

A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN THE POETRY  
OF ROBERT FROST

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by  
Margot J. Mack  
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Gary W. Bleeker

Approved for the Major Department

Samuel R. Taylor

Approved for the Graduate Council

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## PREFACE

This study examines and critically evaluates women figures in Robert Frost's poetry. The lives and personalities of the women who influenced Frost are noted and reviewed. In order to facilitate analysis, representative women characters in the poems are classified into three groups--the initiated, the obsessed, and the perceptive woman. To demonstrate Frost's artistic achievements, each of these fictive women is discussed in terms of the poetic form of the work in which she appears.

I gratefully acknowledge my appreciation to my thesis director, Dr. Gerrit W. Bleeker, for his guidance and helpful suggestions. I also wish to thank my second reader, Dr. Green Wyrick. Finally, I thank my husband and family for their encouragement.

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M. J. M.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE WOMEN WHO INFLUENCED FROST

Robert Lee Frost's works pose an enigma of contrarities for both readers and critics. His poems have been described as the bland musings of a gentle pastoral bard, and paradoxically, as the stark observations of a terrifying poet. The echo of the eclogue in the rural settings of much of his poetry has led to the misnomer, "nature poet," while the unadorned clarity with which he records his observations leads others to judge Frost's works as frightening and filled with melancholy and desolation. More accurately, however, his works deal with the relationship of individuals to the natural world. Frost himself pointed out in a television program in the fall of 1952 that very few of his poems did not include people.<sup>1</sup> Although the poet speaks sometimes from the viewpoint of men characters,<sup>2</sup> in much of his best poetry women characters are developed with unusual sensitivity. Therefore, a study of the women characters in Frost's poetry is essential to the understanding and appreciation of his art.

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<sup>1</sup>Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Towards God," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVII (July, 1958), 339.

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Sergeant, The Trial by Existence, p. 442.

Frost's keen perception in the portrayal of women undoubtedly was influenced by the women with whom he was most closely associated in his life: his mother, Isabelle Moodie Frost; his sister, Jeanie Frost; and his wife, Elinor White Frost. He was, in addition, overly sensitive in his relationships with others. In his desire to be understood, he was sensitized to meanings of the experiences of those about him, and he recorded their actions with an acute sympathy for human emotional needs without exaggerating or minimizing anxiety, wisdom, joy, or grief. This extreme sensitivity combined with feminine familial influence led to the development in Frost's poetry of strong women characters whom critics have found difficult to classify.

No comprehensive categorization of Frost's women characters has been attempted by critics. Frost himself disliked the effort expended to ". . . fit everything into conventional categories."<sup>3</sup> His women characters, like all of his characters, are individuals rather than types; they are common people whose personalities contribute to their problems. Frost blames their problems on "the way life is built and the way they are built."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, any

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<sup>3</sup>Louis Untermeyer (ed.), The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, p. 92.

<sup>4</sup>Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson, p. 70.

method of classification is inevitably somewhat contrived. The general divisions into which Frost's women characters can be placed have been approached, therefore, with the knowledge that some over-lapping will occur and that each woman character must be accepted primarily as an individual struggling in her own way with her personal relationship to the natural world.

A study of the women characters may logically begin with the early love lyrics which appear in greatest number in Frost's first volume, The Boy's Will, in which the woman figure is the beloved and the theme is initiation. Closely related to these characters of initiation are the women who are initiated as they search for identity. To facilitate further analysis, the other women characters may be differentiated as the woman who is obsessed with death, loneliness, fear, or guilt, and the perceptive woman who is mature and stable.

In the presentation of his women characters, Frost demonstrates his artistic ability to chose a poetic form that in itself aids in the delineation. Consequently, each woman must be studied in terms of the "sound sense,"<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>The use of sound sense in poetry is not new. Frost used sound of sense to convey meaning. The best writing, he maintained, cannot equal the best moments of oral expression. His theory was that a written sentence must convey a meaning by sound as well as a meaning of words.

structure, setting, style, and other poetic techniques found in the specific work in which she appears. In addition, Frost's own intricate personality and the women who helped shape that personality must be considered, for Robert Frost's own life is in his art.<sup>6</sup> William Dean Howells, in his Harper's column in 1915, praised Frost's artistry in the portrayal of the women characters of his first and second volumes of poetry, A Boy's Will and North of Boston:

His manly power is manliest in penetrating to the heart of womanhood in that womanliest phase of it, the New England phase. Dirge, or idyl, or tragedy, or comedy, or burlesque, it is always the skill of the artist born and the artist trained which is at play, or call it work, for our delight.<sup>7</sup>

It was Howells also who observed that concerning women Frost was unusually perceptive and forgiving.<sup>8</sup> The poet knew well the wisdom and kindness of his devout mother, the suffering and faithfulness of his reticent wife, and the despair

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<sup>6</sup>Reginald Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost, p. vii.

<sup>7</sup>Lawrance Thompson, The Years of Triumph, p. 57. In 1939, Robert Frost asked Lawrance Thompson to become his official biographer with the stipulation that no part of the biography would be published during the poet's lifetime. The first two volumes of the biography, Robert Frost, The Early Years, 1874-1915 and Robert Frost, The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 have been used as the principal sources for biographical data in this paper because they are the only reliable sources of Frost's biography. The final volume, The Years of Glory, has not been published.

<sup>8</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 421.



and torment of his demented sister. A study of the effects of each of these women on Robert Frost, the man, will serve to clarify the reflections of their personalities in the women characters later created within the framework of specific poetic forms by Robert Frost, the poet.

A. ISABELLE: "ONCE SHE WALKED IN BRIGHTNESS"

A native of Scotland, Isabelle Moodie Frost was reared by devout Scotch-Presbyterian grandparents, with whom she shared intense spiritual convictions and the belief that she was blessed with second sight. She was brought to Columbus, Ohio, by her uncle, Thomas Moodie, when she was twelve years of age.<sup>9</sup> Later, graceful and confident, she taught in Lewiston Academy, Lewiston, Pennsylvania, where she met William Prescott Frost, Jr., a handsome, brilliant, erratic rebel against his native Puritan New England.<sup>10</sup> Despite strong religious differences, Isabelle Moodie and William Frost married and moved to San Francisco where their son, named Robert Lee for William's Confederate hero, was born on March 26, 1874.<sup>11</sup>

Isabelle turned to religion for consolation when

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<sup>9</sup>Thompson, Early Years, pp. 3-4.

<sup>10</sup>Lesley Frost Ballantine, "Somewhat Atavistic," Ball State University Forum, XI (Winter, 1970), 3.

<sup>11</sup>Thompson, Early Years, pp. 6,9.

after the first year of marriage she was unable to curb the rebellious actions of her young husband.<sup>12</sup> She was drawn from her Scotch-Presbyterian background to the mysticism of Swedenborgianism, founded by the Swedish mathematician and scientist, Dr. Emanuel Swedenborg,<sup>13</sup> who had a visionary outlook on life. Although William ridiculed her religious convictions, Isabelle joined the Swedenborgian church.<sup>14</sup> A letter of condolence written in June, 1883, to her friend, Sarah Newton, on the death of her father, indicates the comfort Isabelle found in the mystical aspects of her chosen religion. Of Sarah's father she wrote:

I love to think of such a man in the other world. So soon he will have lost the old and worn look and could you be with him he would appear as you knew him in the vigor of manhood, enhanced of course with a heavenly beauty.<sup>15</sup>

Concerning the unquestioning acceptance of life, she wrote, "If we are only faithful in what lies before us when it is all over and we are passing from this scene the thought will make things brighter."<sup>16</sup> Finally, referring to her own religious needs in relation to the trials of her marriage, she

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<sup>12</sup>Jean Gould, The Aim Was Song, p. 36.

<sup>13</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>14</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>16</sup>Loc. cit.

she ended her letter:

My husband meets with little success that helps us although in his bus[i]ness he gives satisfaction but I have much to be thankful for and most of all that my mind is settled in the matter of religion for you know my nature is religious.<sup>17</sup>

Isabel's reliance upon her religion was evident.

Robert was baptized in her church and Isabelle exposed him to the self-protective aspects of Swedenborgianism, which helped him during his boyhood in San Francisco to retreat into the consolations of his imagination when he sensed the frequent estrangements in his parents' relationship and the consequent sadness in his mother.<sup>18</sup> Isabelle, in turn, sought to shield the boy from William, who punished Robert severely and inconsistently. The child was confused when his mother taught him that he must be obedient to her just as to the Heavenly Father or punishment would result; this fear of the Heavenly Father became ". . . inseparable from his firsthand knowledge and fear of his earthly father."<sup>19</sup> Isabelle told Robert, when he was old enough to understand, that more than once she had lifted the baby from his cradle, and had run to a neighbor's home because

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<sup>17</sup>Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. xvi.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

she feared the father in a drunken rage would cause the death of them both.<sup>20</sup> Robert's young life was beset with innumerable fears that he never lost. He was afraid of the dark, of failure, and of rejection. Ironically, when he had children of his own, his great desire was to give them the gift of courage which he did not possess, but instead he transmitted to them many of his own stubborn fears, rooted in his childhood.<sup>21</sup>

Aware of the boy's fears, Isabelle sought to encourage him with stories of biblical heroes, but he unfortunately believed that he, too, had the virtues of the heroes, forgetting that a hero must earn the virtues attributed to him. He often knew frustration and discouragement when he aspired but failed to attain the biblical perfection of which Isabelle spoke.<sup>22</sup>

In daily Bible stories, Isabelle emphasized moral truths based on opposites such as ". . . good and evil, chaos and order, darkness and light--until Robbie developed a habit of thinking in terms of paired images."<sup>23</sup> In his maturity, Frost's poetry was often built on just such

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>21</sup>Thompson, Years of Triumph, pp. 205, 497-498.

<sup>22</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. xv.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

opposites: fire and ice; out far and in deep; telescope and microscope; bond and free. In addition to Bible stories, the mother was careful also to relate tales of hero worship including classical myths, Scottish literature, and stories of the American Civil War. The experiences of Joan of Arc and Emanuel Swedenborg, who both heard the voices of angels, appealed to the imagination of Robert.<sup>24</sup> When his mother told him of her own mystical powers, the boy believed that he, too, possessed second sight and heard voices. Isabelle encouraged him to use his power of second sight but warned him to refrain from speaking of it to others who might not understand.<sup>25</sup>

Contradictions in his religious training confused the child. His mother taught him that "the most heroic forms of human effort are self-forgiveness and self-sacrifice."<sup>26</sup> Yet, unable to completely shed her Scotch-Presbyterian heritage, she taught the boy also "self-abasement, self-degradation, self-hatred."<sup>27</sup> Confronted with these conflicting tenets of religion, coupled with the

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<sup>24</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 35-36.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 376-377.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

mounting friction between his parents, it is not strange that the child experienced extreme nervous tension. Each time he was sent to a public school, he returned home with severe head and stomach pains. His mother, a fine teacher herself, yielded to him each time and taught him at home. He disliked schooling, took advantage of Isabelle's sympathy, and consequently became ". . . unintentionally pampered and spoiled."<sup>28</sup> Isabelle's desire to compensate with over-indulgence for the punishment meted out by William resulted in inner personality conflicts which led the poet throughout his life to turn impulsively away from schooling, work, and home obligations whenever situations became difficult.<sup>29</sup>

The boy's physical and emotional health concerned Isabelle. She knew that William loved the boy, and that he tried to make amends for his inconsistent behavior by taking his son with him on political campaigns, to athletic events, and on other outings.<sup>30</sup> But William's health was failing and, as tensions in the home mounted, Isabelle taught the boy to value the bright moments of life. Together they walked to Telegraph Hill, to Nob Hill and to Russian

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>29</sup>Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 135.

<sup>30</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., pp. 12-14.

Hill. Together they viewed the Pacific and the distant Sierra Nevada Range. She taught him to value geography and the marvels of their country. They walked on the beaches and waded when the tide was out. They rode cable cars and horse cars and visited the park, zoo, and botanical gardens of Woodward's Gardens.<sup>31</sup> Isabelle had learned to counter her grief with ". . . the balancing instinct for enjoying life," and this gift she gave to Robert.<sup>32</sup> This instinct was reflected many years later when the poet said, "Nobody can be richer than he who keeps fresh the art of experience for its own sake."<sup>33</sup> The same philosophy was expressed when on beginning a ride through the countryside the poet said to a companion, "Let's go slow so I can see the flowers."<sup>34</sup> The indelible experiences of California later inspired Frost to write "A Peck of Gold," "At Woodward's Gardens," "A Record Stride," and "Once by the Pacific." He believed that literature begins with geography, and his geography began with "the local."<sup>35</sup> Isabelle had nurtured

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<sup>31</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>33</sup>Robert G. Berkelman, "Robert Frost and the Middle Way," College English, III (January, 1942), 353.

<sup>34</sup>Cook, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

this belief.

When William Frost died of tuberculosis in 1885, Isabelle and her children, eleven-year-old Robert and nine-year-old Jeanie, returned to New England.<sup>36</sup> Robert Frost became, in a historical sense, ". . . a Western pippin grafted on a Yankee greening."<sup>37</sup> His mother continued to teach him by reading aloud to him, striving to help him overcome his fears through the idealization of courage and daring. She taught him an awareness that he would perhaps not have cultivated in public schools. She expressed great pride for him and told him of her expectations of the fame she knew he would some day earn.<sup>38</sup> When he showed an interest in astronomy, she helped him sell subscriptions to earn a telescope. She converted a bedroom of their small apartment into an observatory of sorts.<sup>39</sup> Always regarding evolutionary ideas as blasphemous, she feared that Robert would grow interested in them. He did, throughout his life concern himself with the ". . . heroic wanderers among ideas; but his mother's teachings would continue to provide

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<sup>36</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>37</sup>Cook, op. cit., p. 3.

<sup>38</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 48.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 92.



him with a kind of sea anchor, even when his thought remained harborless.<sup>40</sup> When he indicated that feminine influence on his life was stifling him, she wisely read Tom Brown's School Days to him and the youth was impressed that Tom fought and played baseball, yet did not consider schooling girl's play.<sup>41</sup>

When he entered high school in Lawrence, Massachusetts, Robert Frost finally demonstrated his ability to read, study, and learn without the help of his mother.<sup>42</sup> He graduated from high school as co-valedictorian and was presented with the Hood Prize for general excellence. When he sold the gold medal on the following day to express his rejection of conventions, Isabelle felt a painful separation from her son. She knew that his action was interpreted by others as scorn and arrogance.<sup>43</sup> It was perhaps one of the first open actions in the poet's struggle to express his personality through independence and non-conformity.

Isabelle died before Frost experienced the triumphs she had predicted he would realize. His enigmatic poem, "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," probably written early

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 68-69.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 79-80.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

in the 1920's,<sup>44</sup> expressed the bitterness he had experienced in the years immediately following her death in 1900.<sup>45</sup> His biographer, Lawrance Thompson, calls the poem ". . . an ironic allegory of conflict between free will and predestination."<sup>46</sup> The poem, which Frost identified as a biographical reference to Isabelle, is reminiscent of the early religious morality play.<sup>47</sup> "The Voice" representing an evil power supported by lesser "Voices" waits patiently and expectantly for twenty years to see a lovely woman, "proud and the pride of friends" (l. 18),<sup>48</sup> hurled down seven times, each time to a greater depth, not by "unavoidable mischance," but by her own free choice of seven "joys" which brings her misery and torment.<sup>49</sup> Thompson suggests that Frost makes ". . . a deliberate parody of the seven joys and sorrows of Mary."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 555.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 548.

<sup>46</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 138.

<sup>47</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 260.

<sup>48</sup>Robert Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost, pp. 325-326. (All subsequent references to poems will be identified within the text by lines with an initial footnote citing the page number in this collection.)

<sup>49</sup>David A. Sohn and Richard H. Tyre, Frost the Poet and His Poetry, p. 52.

<sup>50</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 292.

The life of Isabelle Frost is reflected in each choice and in each resulting hurt contained in the poem. The young woman who makes her first choice her wedding could well be Isabelle, who chose with misgivings William Prescott Frost, Jr. for her husband. She had earlier rejected marriage to a clergyman because she felt unworthy; later she had mystical experiences which suggested that divine punishment would follow.<sup>51</sup> The Voices of the poem chide and mock: "She would refuse love safe with wealth and honor! / The lovely shall be choosers, shall they? / Then let them choose!" (ll. 6-8). Line twenty-four indicates a secret flaw that led to grief in the marriage, and subsequent choices include the woman's desire to keep her grief a secret. She chose that her friends ". . . move in pleasure too far off / To think much or much care" (ll. 29-30). Frost remembered sadly and with characteristic guilt his mother's life as a teacher in Lawrence. "She just sank out of sight," he said, "and I never knew she was suffering."<sup>52</sup>

Isabelle's relationship with her two children is alluded to in the woman's fourth choice: "Give her a child at either knee for fourth joy / To tell once and once only,

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>52</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 260.

for them never to forget / How once she walked in brightness" (ll. 31-33). In final irony the Voices say, "Trust us" (l. 53). The tireless use of both irony and sarcasm throughout the poem indicates that Frost had little sympathy in this period with his mother's teachings that human trials are punishments of divine origin.

Eight years before Isabelle's death, while he was still a boy in high school, Frost had probed for reasons why his family had known countless griefs and disappointments. He suddenly knew that Isabelle's belief in the relationship of human trials to divine punishment stopped short of the answer he sought. He imagined that each individual should be given the choice to come to earth with the stipulation that he would have no memory of that choice. Thus, with the possibility of pride erased, a real trial on earth would be possible. The idea appealed to the boy, but the words he needed eluded him, and the manuscript was placed with other unfinished pieces.<sup>53</sup>

Fourteen years later after Frost had experienced illness, disillusionment, rejection, the deaths of both his son, Elliot, and his mother and had doubted divine punishment and divine justice even more, he reconsidered his own

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<sup>53</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 290.

philosophy of unremembered choice of existence. The metaphors and figures required for the poem now came to him, and the poem, "The Trial by Existence," was completed. It ended on a sure note:

'Tis the essence of life here,  
 Though we choose greatly, still to lack  
 The lasting memory at all clear,  
 That life has for us on the wrack  
 Nothing but what we somehow chose;  
 Thus we are wholly stripped of pride  
 In the pain that has but one close,  
 Bearing it crushed and mystified (ll. 65-72).<sup>54</sup>

The poem marked an important point in Frost's personal philosophy and in his attitude toward others. He considered it an affirmation of a new confidence.<sup>55</sup> Rueben Brower called it more an expression of moral knowledge than of religious knowledge.<sup>56</sup> If Isabelle Frost had lived to see the work published, she would have understood how this poem had grown out of the hurts and confusions of the poet's childhood, and that although the concept of sin and punishment she taught had not satisfied her son, yet it was from her knowledge that his had unfolded.

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<sup>54</sup>Frost, op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>55</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 291.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 298.

<sup>57</sup>Rueben A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention, p. 124.

## B. JEANIE: "SHE HAD NO SAYING DARK ENOUGH"

Jeanie Florence Frost, two years younger than her brother, experienced the same uncertainties that Frost knew in his San Francisco childhood, but she reacted more violently to them. Rivalry for parental attention, coupled with unusually sensitive personalities, resulted in a stormy relationship between the siblings. Jeanie's overdependence on her mother led to nervous disorders and undiagnosed ailments. The distressing times when she cried uncontrollably and hysterically led to lifetime dislike and impatience on Robert's part.<sup>58</sup> "She and I always had unhappy times together, poor thing," Frost once commented.<sup>59</sup>

Jeanie was intelligent and learned to read and write early, performing far above her brother scholastically until they entered high school, when Robert's grades surpassed hers. At this turn she sank into a deep depression refusing to continue her studies or to take college examinations. When she raved and cried, Frost was determined to make an effort to keep his own rages, fears, and sensitivities controlled. He sensed wisely that if he did not, his emotional

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<sup>58</sup>Thompson, The Early Years, p. 47.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 519.

and psychological problems could easily surpass those of Jeanie.<sup>60</sup>

Later Jeanie Frost assisted in her mother's private classrooms and taught intermittently in other schools; then at thirty-five she entered the University of Michigan where she earned her college degree. But the hysteria demonstrated by the three-year-old Jeanie in San Francisco grew increasingly more violent until it was finally uncontrollable.

In a letter to Louis Untermeyer on April 12, 1920, Frost wrote that Jeanie's sanity had finally snapped in her agitation over the entry of the United States into the World War, and that "she turned everything she could think of to express her abhorrence of it: pro-German, pacifist, internationalist, draft obstructor, and seditionist."<sup>61</sup> In 1920, Jeanie was committed to a mental hospital where she died nine years later.<sup>62</sup>

A few years before her death, Jeanie wrote a long and moving letter to her brother.

I am very peculiar and did not start right. If I ever was well and natural it was before I can remember. I hate to have anyone understand how I feel in a way. To the mind of anyone who could understand the condition of my mind, there

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<sup>60</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 232.

<sup>61</sup>Untermeyer (ed.), op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>62</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 133.

could not be any worse horror. This is the way I have been for the past twenty years and before that, only I did not use to understand--I use to lay it to causes that had nothing to do with it.<sup>63</sup>

Jeanie revealed perception and self-consciousness which Frost biographers have not always reflected.

Her letter may have reminded Frost of his promise to himself in high school that he would not give in to his emotions as Jeanie did. In 1917, he had written to a former student, John T. Bartlett, that an individual could avoid physical and nervous crises if he were willing to take "corrective measures." He often deplored that Jeanie had not done so.<sup>64</sup> He wrote to Bartlett:

I have seen right in my own family one person lost by not taking instant and out-and-out measures and another person saved by taking them. The business can go either way you want to. . . . Cut and run away from every care: that is the rule.<sup>65</sup>

Thompson conjectures that the "one person lost" may have been either Jeanie or the poet's father and that the "person saved" was Frost himself.<sup>66</sup> Much later, on April 9, 1934, Frost discussed the same subject with Bartlett,

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<sup>63</sup>Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters, pp. 318-319.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 212.



who makes the following observations concerning their conversation:

We all have our souls--and minds to save, and it seems a miracle we do it; not once, but several times. He [Frost] could look back and see his hanging by a thred. His sister wasn't able to save hers. She built the protecting illusion about herself and went the road of dementia praecox.<sup>67</sup>

In the earlier letter to Louis Untermeyer written on April 12, 1920, Frost concluded by supporting bluntly his use of conscious measures to save his thoughts from obsession with tragic events in his life.

And I suppose I am a brute in that my nature refuses to carry sympathy to the point of going crazy just because somebody else goes crazy, or of dying just because someone else dies. As I get older I find it easier to lie awake nights over other people's troubles. But that's as far as I go to date. In good time I will join them in death to show our common humanity.<sup>68</sup>

Frost was not so unfeeling as the blunt closing of this letter would make him appear. The emotional collapse of another always saddened him greatly. Jeanie's death had a deep and lasting impact on him. Following a life-long pattern of self-guilt, he blamed his own actions for some of the stress that had disturbed his sister throughout her

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., pp. 212-213.

<sup>68</sup>Untermeyer (ed.), op. cit., p. 103.

life.<sup>69</sup> The sympathetic treatment in his poetry of characters such as the fearful "servant" in "A Servant to Servants," the hysterical Amy in "Home Burial," and the conscience-stricken woman of "The Witch of Coös," reflects Robert Frost's concern for those, who like his sister, were emotionally obsessed.

C. ELINOR: "SHE IS AS IN A FIELD A SILKEN TENT"

Elinor White Frost and Robert Frost both nurtured deep drives for a love that was "ideally perfect."<sup>70</sup> When Elinor agreed to marry Frost, she had no illusions concerning marriage to the man whose loyalty to his art was an integral part of his personality. She recognized that Robert Frost, the husband, and Robert Frost, the poet, could not be separated.<sup>71</sup> On her wedding day she knew that although she and Robert shared ideals, their love was not perfect, and that "ominous elements" existed in their relationship. She knew that she had hurt him deeply when she had repeatedly refused to marry him until her college education was completed. She had searched for an ideal combination of virtues in a husband--a combination that

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<sup>69</sup>Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters, pp. x-xi.

<sup>70</sup>Thompson, The Early Years, p. 135.

<sup>71</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 70.

Frost did not possess; he was willful and consumed with self-pity, and she had wounded him many times in telling him so. In retaliation he had more than once threatened suicide.<sup>72</sup>

But the bride remembered also idyllic moments of walking, picnicking, and boating during their courtship. Frost had been eager and impatient; she had been shy and reticent. Both delighted in poetry, and with the help of Shelley's lyrics and longer works, Frost convinced her that love was "at the core of the universe."<sup>73</sup> His first gift to her was poetry by Edward Rowland Sill. Together, Elinor and Robert shared the discovery of the cryptic poetry of Emily Dickinson.<sup>74</sup>

Before their marriage Elinor, too, wrote poetry; however, she gave up this expression of her artistic ability in deference to her husband, whose jealousy clearly indicated his need to be sui generis in the Frost family. In a letter written to Mrs. Edna Davis Romig on February 4, 1935, Mrs. Frost confided that she had written poetry early in her life, then admonished Mrs. Romig never to mention the

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<sup>72</sup>Thompson, The Early Years, p. 211.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., pp. 135-136.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

fact.<sup>75</sup>

The first twenty years of marriage were difficult. Elinor realized that deprivation coupled with the aspiring poet's pride would not be easy. Although she had perhaps initially hoped to change and remake him into a more responsible and less erratic human being, she became reconciled to stay with him self-sacrificially ". . . and to honor him as a good poet who had failed to win attention."<sup>76</sup> The attitude of self-sacrifice gave her purpose through years of poverty and loneliness. Robert, at that time, probably was not aware of the sacrifice required of his wife. His early years had prepared him to lean heavily on his mother's strength.<sup>77</sup> Because Elinor, like Isabelle, was a fine combination of intelligence and courage, Frost found it natural to transfer his dependence.<sup>78</sup>

The marriage of Robert and Elinor was tested severely with poverty, failure, illness, and death. Depressed and uncertain of himself, Frost indulged in self-pity. Elinor "had a scornful knack for making him realize that he always took his sufferings with far more self-pity than she took

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 505.

<sup>76</sup>Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 30.

<sup>77</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>78</sup>Ballantine, op. cit., p. 5.

hers. . . ."79 He responded with dark moods in which he judged himself a failure as a husband, father, poet, and man. He considered Elinor's reticence a method of punishment, and at such times he experienced his childhood desire to run away and never return. He often walked until he was exhausted; then like a child he returned repentant.<sup>80</sup>

When Frost expressed a wish to continue his schooling at Harvard, Elinor was taciturn and coolly indifferent, but she helped him prepare for his examination.<sup>81</sup> Later, as Frost sought teaching positions to support his growing family, frequent moves were made. The tragic death of their four-year-old first-born, Elliot, left both parents grief-stricken. Elinor was inconsolable in her bitterness and taking an atheistic stand, she vowed there was no God and that the world was only evil.<sup>82</sup> At this point Frost, himself, was inclined toward skepticism. Thompson infers from notes written by Frost that the poem, "Stars," was completed soon after Elliot's death.

And yet with neither love nor hate,  
Those stars like some snow-white  
Minerva's snow-white marble eyes

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<sup>79</sup>Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 195.

<sup>80</sup>Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 309-310.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 258.

Without the gift of sight (ll. 9-12).<sup>83</sup>

The closing lines of that poem reflect bitterness with the lack of divine justice in human affairs.<sup>84</sup>

Although such moods recurred for brief periods throughout the poet's life, he stated his religious affirmation more and more frequently, becoming increasingly disturbed when his wife continued to express an atheistic outlook. When their infant daughter died in 1907, Elinor accepted the death fatalistically, growing even more bitter and skeptical than earlier.<sup>85</sup> She did not share in the religious education of the Frost children; Frost himself nurtured their religious training.<sup>86</sup> He expressed his concern for Elinor's religious views in a letter, written in 1920, to Louis Untermeyer, in which he indicated that Elinor's religious denials continued.<sup>87</sup>

The years the Frost family lived on the farm near Derry, New Hampshire, began with hopelessness. Elinor was listless and unenthusiastic; Robert was ill. Frost

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<sup>83</sup>Frost, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., pp. 546-547.

<sup>85</sup>Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters, p. 244.

<sup>86</sup>Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 306-307.

<sup>87</sup>Untermeyer (ed.), op. cit., p. 101.

feared that she loved him much less than he loved her. Illness, coupled with despair over his relationship with Elinor, made thoughts of suicide attractive. He feared that he had not treated Isabelle, Jeanie, or Elinor well and that his illness was his punishment. His belief in his art was perhaps the hope that gradually brought about a change in his attitude.<sup>88</sup>

The Frosts sold the Derry farm regretfully and moved to Plymouth, New Hampshire, in 1911. Elinor, who was not socially inclined, had found contentment in the isolation of the farm.<sup>89</sup> Frost had regained his health there and found time and peace to weigh his values. In his position at the State Normal School in Plymouth, he experienced new success in the teaching profession, however, and demonstrated a new self-confidence.<sup>90</sup> When his superior, Principal Silver, criticized Elinor's poor housekeeping and described her as ". . . lacking in personality," Frost's deep love for her was demonstrated by the two words of his defensive and furious retort, "She's mine!"<sup>91</sup>

The turning point in the lives of Robert and Elinor

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<sup>88</sup>Thompson, The Early Years, pp. 265-272.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 350.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., pp. 367-368.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 374.

Frost came when the poet, who at thirty-eight had attracted little attention as a poet, moved his family to England at Elinor's suggestion, "Let's go over there and sleep under thatch!"<sup>92</sup> Finally, during the years in England, Frost's volumes A Boy's Will and North of Boston were accepted for publication by English publishers, fulfilling Frost's long and consuming desire for recognition as a poet. His new stature, however, required an adjustment from Elinor who understood best his frustration in searching for literary identity. Ironically, when success came at last to Robert Frost, his wife experienced a kind of jealousy.<sup>93</sup>

After their return to New England, Frost was enraged when Amy Lowell in her book, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, described Elinor as his conventional helpmate. Frost wrote to Untermeyer that he resented Miss Lowell's estimate, because Elinor actually helped him in no way, and although she always knew he was a good poet, she had no desire for his talent to be recognized while they lived. He considered Miss Lowell's picture of Elinor an insult.<sup>94</sup> Frost was not entirely honest in what he wrote to Untermeyer;

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<sup>92</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>93</sup>Thompson, Years of Triumph, pp. 30-31.

<sup>94</sup>Untermeyer (ed.), op. cit., pp. 62-63.



Elinor helped him in his writing more than he admitted. She was proud to serve as his secretary and adviser. He was honest, however, in saying that she considered her husband a good poet. She wrote in 1913 to the wife of John Bartlett concerning Frost's volume, A Boy's Will:

I am very glad you and John like Robert's book. Of course I love it very much, and have been somewhat disappointed that the reviewers have not been more enthusiastic. How can they help seeing how exquisitely beautiful some of the poems are, and what an original music there is in most of them?<sup>95</sup>

Ten years later, in 1923, she wrote to Lincoln MacVeagh, a Holt representative who made arrangements for illustrating and publishing New Hampshire:

I have wanted to write to you ever since your last letter came, to thank you for what you said at the end of it about Robert's poetry. Robert was greatly pleased, and I myself felt it deeply that you should realize how much there is in the poetry that those who have written about it either don't see at all, or touch on very lightly. There is in it all the truth, vigor and humanity that they emphasize, but there is also a clean beauty, and even 'glamour' in line after line, and poem after poem, which his own particular way of expressing seems to have blinded them to so far. . . .<sup>96</sup>

Although Elinor, ironically, continued to be frustrated as Frost achieved poetic success, she obviously recognized his artistic strengths and openly expressed her pride.

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<sup>95</sup>Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters, p. 78.

<sup>96</sup>Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 246.

Elinor's belief in his artistic talent and his own deep love for her sustained Frost through many personal tragedies. The death of Elinor, at the height of his career and after forty-three years of marriage, was shattering to the poet.<sup>97</sup> To Untermeyer he had written earlier: "She has always been the unspoken half of everything I ever wrote and both halves of many a thing from My November Guest down to the last stanza of Two Tramps in Mud Time."<sup>98</sup> Following Elinor's death, Frost wrote to Bernard De Voto,

I expect to have to go depths below depths in thinking before I catch myself and can say what I want to be while I last. I shall be all right in public, but I can't tell you how I am going to behave when I am alone. She could always be present to govern my loneliness without making me feel less alone.<sup>99</sup>

Finally, to Professor George Roy Elliot and his wife, Alma, who had been Elinor's closest friend, Frost wrote most poignantly:

Some of the old ambitious resolutions may come back to me in some form. The danger will be that they may too openly concern her. Pretty near every one of my poems will be about her if rightly read. But I must try to remember they were as much about her as she liked and permitted them to be. Without ever saying a word she set limits I must continue to observe.

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<sup>97</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 279.

<sup>98</sup>Untermeyer (ed.), op. cit., pp. 295-296.

<sup>99</sup>Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters, p. 470.

One remark like this and then no more forever.<sup>100</sup>

Frost knew well that Elinor had given deep and lasting direction to his life and to his art.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp. 471-472.

## CHAPTER II

### THE INITIATED WOMAN

The theme of initiation is found most frequently in Frost's poems which present the relationship between young men and women and is clearly exemplified by the love lyrics, "In Neglect," "Going for Water," "Flower Gathering," and "A Dream Pang." "The Subverted Flower" also presents a young girl experiencing initiation into love, but in a much more complexly constructed poem. Closely related to the young women characters' initiation into the relationship of love with men are the innocent feminine characters in "Wild Grapes" and "Maple" who are initiated into the realms of experience as they search for answers to their identity. In varying degrees, one discovers the influence of Isabelle, Jeanie, and Elinor upon Frost's creation and development of these young women characters.

The early love lyrics of Frost illustrate a more subtle treatment of the theme of initiation. The woman figure appears obliquely and reflects Isabelle Frost's influence on the poet's standards and ideals of womanhood through heroic romances she read to him in his childhood.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>Thompson, The Early Years, p. 171.

But the early poems are written to Elinor and of Elinor, and record tremulous uncertainties of the young, as they are initiated into new love. Frost wrote later to a friend that nearly all of his poems are about Elinor, ". . . if rightly read."<sup>102</sup> It is not difficult to read the love lyrics "rightly" and thus sense that the young Elinor was indeed the poet's inspiration. His love poems were instruments through which he sought her companionship as well as her understanding.<sup>103</sup> The early love lyrics reflect an Eden motif in which young lovers live in solitude and seclusion.<sup>104</sup>

Such a lyric is the epigrammatic five-line poem, "In Neglect," written to Elinor at a period when the poet's pride had been injured by his paternal grandfather.<sup>105</sup> The poet salves his injured pride with the poetic portrait of roguish camaraderie with his loved one.

They leave us so to the way we took,  
 As two in whom they were proved mistaken,  
 That we sit sometimes in the wayside nook,  
 With mischievous, vagrant seraphic look,  
 And try if we cannot feel forsaken (ll. 1-5).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters, p. 472.

<sup>103</sup>Thompson, The Early Years, p. 311.

<sup>104</sup>George Wilson Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost, p. 78.

<sup>105</sup>Thompson, op. cit., p. 412.

<sup>106</sup>Frost, op. cit., p. 23.

The ironic twist of the last line indicates that the hurt is made bearable because it is shared.

The theme of oneness and the deep understanding between man and woman emerges again in the lyric, "Going for Water." The reader senses that these lovers are the same two who appear in many of Frost's lyrics.<sup>107</sup> The couple here withdraw from their everyday environment of care: "The well was dry beside the door" (l. 1).<sup>108</sup> They seek seclusion by the brook in their own wood and the delight of young love ". . . is endowed with [the] undefined and almost ritualistic significance" of first love.<sup>109</sup>

Depth of feeling is expressed poignantly and dramatically in the lyric, "Flower Gathering." Frost learned early in his courtship with Elinor that the voices of his own consciousness were as clear to him as voices in a dream.<sup>110</sup> Thus, the "give and take" in his own mind is expressed by the speaker in the first stanza, while the "give and take" between the speaker and the one who welcomes

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<sup>107</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>108</sup>Frost, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>109</sup>John T. Ogilvie, "From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost's Poetry," South Atlantic Quarterly, LVIII (Winter, 1959), 66.

<sup>110</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 429.

him silently is implied in the second stanza of the poem.<sup>111</sup>

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

All for me? And not a question  
 For the faded flowers gay  
 That could take me from beside you  
 For the ages of a day?  
 They are yours, and be the measure  
 Of their worth for you to treasure,  
 The measure of the little while  
 That I've been long away (ll. 1-16).<sup>112</sup>

Frost wrote this poem in the summer of 1896, when he and Elinor vacationed in Allenstown. The holiday was a late honeymoon during which Robert became interested in botanizing.<sup>113</sup> The poem probably was conceived when Elinor reproached him with characteristic silence when he returned late from one of his long walks.<sup>114</sup> Thus the lines follow:

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<sup>111</sup>Robert S. Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Dramatic," New England Quarterly, X (June, 1937), 267.

<sup>112</sup>Frost, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>113</sup>Thompson, The Early Years, p. 219.

<sup>114</sup>Louis and Esther Mertins, The Intervals of Robert Frost, p. 20.

"Are you dumb because you know me not, / Or dumb because you know?" (ll. 7-8). Accurately capturing the sound of sense, Frost continues, "All for me?" (l. 9). The conversational tone balances the emotional implication. Words used are extremely simple. He tenders the faded bouquet of wilted flowers, perhaps in exchange for a sad smile. Typical of his lyrics, the poem permits the reader to use his own experience, and his own consciousness to feel what the young lovers feel.

In the sonnet, "A Dream Pang," Frost records the relationship between young lovers who have quarreled. His own frequent indulgences in wounded pride and self-pity, and Elinor's stubborn reticences had taught them both much about separation. Robert knew well the pangs of desire for reconciliation. The persona, as he unfolds his dream, confesses to the silent loved one that it is he who has erred. Once again the reader knows the woman only through the persona's reaction to her. She is loved; she longs for his confession; she is near when he seeks to confess. With the following lines, "But 'tis not true that thus I dwelt aloof, / For the wood wakes, and you are here for proof" (ll. 13-14),<sup>115</sup> the sonnet ends tenderly with the

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<sup>115</sup>Frost, op. cit., p. 22.



suggestion that as morning dawns, the reconciliation is realized.

The early love lyrics reflect Frost's youthful response to woman well-loved. The woman of each lyric is revealed to the reader only through the persona's reaction to her, and his inspiration could well be a youthful Elinor White Frost.

Perhaps the Frost poem which best exemplifies a young woman being initiated into the world of love is "The Subverted Flower." Because the initiation theme here is limited to the sexual attraction of love, the female character is less complex and less developed than in other poems, such as "Maple," where the central female figure experiences a much more complicated kind of initiation into the meaning of life as well as love. However, by carefully explicating "The Subverted Flower," one gains a fuller understanding of this type of female character and the kinds of poetic techniques Frost uses to develop her artistically.

Scholars often fail to recognize the artistic merits of "The Subverted Flower." For example, Brower, failing to accept it for its own merits, reads the poem entirely in terms of the horror it supposedly presents and likens its brilliant cruelty to Emerson and Thoreau.<sup>116</sup> Gould

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<sup>116</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 120.

states that it is the only poem Frost wrote concerning sex and describes the central female character as highly educated but afraid to give in to the ". . . wild sweetness of love."<sup>117</sup> There seems to be little textual basis for her assumption that the girl is educated, however, Cox, adding little toward the understanding or appreciation of Frost's art, describes the couple as ". . . a nice boy and a fine but educationally frightened girl."<sup>118</sup> Cox does note that a flower becomes the symbol of the boy's wild attraction but fails to give any kind of detailed discussion to Frost's intricately designed extended metaphor used to present the theme of initiation. Thompson explains that in the poem a young girl finds the "physical yearnings" of her lover "repulsive" and sees him as a beast; the critic could have been much more explicit, however.<sup>119</sup>

The narrator of the poem, which begins in medias res, focuses through the central consciousness of the female character. Coupled with this type of narration, which is especially effective since the central figure is experiencing

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<sup>117</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>118</sup>Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost, pp. 148-150.

<sup>119</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 117.

personal initiation, is an emphasis on the girl's reactions always determined by her senses. Because the narrator filters all through her, the narration is not necessarily reliable.

The poem immediately relies on tension and contrast as "She drew back; he was calm . . ." (l. 1).<sup>120</sup> The paired images here are clearly a reflection of Frost's early moral training by his mother, Isabelle, who taught him moral truths based on opposites. In this poem the male is seen by the girl as ". . . he lashed his open palm / With the tender-headed flower" (ll. 3-4). Again, tension and contrast are achieved with "lashed" and "tender-headed." The girl's impressions continue to sense this destructive quality in him as he "flicked" and "flung" and "cracked" and "clasped." We are told "His lips were sucked and blown / And the effort made him choke / Like a tiger at a bone" (ll. 27-29). This, of course, is her impression, and she senses all the animalistic qualities about him. Words such as "blind," "eyed," "clasp," "touch," "spoke," "call," "look," "hear," "laugh," "see," and "tongue" are very functional here, because they stress her use of sense impression.

Also important to the poem's structure and the

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<sup>120</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 453-455.

girl's initiation is the use of extended metaphors. Two are used--a flower and an animal. The flower objectifies her virginal state but also the boy's rather tender desires which she fails to perceive in her state of fear. The narrator describes the girl ". . . standing to the waist / In goldenrod and brake, / Her shining hair displaced" (ll. 15-17). It is almost as though she is an unplucked blossom, herself. She observes the boy holding a flower in his hand, and immediately she notices its bruised condition. Near the end, the poem shifts however, and he, too, seems as a young flower injured by her, and the narrator for a moment shifts his focus away from her impressions as he states, "But what she could not see / Was that the flower might be / Other than base and fetid . . ." (ll. 50-52). The title, "The Subverted Flower," has a double meaning which critics have failed to recognize. The young girl is initiated into her first experience with a male's physical attraction for her and fears she will be "subverted." Ironically, however, it is he who is eventually subverted by her rejection, distrust, and blind fear.

A second metaphor develops through the use of animal imagery. The boy is described in animalistic terms throughout the poem. It must be stressed that these descriptions are the girl's impressions, however, and therefore are likely to be hyperbolic. She notices his "ragged

muzzle" (l. 14). He is compared to a ". . . tiger at a bone" (l. 29). She is afraid to move "Lest movement should provoke / The demon of pursuit / That slumbers in a brute" (ll. 32-34). She also fears he will ". . . pounce to end it all . . ." (l. 39). His ". . . hand hung like a paw. . ." (l. 42), and here her vision of him takes the form of a dog, as she rejects his outward sign of love:

And the dog or what it was,  
 Obeying bestial laws,  
 A coward save at night,  
 Turned from the place and ran.  
 She heard him stumble first  
 And use his hands in flight.  
 She heard him bark outright (ll. 58-64).

In the concluding lines of the poem a reversal occurs, however, and she becomes like an animal.

And oh, for one so young  
 The bitter words she spit  
 Like some tenacious bit  
 That will not leave the tongue,  
 She plucked her lips for it,  
 And still the horror clung.  
 Her mother wiped the foam  
 From her chin, picked up her comb  
 And drew her backward home (ll. 65-73).

Thus, animal imagery is used both as a manifestation of her sensual impressions and also by the narrator after he refocuses his viewpoint and looks at her rather than through her mind.

Perhaps Frost's development of this female character was influenced by his sister Jeanie's psychotic reactions,

and even more specifically, by his daughter Irma's deep fear of the "bestial" aspect of the sex act.<sup>121</sup>

Included in Frost's volume, New Hampshire, is another poem of initiation, "Wild Grapes." The poem records a personal childhood experience of Miss Susan Ward, critic of Frost's early poetry, who in her old age suggested that he write the poem.<sup>122</sup> The persona here is clearly an uninitiated young girl, who picks grapes from a vine entwined in the branches of a tree. As she clutches the top of the tree,<sup>123</sup> which represents the great expanse of experience, it snaps skyward, and not daring to let go with her hands, she hangs suspended in midair. She likens her brother's rescue of her to Orpheus' rescue of Eurydice from the upper regions. As the persona later relates the story, she finds that she had been in the precarious predicament because she had lacked knowledge more than weight. "I had not taken the first step in knowledge; / I had not learned to let go with the hands" (ll. 95-96),<sup>124</sup> she says.

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<sup>121</sup>Thompson, Years of Triumph, pp. 497-498.

<sup>122</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 268.

<sup>123</sup>Since Frost called this poem the girl's version of "Birches," it is interesting to note that Anne K. Juhnke in her essay, "Religion in Robert Frost's Poetry," states that in folklore the birch is the tree at the entrance of Paradise.

<sup>124</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 240-243.

Thus, the young girl experiences an initiation into life similar to that experienced by Maple.

Frost in "Maple" creates a central female figure who experiences initiation into life as a result of her unusual name. The theme of initiation provides the framework needed to develop a complicated, credible character as well as a universal figure, who has been overlooked by most critics and misunderstood by others. Berkelman dismisses Maple after a saccharine comment explaining that Frost must have liked Maple's mother and father since they named their daughter Maple, preferring ". . . to keep their thoughts from practical sap and practical sugar and dwell on the scarlet and pale pink of autumn leaves."<sup>125</sup> Even Thompson apparently fails to recognize the poetic and artistic importance of "Maple," for he merely generalizes that Frost uses a fresh treatment in "Maple" of a theme he uses often in ". . . the unfolding of meaning which grows out of an inscrutable secret."<sup>126</sup> Just as with "The Subverted Flower," critics have neglected to recognize Frost's complicated use of key images, setting, and the cyclical movement which all interrelate and build in the

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<sup>125</sup>Berkelman, op. cit., p. 350.

<sup>126</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 116.

progression of the poem.

Again Frost uses a complex narrator who focuses through the consciousness of the central figure, Maple. The entire poem relies on a series of paradoxes which result from Maple's undergoing the cyclical process of initiation and growth until she finally reaches a new level of awareness. As the narration opens, Maple's female, dogmatic, conventional teacher refuses to accept the child's unusual name, "Maple," substituting the common name "Mabel." The teacher's attitude stimulates the child's awareness of her peculiar name, forcing her to quest for an explanation. Ironically, then, knowledge motivates her to search for an answer to "Who am I?" as she attempts to discover the meaning of her name and her mother's expectations for a child named Maple.

Maple's father, sensitive, concerned, considerate, and tender, tries to recapture the moment he and his wife named the baby as he relates,

Your mother named you. You and she just saw  
 Each other in passing in the room upstairs,  
 One coming this way into life, and one  
 Going the other out of life--you know? (ll. 12-15).<sup>127</sup>

Immediately, then, the cycle of life is introduced into the poem, and almost as if fate appoints her this position

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<sup>127</sup>Frost, op. cit., p. 222.



in life, Maple is marked for all time as her mother ". . . put her finger in [Maple's] cheek so hard / It must have made [her] dimple there, and said, 'Maple'" (ll. 18-20).

After her father has so vividly described the day of her birth, he continues to admit, "I don't know what she wanted it to mean, / But it seems like some word she left to bid you / Be a good girl--be like a maple tree" (ll. 22-24). At this time in Maple's young life she is apparently uneffected by her father's words, for in her childish mind she is wishing only to rebuke her "certain" teacher. It is interesting to observe that Frost's very subtle humor is evident in the light touch used here, for while the narrator tells us that the father's words are "Dangerous self-arousing words to sow" (l. 31), he also explains "Luckily all she wanted of her name then / Was to rebuke her teacher with it next day, / And give the teacher a scare as from her father" (ll. 32-34).<sup>128</sup> "Sow" becomes a key word at this point in the poem for it introduces an image running throughout the poem.

Again, a paradox is evident, for usually "sowing" is a springtime activity, but the father's words are sowed in autumn, apparently, since Maple's teacher is

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<sup>128</sup>Frost was enraged when Amy Lowell once commented there was a lack of humor in his poetry; such lines as these in "Maple" seem to support his reason for anger at such an accusation.

just learning her name. The time of year is quite functional here, however, for the seed is in the dark (winter), waiting to germinate until later in Maple's cycle of awareness (spring), when she has blossomed into young womanhood. The perceptive narrator explains that

What he sowed with her slept so long a sleep  
 And came so near death in the dark of years,  
 That when it woke and came to life again  
 The flower was different from the parent seed.  
 (ll. 38-41).

She now attempts to discover the meaning of her name by vague recollections of her father's earlier explanation.

Important at this point in the poem is the narrator's description of Maple's childhood home, "the house one story high in front, three stories / On the end it presented to the road" (ll. 59-60), which he repeats several times throughout the narrative. The home's several stories seem to refer to the many levels and depths of reality for which Maple searches. The mystical number three further appears to add to the cyclical motions of the poem as Maple strives to free herself from her triad relationship with her father and mother's past and emerge with one identity--her own.

Maple, in a girlish manner, studies her reflection in a mirror and watches "her mother's picture fading (l. 63), but views herself ". . . more or less outwardly. . ." (l. 73), seeing only herself as others see her instead

of discovering a deeper level of meaning. She also reads a passage marked in her mother's Bible with a maple leaf but is unable to interpret the importance of its text dealing with a "wave offering," or peace offering. She does not approach the hidden meaning until the final phase of her cyclical quest. Meanwhile, the mystery of her name motivates her to continue her education as she searches for self.

Thus, the setting suddenly shifts to an office in a building nineteen stories above a busy city, a contrast to the earlier sunny cellar of her father's home, which was permeated by nature. Here her role has changed. She is now a city girl filling the role of secretary. This section of the poem is especially significant for it reveals her changing self, her feminine reactions, and also uses an unusual and effective extended image--an airship.

She learned shorthand, whatever shorthand may  
 Have had to do with it--she sometimes wondered  
 So, till she found herself in a strange place  
 For the name Maple to have brought her to,  
 Taking dictation on a paper pad,  
 And in the pauses when she raised her eyes  
 Watching out of a nineteenth story window  
 An airship laboring with unship-like motion  
 And a vague all-disturbing roar above the river  
 Beyond the highest city built with hands.  
 Someone was saying in such natural tones  
 She almost wrote the words down on her knee,  
 'Do you know you remind me of a tree--  
 A maple tree?'

'Because my name is Maple?'

'Isn't it Mabel? I thought it was Mabel.'

'No doubt you've heard the office call me Mabel.  
I have to let them call me what they like'  
(11. 77-94).

Maple, now transplanted to the city, seems to have lost the sensitivity she once had, as she takes notes on a paper pad made from a tree removed from nature to be used for economic purposes rather than for aesthetic beauty. She has grown away from her mother's world, then, foreshadowing her eventual desire to forget her mother's reason for naming her.

Also in contrast to the aesthetic beauty of nature found around her parent's home is the laboring airship. Its very name demonstrates the unimportance of the relationship of a thing to its given name, for this airship moves with ". . . unship-like motion." It objectifies further, Maple's apparent buried desire to find herself, for it is vague, suspended, floating, waiting like she is, parallel to the hidden yet still existent question she has.

Her ears have become so untuned to nature that she almost misses the "natural tones" of the young man when he uncovers the question she has nearly erased from her mind. He appears to represent a natural part of her being as he recognizes something about her that is reminiscent of a maple tree as she looks out the window. She reveals that it no longer matters to her that people think her

name is Mabel, for she does not try to live up to Maple anymore.

The narrator's word choice in the next five lines indicates that Maple is entering a new phase of her cyclical quest, however.

They were both stirred that he should have divined  
 Without the name her personal mystery.  
 It made it seem as if there must be something  
 She must have missed herself. So they were married,  
 And took the fancy home with them to live by  
 (11. 95-99).

"Stirred" suggests that her original questions are again surfacing, while "divined," "mystery," and "fancy" give her quest a religious or mystical aura, and their marriage seems to have resulted from their mutual reaction to the magical quality of their meeting. These connotations continue as the narrator tells us "they went on pilgrimage once to her father's" (1. 100). Her initiation is now about to be achieved. Maple recalls the Bible passage marked by her mother and the repetition of "wave offering" suggests the repeated motion of waves, always cutting away the shore line, just as her questing slowly continues as her life ebbs away. This wearing away is again suggested by her answer to her husband when he asks her what her father's explanation had been.

'You've never asked your father outright, have you?'

'I have, and been put off sometime, I think.'

(This was her faded memory of the way  
 Once long ago her father had put himself off.)

(11. 111-114).

Her faded memory also links back to her mother's fading picture which illustrates the tight control Frost has over his materials throughout the poem.

Maple's husband adds mystery when he says maybe the father did not give Maple an explanation because it was not meant for her to know. Maple finds this unfair but begins to realize that what matters is not what the mother intended her name to mean, but what Maple herself thinks it means. Thus, the young couple are united by what is not explained and turn to the fanciful and imaginative. Their search for a meaning in Maple's name, however, does recur one last time when,

Once they came on a maple glade,  
 Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up,  
 And every leaf of foliage she'd worn  
 Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet.  
 But its age kept them from considering this one.  
 Twenty-five years ago at Maple's naming  
 It hardly could have been a two-leaved seedling  
 The next cow might have licked up out at pasture  
 (ll. 148-155).

This new tree is Maple's age, and the fact that they are both twenty-five seems a further emphasis on the cyclical or seasonal movement throughout the poem. It is the end of autumn when Maple discovers the lone tree, for its leaves are pale at its feet, and thus the poem comes full circle in a rhythmical pattern. Perhaps the name "Maple" came from the life and death cycle realized by the mother when the tiny girl was born. Maple happened to live,

unharmd or destroyed by natural forces, just as the seedling survived. However, assuming this tree too young to have been the one Maple's mother had in mind when she named her, Maple abandons the possibility of any symbolic significance. Thus, the narrator tells us,

They hovered for a moment near discovery,  
 Figurative enough to see the symbol,  
 But lacking faith in anything to mean  
 The same at different times to different people  
 (ll. 157-160).

"Different times" indicates all the different parts of the life cycle, but Maple does not recognize this tree as a universal life symbol, and she has finally come to desire that the mystery continue. She no longer wishes to solve it. She is afraid to pry any more, for she thrives on romantic fancy and fears that the answer to her question "Who am I?" is simply "a product of nature." The narrator ends by warning the reader that it is better to leave things to nature and to chance rather than cause a child to live a whole lifetime trying to find out what he is supposed to be. The irony and ultimate paradox is, of course, that regardless of one's name, each man lives with that same haunting question.

Maple, the female character in this poem, ultimately becomes, then, a universal figure searching for identity. However, Maple is also something much more specific than this. Her character demonstrates Frost's sensitive

understanding of the questing female as a child, a dying mother, a young woman. Though this character is not particularly patterned after Isabelle, Jeanie, or Elinor, the poem seems instead to embody all three of the women Frost knew, as well as his own daughters. One sees the tender relationship between father and daughter, the sensitive, deep feeling of a mother similar to that of Isabelle for Robert, the questing for and denial of certain truths reminiscent of Elinor's own struggles, and the frustration and relentless question of self-identity experienced by Jeanie. Most importantly, what Frost has created here is a complex and credible feminine character within the framework of a tightly-knit, well-written poem.



CHAPTER III  
THE OBSESSED WOMAN

Frost developed several women characters throughout his poetry who were obsessed with death, loneliness, fear, or guilt. It seems natural that some of his most credible characters would be those possessing a monomania, since his mother, sister, and wife each at some phase in her life, experienced such obsessions. Isabelle was so concerned with religion that she said herself it permeated all she did. Jeanie's obsession varied with each situation, and her unstable mind was often obsessed with fear of war, threat of communism, or ". . . the indelicacy of having children."<sup>129</sup> At one point, Elinor, too, became nearly obsessed with the death of their son, Elliot, and this obsession is most likely represented in "Home Burial." Other poems dealing with the woman suffering from a monomania include "Hill Wife," "The Fear," "The Housekeeper," "The Witch of Coös," and "A Servant to Servants."

Amy, the central female character in the poem "Home Burial," expresses her obsession with the death of her small son both through her words and her actions. She

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<sup>129</sup>Thompson, Selected Letters, p. 247.

appears to be patterned after Elinor, who was inconsolable after her first-born, Elliot, died; Robert was unable to ease her deep bereavement.<sup>130</sup> While Elinor lapsed into deep depression, Frost was able to overcome this loss. In a letter to Untermeyer, Frost explained that he was unable to lapse into a deathlike state just because someone else died.<sup>131</sup> Thus, Frost knew well a woman obsessed with death, which may explain the credibility of Amy's character, for he had undoubtedly experienced the separation he and Elinor felt at the loss of their child.<sup>132</sup>

"Home Burial" is built around a strained husband-wife relationship, caused by the wife's self-imposed obsession with her child's death. The poem's rhythm is jagged and uneven which punctuates the instability of their marriage relationship. The entire poem functions like a seesaw in sound, word choice, setting, and action.

Throughout, the rhythm and sound are jarring and out of tune, as in the excerpt of their debate:

'What is it--what?' she said.

'Just that I see.'

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<sup>130</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 75.

<sup>131</sup>Untermeyer (ed.), op. cit., pp. 102-103.

<sup>132</sup>Sergeant, op. cit. p. 74.

'You don't,' she challenged. 'Tell me what it is'  
(ll. 18-20).<sup>133</sup>

The lines vary in length, and her repetitious words in their seesaw movement underscore her driving monomania. One critic observes that her words express ". . . the pain of a primal wound."<sup>134</sup> Thompson describes her driving obsession as "unbalanced perseverance."<sup>135</sup> O'Donnell has especially recognized the chaffing, rough quality of their conversation, explaining that ". . . they irritate a raw spot with every syllable they utter. . . ."<sup>136</sup> The seesaw construction of "Home Burial" is much more complex than just the suggestive sounds, however.

As the narrator unfolds this drama, he describes the couple's movements on a flight of stairs. The words he uses along with the characters' actions create such a complex undercurrent of frantic discomfort that one immediately senses their unbalanced relationship.

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs  
Before she saw him. She was starting down,  
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear,

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<sup>133</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 69-73.

<sup>134</sup>Robert A. Greenberg and James G. Hepburn, Robert Frost: An Introduction, pp. 145-146.

<sup>135</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, pp. 110-111.

<sup>136</sup>W. G. O'Donnell, "Robert Frost and New England: A Revaluation," Yale Review, XXXVII (Summer, 1948), 706.

She took a doubtful step and then undid it  
 To raise herself and look again. He spoke  
 Advancing toward her: 'What is it you see  
 From up there always--for I want to know'  
 (ll. 1-7).

One first notices the repetitious use of the words "saw" and "see," an obvious underlining of the characters' psychological vacillation. Further, one notes the physical up and down movement of the wife, while the words "fear," "doubtful," and "undid" stress her psychological distress. Swennes views such conversation and action as ". . . sexual aggression and withdrawal."<sup>137</sup> However, it would seem that this couple's estrangement is caused not by a sexual conflict, but rather by their differing reactions to the death of their young son; their sexual estrangement is an outgrowth of this basic misunderstanding. Swennes further demonstrates his failure to comprehend their conflict when he notes that Amy erects barriers that destroy their relationship because the husband is not patient nor understanding enough.<sup>138</sup> The husband displays his feelings for her early in the poem as he says, "I will find out now--you must tell me, dear" (l. 12), and even more so when he tells her at the end of the poem that he wishes her to stay. Even though he is extremely forceful, it should be stressed that he must act this way

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<sup>137</sup>Robert H. Swennes, "Man and Wife: The Dialogue of Contraries in Robert Frost's Poetry," American Literature, XLII (November, 1970), 366-367.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., p. 367.

with a distraught and inconsolable woman.

Another effective device used by Frost in this poem is the symbolic function of the latch and door. Amy stands near the door during much of her conversation with her husband and fumbles with the latch. "Her fingers moved the latch for all reply" (l. 47), a movement which sustains the up and down motif which runs throughout the poem. Also, however, this recurrent act symbolizes Amy's threat to escape from her husband and reality into a fantasy world of her own making. In an attempt to force his wife to accept the fact of her child's death, her husband begs Amy to unlock her grief for him rather than unlocking the door. "Don't--don't go. / Don't carry it to someone else this time. / Tell me about it if it's something human. / Let me into your grief" (ll. 59-62). As long as she does not open the latch, she has not locked him out; however, should she unlatch the door, her act will serve to shut him off completely from her. Therefore, he eventually begs her to "Close the door" (l. 114), hoping to keep their communication open. This poetic device, then, helps illuminate the woman's attempt to elude her problem.

Closely related to the latch device is Frost's use of a wall. Amy feels that her husband does not mourn for their child as she does and so has come to interpret all his actions as insensitive. Her memories and interpretations

of his various activities become a barrier. The most vivid involves a wall.

'You can't because you don't know how to speak.  
 If you had any feelings, you that dug  
 With your own hand--how could you?--his little grave;  
 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  
 And roll back down the mound beside the hole.  
 I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.  
 And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs  
 To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.  
 Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice  
 Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,  
 But I went near to see with my own eyes.  
 You could sit there with the stains on your shoes  
 Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave  
 And talk about your everyday concerns.  
 You had stood the spade up against the wall  
 Outside there in the entry, for I saw it'  
 (ll. 75-92).

His act of standing the spade against the wall is a lasting image in her mind--that wall is between them. The image objectifies the void or break in their relationship.

These lines further illustrate the up and down movement of the poem, but also couple opposites, a technique used repeatedly by Frost as he builds a setting for the development of frantic, distraught women. Thus, the "gravel leaps lightly" and "lands lightly." Also, physical evidence such as the spade, the gravel and mud, and the stains on her husband's shoes complete the impression of her isolated and frantic attempt to escape the reality surrounding her. Finally, she enlarges the case to universal

dimensions, equating the baby's death to all evil in the world. She says, "'But the world's evil. / I won't have grief so / If I can change it. / Oh, I won't, I won't!'" (ll. 110-111). She desires to destroy death, and if that is impossible, then she hopes to change the world to fit her own designs, eliminating death.

Here, then, Frost has created a woman character whose monomania has led her to an irrational and impossible desire. At the poem's end, the two characters are left suspended--we are not told how their estrangement ends, for that is not important. What Frost wished to accomplish has been completed--a credible female character suffering from obsession has been created.

Three closely related poems by Frost are "The Hill Wife," "The Housekeeper," and "The Fear." In each of these works, the central woman character harbors a fear directly related to her marriage relationship.

In the poem, "The Hill Wife," Frost presents dramatic action through five related lyrics. The five separate poems were not written at the same point in the writer's career, but they were combined later in a sequence which builds on the theme of separation and becomes a psychological analysis of a woman's obsession that grows out of loneliness.

The initial poem, "Loneliness," is a twelve-line

record of the thoughts of the young wife who is deeply troubled with the lack of understanding in her relationship with her husband. Possessing a fine sensitivity to the natural world about her, she observes that a satisfying marriage relationship would not warrant the magnified sadness they feel when the birds leave nor the great joy they experience when the birds return. Meanwhile, her husband is concerned mainly with practicalities and does not recognize her loneliness, nor does he understand her need to exercise fancy and imagination. The Hill Wife completes her statement when she contrasts the barrier that separates husband and wife to the oneness which unites the ". . . birds that fill their breasts / But with each other and themselves / And their built or driven nests" (ll. 10-12).<sup>139</sup> In the second lyric, "House Fear," an omniscient narrator draws a subtle contrast between the fulfillment of the occupants of the birds' nest in the first lyric and the estrangement that exists between the fearful occupants of the house.

Neurotic fear engendered by loneliness overcomes the woman as she describes her encounter with the beggar of "The Smile." His smile is an enigma to her; it tantalizes her imagination and intrigues her as it at once

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<sup>139</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 160-162.



attracts and repels. "That smile! It never came of being gay. / Still he smiles--did you see him?--I was sure!" (ll. 2-3). When she imagines that his smile mocks them because they are young and married or because they know poverty, she voices her own judgment of her dilemma. "Perhaps he mocked us for being wed, / Or being very young (and he was pleased / To have a vision of us old and dead.)" (ll. 8-10). She sees her youth passing and fears that age and death will come to her before she has known fulfillment. Ogilvie suggests that the tramp presages disaster.<sup>140</sup> "He's watching from the road as like as not" (l. 12). Certainly he objectifies the woman's growing uneasiness with her plight.

The isolated union is further investigated by the narrator in the fourth lyric, "The Oft-Repeated Dream." The woman's dream of a dark pine "Forever trying the window-latch / Of the room where they slept" (ll. 3-4), symbolizes her knowledge that lack of understanding from her husband, coupled with outside forces, threatens their marriage. She has ". . . no saying dark enough" (l. 1) to make her husband recognize that she cannot go on with this union. She is as ineffectual in penetrating the barrier between herself and her husband as ". . . a little

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<sup>140</sup>Ogilvie, op. cit., p. 72.

bird / Before the mystery of glass!" (ll. 7-8). Here Frost sustains the bird imagery of the earlier lyrics. The final four-line stanza of the lyric indicates that the woman has not yet given in to her wish to leave this man who will not recognize her desire to be needed.

It never had been inside the room,  
 And only one of the two  
 Was afraid in the oft-repeated dream  
 Of what the tree might do (ll. 9-12).

The narrator concludes the dramatic sequence with "The Impulse" by moving from the woman's impulse to leave her husband to the final separation. Frost underscores the finality of separation with images such as the furrowed field, the felled tree, the broken alder bough, and finally with the words, "the ties gave." She, bird-like, follows her husband as he furrows the field, but since he fails to respond she strays into the wood, where she hides among the fern and does not answer when he calls.

And once she went to break a bough  
 Of black alder.  
 She went so far she scarcely heard  
 When he called her--  
 And didn't answer--didn't speak--  
 Or return.  
 She stood, and then she ran and hid  
 In the fern (ll. 13-20).

Her love is dead; impulsively she leaves him.

The last stanzas of the lyric describe the unimaginative husband who fails to search for her among the ferns. Finally, he goes to her mother's house, but does not find

her there. "Sudden, swift, and light," she has taken flight. "And he learned of finalities / Besides the grave" (ll. 27-28). She does not exist for him any more.

In "The Hill Wife" Frost reflects the delicate balance of a woman's need to express her sensitivities and imagination and her need to be understood. In this poem there are shadows of Isabelle, who knew the loneliness of estrangement from William, and who more than once literally took flight. Frost had seen loneliness in Elinor, also, and perhaps recognized a kind of temporary flight in her long and frequent periods of reticence.

The long dramatic dialogue, "The Housekeeper," unfolds the story of a woman obsessed with another need, that of social approval. Thompson calls this poem a psychological study of Estelle, the housekeeper, who does not appear in the poem.<sup>141</sup> Her story is narrated by her ponderous mother, resigned and pathetic, as she converses with an unnamed neighbor. Estelle has brooded long on the attitude toward marriage of John Hall, her common-law husband of fifteen years.

'The strain's been too much for her all these years:  
I can't explain it any other way.  
It's different with a man, at least with John:  
He knows he's kinder than the run of men.

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<sup>141</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 109.

Better than married ought to be as good  
 As married--that's what he has always said'  
 (ll. 85-90).<sup>142</sup>

An idealist, John does not consider marriage and recognition by his neighbors a guarantee of love or a prerequisite to happiness.<sup>143</sup> But the desire for marriage and respectability becomes an obsession for Estelle. When John denies her the fulfillment of that desire by refusing to marry her, she leaves him for another who will marry her. John learns too late that she required more than the kindness he gave her; she required also a sense of respectability. Ironically, the Hill Wife, who had the respectability of marriage, left her husband because she required also the kindness of his understanding. In each poem Frost comments indirectly on the human need for acceptance.

Frost based the poem, "The Fear," on a personal experience. One evening in the summer of 1907, while visiting in the White Mountains, he took Carol, his small son, for a stroll along a country road. At one point, a woman carrying a lantern called to them. Frost sensed fear and suspicion in the woman's voice, perhaps because his own fears were countless. He explained that he was not a prowler and that he had his small son with him. Later, his hostess,

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<sup>142</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 103-111.

<sup>143</sup>Cox, op. cit., p. 152.

Mrs. Lynch, explained that the woman, a neighbor, had deserted her husband to live with the man she loved.<sup>144</sup>

Frost saw the possibility for a dramatic narrative poem in this experience.

Critic Denis Donoghue suggests that this poem was the beginning of the drama which was reworked in "The Hill Wife."<sup>145</sup> One section of each of these poems concentrates on the fear experienced by a couple returning at night to an empty house. Just as the couple in "The Hill Wife" "learned to rattle the lock and key" (l. 5), the couple of "The Fear" takes care that "the key rattled loudly into place / . . . to warn someone to be getting out" (ll. 22-23)<sup>146</sup> at another door. Another parallel between the two poems is observed in the neurotic apprehension of each woman concerning a mysterious presence lurking in the shadows. Just as the Hill Wife imagines that the tramp watches from the woods, the woman of "The Fear" imagines that someone is ". . . everywhere / Around us, looking out of tree and bushes / Till I sha'n't dare to set foot outdoors'" (ll. 51-53). In the mind of each woman, an elusive person embodies a fear.

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<sup>144</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. 344.

<sup>145</sup>Denis Donoghue, "A Mode of Communication: Frost and the Middle Style," Yale Review, LII (December, 1962), 216.

<sup>146</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 112-116.

Thompson considers "The Fear" a continuation of the poem, "The Housekeeper."<sup>147</sup> It is not difficult to observe continuity in the dramatic action of the two poems. Such continuity is facilitated, because in his volume, North of Boston, Frost placed "The Fear" directly after the poem "The Housekeeper."

The woman of "The Fear" is obsessed with the fear that the man she has abandoned will find her where she lives with another, and she imagines that he lurks somewhere in the dark. She and her companion, Joel, have returned in a gig to their farm. The woman has seen a face in the bushes by the edge of the road and is consumed with fear and suspicion.

A lantern inside the barn throws an eerie light on the grass outside. Frost builds the sense of mystery with careful description: lurking shadow, hollow floor, drawn curtains, rattling key. The couple's conversation, as they stand outside the barn, is heavy with psychological interest. The woman vocalizes her persistency; Frost is at his best in his use of sound of sense.

' . . . I saw it just as plain as a white plate,'  
 She said, 'as the light on the dashboard ran  
 Along the bushes at the roadside--a man's face,  
 You must have seen it too.'

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<sup>147</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 110.

'I didn't see it.

Are you sure--'

'Yes, I'm sure!'

'--it was a face?'

'Joel, I'll have to look. I can't go in,  
I can't, and leave a thing like that un-  
settled' (ll. 9-18).

At first apprehensive and fearful, the woman now summons her courage as she lifts the lantern and calls into the night. When she learns the true identity of the voice that answers and is assured that he is only a casual passer-by, her attitude towards Joel becomes defensive. She experiences guilt. Early in the poem she has alluded to an old love when she says, "'This is my business / If the time's come to face it, I'm the one / To put it the right way'" (ll. 41-43). Now she stands immobile. Unable to turn to face Joel, fearing he will not understand her actions, she pleads: "'This is a very, very lonely place, / Joel!'" (ll. 101-102). In her need to be understood, she takes her place with the Hill Wife and with Estelle.

A third person narrator begins and concludes Frost's poem, "The Witch of Coös." The story is told by the conscience-stricken woman character, aided by her dull-witted middle-aged son. Thomas Thornburg classifies the work as a dramatic monologue in which A (the woman) tells B (the

stranger) about C (the murder).<sup>148</sup> Thus, the stranger learns the reason for the woman's grim melancholy.

The woman known as the Witch of Coös lives in an isolated New Hampshire farm home, where forty years earlier her husband, Toffile, murdered her lover and buried the body in their dark cellar. The woman unfolds the story of a life obsessed with guilt. On a cold winter night the murdered man's skeleton climbed the cellar stairs and with smoke rolling in its eye sockets reached toward her. When she struck at the outstretched hand, the finger bones clattered to the floor and the skeleton turned to climb the stairs to the second floor where Toffile slept; then it proceeded to the attic. The frightened woman implored her husband to nail shut the attic door and push the bed against it. Although Toffile now is dead, she still hears the bones scratching against the attic door at night. Her tale is the confession of a guilt-crazed woman.

Critic Elizabeth Isaacs suggests that the question of what part of the tale is fact and what part is fancy is never answered.<sup>149</sup> John F. Lynen is perhaps more nearly

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<sup>148</sup> Thomas R. Thornburg, "Mother's Private Ghost: A Note on Frost's 'The Witch of Coös,'" Ball State University Forum, XI (Winter, 1970), 17.

<sup>149</sup> Elizabeth Isaacs, An Introduction to Robert Frost, p. 138.



right in his surmise that the murder itself is truth, while the walking skeleton imprisoned in the attic is phantasy born of the woman's suppressed sense of guilt.<sup>150</sup>

Defensive concerning the witchcraft the hill-folk associate her with, the woman says, "Summoning spirits isn't 'Button, button, / Who's got the button' I would have them know" (ll. 7-8).<sup>151</sup> Oblique reference is made again to the parlor game when she searches futilely for one of the brittle finger-pieces she supposedly struck to the floor so long ago. She interrupts her own story to ask, "(Where did I see one of those pieces lately? / Hand me my button-box--it must be there)" (ll. 81-82). When the bone is not found, the reader suspects the woman does, indeed, delude herself with a game of "Button, button."

The son's question, "You wouldn't want to tell him what we have / Up attic, mother?" (ll. 19-20), leads naturally to her confession of the family secret--a skeleton in the attic. "Bones--a skeleton" (l. 21), she answers. After the initial admission, details follow easily for both the mother and her son, who was too young to remember what

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<sup>150</sup>John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, p. 115.

<sup>151</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 247-252.



to objectify her guilt. On the winter night the skeleton entered her kitchen, Toffile had gone to bed, leaving the door to the outside wide open ". . . to cool the room off / So as to sort of turn me out of it" (ll. 43-44), indicating that he had no concern for her. Toffile's bed in the room above was as cold as the night. It "might just as well be ice and the clothes snow" (l. 40), she said. In the cellar below "The bulkhead double-doors were double-locked / And swollen tight and buried under snow (ll. 6-7). She found no warmth or comfort anywhere; she knew only the chill of guilt. When the skeleton reached the cellar door, it stopped: ". . .the bones didn't try / The door; they halted helpless on the landing, / Waiting for things to happen in their favor" (ll. 62-64). It was she who opened the door to him: "So suddenly I flung the door wide on him" (l. 71). It was she who exposed her lover. After she struck the ghost, ". . . It had its choice / Of the door to the cellar or the hall. / It took the hall door for the novelty" (ll. 84-86). Her lover had obviously used the cellar as a place to hide in the past. When the skeleton ascended to the bedroom above, she shouted, "'Shut the bedroom door, / Toffile, for my sake'" (ll. 94-95). She begged her husband to avoid a confrontation, but he did not. When she could not see the skeleton in the bedroom, she cried, "'He's after an open door to get out doors'" (l. 113), then added, "'Let's trap him with an

open door up attic'" (l. 114). When he climbed the attic stairs, she ". . . slammed . . . the door and held the knob" (l. 119). Then she cried, "'Toffile, get nails,' I made him nail the door shut / And push the headboard against it" (ll. 120-121). In fear that Toffile would kill her, she had set a trap for her lover to save herself, and now she lived with guilt.

Frost uses a subtle device to indicate the woman's confusion and near-madness when she views the skeleton alternately as either the person of her illicit lover ("him"), or as a mere object ("it" or "them").<sup>152</sup> For example, sometimes she describes the skeleton as a man. It becomes a person when it climbs the cellar steps.

. . . And then someone  
Began the stairs, two footsteps for each step,  
The way a man with one leg and a crutch,  
Or a little child comes up. . . (ll. 51-54).

As her story continues, the skeleton is given emotions: "So suddenly I flung the door open wide on him. / A moment he stood balancing with emotion, / And all but lost himself" (ll. 71-73). Then she gives it memory when she says to Toffile, "'The uncommonly deep snow has made him think / Of

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<sup>152</sup>Thornburg is not accurate when he notes that the woman "stops referring to the skeleton as the 'bones' and begins to refer to it as 'him'" (p. 18), when the skeleton begins to climb the cellar stairs. She alternates her use of neuter and masculine gender in reference to the skeleton throughout the poem. She is not consistent.

his old song, The Wild Colonial Boy, / He always used to sing along the tote road'" (ll. 110-112).

At other times the skeleton is referred to as an object. For example, it ". . . carried itself like a pile of dishes" (l. 30); "It was the bones. I knew them--and good reason" (l. 60); "I had a vision of them put together / Not like a man, but like a chandelier" (ll. 69-70); "I sat up on the floor and shouted, 'Toffile, / It's coming up to you'" (ll. 83-84); ". . . it looked like lightening or a scribble" (l. 90); "It's looking for another door to try" (l. 109); and finally, "I promised Toffile to be cruel to them / For helping them be cruel once to him" (ll. 34-35). She tries to forget the man the skeleton represents, but her guilt will not let her.

When the son breaks in uncertainly to say, "'We think they have a grave down in the cellar'" (l. 136), the woman responds positively, "'We know they have a grave down in the cellar'" (l. 137). She has given up the game of "button, button." When the son repeats words that were probably rehearsed throughout his childhood, "'We never could find out whose bones they were'" (l. 138), the mother quickly corrects him:

Yes, we could too, son. Tell the truth for once.  
They were a man's his father killed for me.  
I mean a man he killed instead of me.  
The least I could do was to help dig their grave.  
We were about it one night in the cellar.  
Son knows the story: but 'twas not for him

To tell the truth, suppose the time had come.  
 Son looks surprised to see me end a lie  
 We'd kept all these years between ourselves  
 So as to have it ready for outsiders.  
 But tonight I don't care enough to lie--  
 I don't remember why I ever cared (ll. 139-150).

When she reveals the identity of the skeleton, the story is no longer a ghost story. It becomes a factual account of a despairing woman telling the grim details of illicit love, murder, and a grave. Her statements have become direct and terse.

The stranger to whom the Witch of Coös has confessed her guilt concludes the poem. He remembers the woman seated in her kitchen with a lapful of buttons. "She hadn't found the finger-bone she wanted / Among the buttons poured out in her lap" (ll. 153-154). Perhaps he feels superior and smiles as he notes that she sought to give credence to an unbelievable story by providing finger-bones from her button-box.

But Frost has the last word. The reader senses that now it is Frost who smiles when the narrator also seizes on something concrete to prove his story. "I verified the name next morning: Toffile. / The rural letter box said Toffile Lajway" (ll. 155-156), he says. These last lines of the poem intimate that Frost felt a sympathy for the Witch of Coös who could not continue her pretense. He often indulged in imagination, also. It was a method of self-protection learned from his mother, Isabelle.

Self-deceptions led him sometimes unintentionally to dishonesty with himself and with others.<sup>153</sup> Consequently, he understood the the need for the exercise of fancy and imagination by the Witch of Coös, a woman obsessed with guilt.

The dramatic monologue, "Servant to Servants," introduces a character whose obsession is deeper and more complex than the Witch of Coös'. While guilt has caused the former character to fantasize, the persona in "Servant to Servants" is driven to near insanity by the fear of this very weakness. Once more Frost speaks through the female's center of consciousness, allowing her to tell her own story, even though her descriptions and perceptions may be exaggerated and unreliable because of her monomania.

Thompson believes that Frost was inspired to compose this poem after a family camping trip to Vermont in 1909, when the poet purchased eggs and milk from Mrs. Connelley, a careworn and haggard farm wife.<sup>154</sup> Possibly Frost added to his memory of Mrs. Connelley his own inner fear of falling ill to the disease of his sister Jeanie as he portrays the isolato figure in this poem.

As the poem opens, the persona's description of her lonely and unappreciated situation in life immediately

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<sup>153</sup>Thompson, Early Years, p. xviii.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., pp. 352-353.

demonstrates her introspective attitude and unbalanced perceptions. Her first comments which are very subjective are effusive, unsure, and incomplete.

I didn't make you know how glad I was  
 To have you come and camp here on our land.  
 I promised myself to get down some day  
 And see the way you lived, but I don't know!  
 With a houseful of hungry men to feed  
 I guess you'd find. . . . It seems to me  
 I can't express my feelings any more  
 Than I can raise my voice or want to lift  
 My hand (oh, I can lift it when I have to).  
 Did ever you feel so? I hope you never  
 (ll. 1-10).<sup>155</sup>

The reiterated use of the personal pronoun "I" underscores the persona's deep-rooted introspection. Furthermore, she is unable to express her feelings. Her vague attempts to explain to the listener her failure to articulate her thoughts, "It seems to me / I can't express my feelings any more" verbalizes the crux of her problem. She cannot control or come to grips with her lurking fear of the threats of insanity. When she questions, "Did ever you feel so? I hope you never" (l. 10), she reveals in what poor condition she is through her arrangement of words; they are awkward and insufficient. They also are reminiscent of Jeanie's letter to Frost, in which she expressed a similar hope that no one would experience her anguish

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<sup>155</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 82-87.



caused by mental illness.

This awkward syntax evidences her inability to form complete thoughts. However, not only are her thoughts expressed in incomplete terms--she feels that her whole life is a void, unfulfilled. She is dissatisfied and frustrated, ". . . --from doing / Things over and over that just won't stay done" (ll. 51-52). She thinks she is not appreciated by the ". . . great good-for-nothings, / Sprawling about the kitchen with their talk" (ll. 76-77), but her fear is really not so much that they do not appreciate her work, but that she is not appreciated for maintaining her sanity. Her feeling of unfulfillment is objectified in the view she sees from her kitchen window.

I look and look at it.  
I see it's a fair, pretty sheet of water.  
I stand and make myself repeat out loud  
The advantages it has, so long and narrow,  
Like a deep piece of some old running river  
Cut short off at both ends (ll. 16-21).

Just as her sentences are incomplete, and her life seems a void, the lake, too, is "cut short off at both ends," and she continues to describe the lake as growing ". . . whiter and whiter and whiter" (l. 25) as a storm approaches, just as she becomes progressively more numb as insanity silently threatens to overtake her. She explains "It's got so I don't even know for sure / whether I am glad, sorry, or anything" (ll. 11-12). She is so controlled by her obsession that she is unable to feel anything but

frustration.

Irony is a second way Frost demonstrates the persona's condition. The woman has spent her entire life comparing herself to an uncle who suffered insanity, and this comparison is the cause of her fear that she, too, will become insane. And yet, as she rambles on in her monologue, she compares herself and her husband, saying ". . . he works when he works as hard as I do-- / Though there's small profit in comparisons" (ll. 67-68) and then interjects a personal observation that "(Woman and men will make them [comparisons] all the same.)" (l. 69). This statement becomes situational irony, for while she seems to make light of drawing comparisons, she fails to recognize the deep danger such indulgence creates as demonstrated by her own life.

Further situational irony appears when the woman asks what brought her listener to her land. She is apparently told that he read of the camping spot in a fern book.

In a book about ferns? Listen to that!  
 You let things more like feathers regulate  
 Your going and coming. And you like it here?  
 I can see how you might. But I don't know!  
(ll. 35-38).

She reveals her amazement that one should allow a thing as fragile as a fern to direct his fate, yet she fails to see that she, too, has been led to this spot by something fragile as a feather. She has been led by the idea of

possible insanity. Her thoughts and ideas are so fragile, in fact, that she is unable to even express them or capture them verbally.

The ultimate irony appears at the end of her monologue when she tells her listener, "Bless you, of course, you're keeping me from work, / But the thing of it is, I need to be kept" (ll. 171-172). In an effective bit of verbal irony, Frost plays on the words "be kept," for she literally has need to "be kept" by an institution, as well as having the need for attention from a sympathetic listener.

Finally, then, in "Servant to Servants" Frost has created a woman so obsessed with fear, that she is hardly able to endure. Believing that she is ". . . past such help--" (l. 156), she resigns herself to her situation. "I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going" (l. 159), she says, revealing her hopelessness. Eventually, we are left with a character so destroyed by her obsession that she must certainly epitomize Frost's concept of total despair caused by a monomania. The woman's monologue trails off:

But behind's behind. The worst that you can do

Is set me back a little more behind.

I sha'n't catch up in this world, anyway.

I'd rather you'd not go unless you must (ll. 174-177).

She has revealed a final irony; she is a servant to her obsession rather than to her husband's hired men, who after all, work little and serve no one.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PERCEPTIVE WOMAN

Several of Frost's women characters are articulate, intelligent, and sensitive to their environments. Their maturity, not always measured in years, can more accurately be noted in their sense of values. The women characters in Frost's poems, "The Generations of Men," "Snow," "The Death of the Hired Man," "West-Running Brook," "In the Home Stretch," and "The Silken Tent," exemplify this type of woman.

The woman of "The Generations of Men" is young and confident. Her conversation is light and touched with good humor.<sup>156</sup> "'Why not take seats here on the cellar wall / And dangle feet among the raspberry vines?'" (ll. 66-67),<sup>157</sup> she asks her companion. She is outspoken and assured, also.<sup>158</sup> While he says it mists, she says it rains. When they peer into the cellar-hole of their ancestral home, he sees raspberry vines while she sees "' . . . the pit from which we Starks were digged'" (l. 99). But she is many-faceted. She knows joy and excitement in the exercise of

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<sup>156</sup>Swennes, op. cit., p. 369.

<sup>157</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 94-102.

<sup>158</sup>Swennes, op. cit., p. 369.

her imagination when she perceptively draws a word picture of an ancestor.

'Just hear  
 What I see. It's a little, little boy,  
 As pale and dim as a match flame in the sun;  
 He's groping in the cellar after jam,  
 He thinks it's dark and it's flooded with delight'  
 (ll. 104-108).

Her practicality returns quickly; it is she who sets the conditions for their next meeting. When he asks, "'Where shall we meet again?'" (l. 219), she answers emphatically and promptly, "'Nowhere but here / Once more before we meet elsewhere'" (ll. 220-221). Some of her confidence comes with the vigor of youth, but much of it is the sureness of a woman who is not afraid to make a choice. She is reminiscent of the head-strong young Elinor.

Another woman character is Helen Cole, the most clearly drawn of the three people in "Snow," the longest dramatic narrative poem of Mountain Interval.<sup>159</sup> The situation is typical of Frost settings: an isolated farm on a cold winter night in New England.<sup>160</sup> In this poem Frost presents a garrulous woman whose irritations and concerns are tolerated with good humor by her affectionately teasing husband.

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<sup>159</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 115.

<sup>160</sup>W. H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand, p. 346.

In conversations and letters Frost discussed exchanges between himself and Elinor much like the verbal tennis of the Coles. For example, when Frost wrote to Untermeyer of a discussion with Elinor concerning her religious disbelief, he reported that she responded tartly to the assertion that man needs God: "Nonsense and you know it's nonsense Bob Frost, only you're afraid you'll have bad luck or lose your standing in the community if you speak your mind."<sup>161</sup> Then Frost's letter continued, "Like a woman she says Pshaw. You know how a woman says Pshaw--you with your uncanny knowledge of your own wife."<sup>162</sup> Helen Cole of the poem "Snow" is this kind of woman.

While a blizzard rages, Meserve, an aptly named lay preacher, stops at the Cole farm on his way home from a religious meeting. Mrs. Cole obviously resents the man and all he stands for. When he goes to the barn to tend his horses, she protests to her husband, "'I detest the thought of him / With his ten children under ten years old'" (ll. 57-58).<sup>163</sup> She dislikes his piety and his religion, also. "'I hate his wretched little Racker Sect'" (l. 59), she says. She derides him in his absence, calling him a runt

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<sup>161</sup>Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters, p. 244.

<sup>162</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>163</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 180-194.

and saying that his smell is strong of stale tobacco. She resents his intrusion into the sheltered place they have cleared for themselves.<sup>164</sup> "'What is he doing out a night like this? / Why can't he stay at home?'" (ll. 175-176), she asks.

But, paradoxically, the woman is also intensely concerned for his safety and urges him to stay there until the storm abates. She implores him to remain: "'Won't you to please me? Please! If I say please?'" (l. 25). When she argues futilely, "'If you were the kind of man / Paid heed to women, you'd take my advice'" (ll. 234-235), Meserve counters, "'Save us from being cornered by a woman'" (l. 255). The preacher pauses before he goes out into the cold, then adds dramatically, "'Well, there's--the storm. That says I must go on. / That wants me as a war might if it came. Ask any man'" (ll. 260-262). The last is spoken directly to Helen Cole. Although Meserve is determined to go back out into the storm, perhaps he senses that "women are not pretending when they try to keep their men from danger; [and that] sometimes they like them better when they won't be kept."<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup>Anne K. Juhnke, "Religion in Robert Frost's Poetry: The Play for Self-Possession," American Literature, XXXVI (May, 1964), 158.

<sup>165</sup>Cox, op. cit., pp. 153-154.

Frost's name for the fanatical preacher, Brother Meserve, was undoubtedly chosen with care. Mrs. Cole's name was selected as carefully. It is particularly descriptive of the ambivalence noted in the character of this woman who is at once cold and unyielding, yet as warm in her concern for Meserve's safety as a lighted coal.

Perhaps the most familiar woman character of Frost's poetry is the gentle, persuasive Mary of the dramatic narrative poem, "The Death of the Hired Man." Although the title of the poem implies that Silas, the hired man, is the central character, he neither speaks nor appears. The action revolves about the death of Silas, but the poem is more accurately Mary's poem. The woman senses that Silas, old and broken, has returned to die. She approaches Warren, her husband, with gentle womanly tact,<sup>166</sup> because she knows that he will be stubbornly intolerant of the old man, who in the past has failed them when he was needed the most. Frost's belief that "thoughts, emotions, and words meet" in a "complete poem"<sup>167</sup> is demonstrated skillfully as Mary pleads with Warren to let Silas remain with them.

Mary sets the quiet tempo of the poem. "Mary sat

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<sup>166</sup>Swennes, op. cit., p. 368.

<sup>167</sup>Bess C. Hopkins, "A Study of 'The Death of the Hired Man,'" English Journal, XLIII (April, 1954), 186.



musing on the lamp-flame at the table / Waiting for Warren" (ll. 1-2).<sup>168</sup> Recognizing the importance of Warren's acceptance of the old man, she anticipates his negations and is prepared to answer them. She knows intuitively that her role is to facilitate the passage of Silas from life to death. She runs tip-toe to meet Warren at the door to tell him Silas has returned, then leads him to the porch and says softly, "'Be kind'" (l. 7). Sensing that her nearness and her love will help to convince Warren that they must show mercy to Silas, "She took the market things from Warren's arms / And set them on the porch, then drew him down / To sit beside her on the wooden steps" (ll. 8-10). Just as Mary "drew" Warren to the step beside her, she tenderly draws an acceptance of Silas from him.

Mary instinctively uses tone of voice and all facets of her personality to convince Warren.<sup>169</sup> When he refuses emphatically to take Silas back, Mary continues to be soft-spoken and gentle: "'Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you,' she said" (l. 31). When Warren continues, loud and adamant, she speaks even more sympathetically of Silas: "'He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove'" (l. 33). She

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<sup>168</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 49-55.

<sup>169</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 71.

expresses mercy and concern again when she murmurs, "'Poor Silas, so concerned for other folks, / And nothing to look backward to with pride, / And nothing to look forward to with hope, / So now and never any different'" (ll. 102-105). Every word and movement from Mary reflect her sensitivity to the hurts and futility Silas has known.

A dramatic turn in the poem follows with a Frostian sustained image frequently analyzed by critics. Coffin describes this image as his favorite figure of speech in Frost. "That is a good figure of speech," he says. "It is the only one in a fairly long poem. It is a poem of plain speaking about plain people."<sup>170</sup>

Part of the moon was falling down the west,  
 Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.  
 Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it  
 And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand  
 Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,  
 Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,  
 As if she played unheard some tenderness  
 That wrought on him beside her in the night (ll. 106-113).

Mary becomes the bridge between earth and heaven as she holds the moonlight in her lap and tenderly touches the "harp-like morning-glory strings." The mystic connotations of harp music lead naturally to Mary's words, "'Warren . . . he has come home to die: You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time'" (ll. 114-115).

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<sup>170</sup>Coffin, op. cit., p. 98.

When Warren mocks her use of the word "home," she defines the word as "'Something you somehow haven't to deserve'" (1. 125). She sees no duty or obligation in their relationship to Silas. As Warren considers the contrast in their attitudes, he has no words at first. "Warren leaned out and took a step or two, / Picked up a little stick, and brought it back / And broke it in his hand and tossed it by" (11. 126-128). The stick becomes functional. A parallel exists between the broken stick and his reaction to Silas.

But Mary continues her effort to reconcile Warren to Silas' need for mercy rather than justice. When Warren argues "'Silas has better claim on us you think / Than on his brother?'" (11. 129-130), and "'His brother's rich / A somebody--director in the bank'" (11. 133-134), she counters softly, "'He never told us that'" (1. 135). When Warren insists on reasons, "'I wonder what's between them'" (1. 145), Mary patiently and philosophically gives him a reason:

'Silas is what he is--we wouldn't mind him--  
 But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.  
 He never did a thing so very bad.  
 He don't know why he isn't quite as good  
 As anybody. Worthless though he is,  
 He won't be made ashamed to please his brother'  
 (11. 147-152).

Her answer indicates an uncritical acceptance and understanding of human nature. Admonishing Warren to be gentle,

Mary finally urges him to go to Silas to communicate his acceptance of the dying man.

' . . . Go, look, see for yourself.  
 But, Warren, please remember how it is:  
 He's come to help you ditch the meadow.  
 He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.  
 He may not speak of it, and then he may' (ll. 162-166).

Nowhere in his narrative poetry is Frost's theory of the importance of every-day speech illustrated more effectively.<sup>171</sup>

Frost continues the moon image as he closes the poem. As Warren goes to Silas, Mary says, "'I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud / Will hit or miss the moon'" (ll. 167-168). The narrator continues, "It hit the moon. / Then there were three, making a dim row, / The moon, the little silver cloud, and she" (ll. 169-171). As the cloud covers the moon, it parallels Warren's quiet announcement when he returns to Mary. He, too, is gentle as he touches her hand and quietly says, "'Dead'" (l. 175). While Warren and the old man had both looked to the future, Mary had reverently accepted death.

Mary's acceptance of death is suggestive of the mystical attitude towards death expressed by Isabelle Moodie

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<sup>171</sup>Edward Lathem, in his Interviews with Robert Frost, records Frost's comment, "I use only the words I find in conversation, making them poetic as best I can with what powers I command" (p. 26).

Frost in her letter to Sarah Newton,<sup>172</sup> while the good marriage relationship between Mary and Warren is built on the kind of deep love Robert Frost had for Elinor.

Another poem, "West-Running Brook," has received much critical attention which must be considered in examining the poem. Although most critics have failed to focus specifically on the woman character as a particular type or as influenced by women in Frost's own life, the scholars have made some accurate and important observations about the woman in this poem.

"West-Running Brook" has been described by Swennes as the ". . . most accomplished of Frost's marriage dialogues," displaying the ". . . dramatic intensity of 'Death of the Hired Man,' plus the dramatic core of philosophical thought which defines man's position in the universe."<sup>173</sup> Perhaps it is "most accomplished" because of its intricately developed structure built on a series of Frostian contrarities. Nitchie spells out the fine relationship both between the husband and wife and also between the couple and their environment, explaining that these result in freedom to express themselves honestly and without self-consciousness concerning

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<sup>172</sup>Thompson (ed.), Selected Letters, p. 14.

<sup>173</sup>Swennes, op. cit., p. 369.

their values because ". . . they can trust each other to go by contrarities."<sup>174</sup>

As the title indicates, the discussion between husband and wife is prompted by their discovery of a west-running brook.<sup>175</sup> Because this poem deals with tension, movement, and suspension the river is an effective background for the philosophical discussion which ensues. The river's ambivalent meaning seems to suggest both the power of nature and the force of time. The woman views the river in terms of its natural fertility and its continual source of water, while the man sees in the river the progression of time and a loss of the past. By drawing a detailed comparison of the attitudes of each character, one comprehends more fully the complexity of both figures in the work.

Representing all womanhood, the woman is able to communicate with the water in a way the man is unable to understand. "Look, look, it's waving to us with a wave / To let us know it hears me" (ll. 20-21).<sup>176</sup> He explains

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<sup>174</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 125.

<sup>175</sup>Thompson in Early Years notes that a west-running brook ran near the house of the Derry farm. It was a small spring-fed brook drained out of a cranberry bog (p. 262).

<sup>176</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 327-329.

that the wave had ". . . been standing off this jut of shore / Ever since rivers . . . / Were made in heaven. It wasn't waved to us" (ll. 32-34). Their discussion continues as she counters "It wasn't, yet it was. If not to you / It was to me--in an annunciation" (ll. 35-36). While he recognizes that man's beginnings are initiated by the water (ll. 45-46), she takes a more personal view, feeling closely related to the water, because just as the Virgin Mary received annunciation, so does this woman believe the water brings an annunciation to her. Her husband tries to tease her out of further discussion by telling her that if she feels something special for the river which only a woman can understand, he will say no more.

'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  
And leave you there, ourselves forbid to enter,--  
It is your brook! I have no more to say' (ll. 37-41).

At this point she demonstrates that although she has very definite opinions of her own, she is also most interested in her husband's ideas. "Yes, you have, too. Go on. You thought of something" (l. 42). Just as Elinor supported Frost when he expressed his philosophical thoughts through poetry, this wife, too, sustains her husband in thought. Unlike the wife in "Home Burial," she does not wish to force her own beliefs upon her husband. Swennes explains that she makes a diplomatic error and when her husband

takes offense, she carefully encourages him to express his convictions; when he does, their conversation ends in agreement.<sup>177</sup> They make no attempt to hide their feelings but rather communicate them accurately.<sup>178</sup>

The couple's reaction to the river's wave stimulates philosophical discoveries. The wave becomes for them a symbol of all civilization. Traveling from the East it suggests the cradle of civilization, the birth of mankind. She sees herself in the process; he sees it all on a broader perspective. Although her view is more limited, she is able to accept her husband's philosophical monologue and thus demonstrates her mature self.

Perhaps as he wrote "In the Home Stretch" Frost remembered the many times Elinor had moved with him from place to place when he returned to school or sought work or more healthful climates. They had lived in cities, in villages, on farms, and in hill country. He had undoubtedly seen her, like the woman of this poem, surrounded by furniture and boxes, peering quietly out a kitchen window at unfamiliar landscapes.

With moving men in and out of the house and with

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<sup>177</sup>Swennes, op. cit., p. 369.

<sup>178</sup>Loc. cit.



furniture piled high about her, the woman of "In the Home Stretch" stands at her kitchen window--a lonely figure looking out over weeds and a mowing-field that stretches to woods. "'And it's scarce enough to call / A view'" (ll. 35-36),<sup>179</sup> she says. The woman has agreed to move to the country with her husband because he wishes to live here--her happiness depends upon his contentment.<sup>180</sup> She has made her choice because she loves him deeply; this keeps her from being an object of pity.<sup>181</sup>

She is too philosophical to want to be pitied. Like the woman of "West-Running Brook," this woman has a fanciful kinship to nature--she perceives a comradeship to the moon.<sup>182</sup>

' . . . How dark it's getting. Can you tell what time  
It is by that? Or by the moon? The new moon!  
What shoulder did I see her over? Neither.  
A wire she is of silver, as new as we  
To everything. Her light won't last us long.  
It's something, though, to know we're going to have her  
Night after night and stronger every night  
To see us through our first two weeks . . .'  
(ll. 74-81).

She anticipates a few weeks of loneliness in the new home, but the moon will be familiar.

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<sup>179</sup>Frost, op. cit., pp. 139-146.

<sup>180</sup>Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 115.

<sup>181</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>182</sup>Nitchie, op. cit., p. 127.



'It would take me forever to recite  
 All that's not new in where we find ourselves.  
 New is a word for fools in towns who think  
 Style upon style in dress and thought at last  
 Must get somewhere. I've heard you say as much.  
 No, this is no beginning' (ll. 199-204).

He continues to probe for an answer: "'Then an end?'"

(l. 205). And she replies, "'End is a gloomy word'"

(l. 206). She is serene in the present, because she does not demand an explanation of where the "now" began or when it will end.

Frost himself once observed that philosophy ". . . has such a sad time because it tries to reduce everything to an All, to a Once-for-All."<sup>183</sup> The wife, answering Joe's questions concerning beginnings and ends, is Frost speaking his own kind of philosophy. William Mulder explains:

The poet is content to work with middles, but they are experience reordered, parts and moments of it. Parts of life interpret the whole. All that the artist needs is samples. Enough success to know what money's like, enough love to know what women are like.<sup>184</sup>

Just as the situation of this poem was inspired perhaps by a memory of Elinor, so the woman of "In the Home Stretch" with her quiet practical wisdom may be a

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<sup>183</sup>William Mulder, "Freedom and Form: Robert Frost's Double Discipline," South Atlantic Quarterly, LIV (July, 1955), p. 389.

<sup>184</sup>Loc. cit.

combination of strong characteristics the poet observed in both Isabelle and Elinor. But she is a vehicle, also, to express his own philosophy. Frost used other women characters in this same way. The wife of Paul's Wife," the old woman of "The Black Cottage," the girl-child of "The Self-Seeker," Thyatira of "A Masque of Reason," and Jesse Bel of "A Masque of Mercy" also help express or delineate a philosophy or an idea.

Frost's early love lyrics were followed in later volumes with lyrics which expressed a mature philosophy of shared values. Contrasted to the lyrics of young love such as "The Pasture," with its breathless invitation, "You come, too," are the poems expressing the deep love of a lasting relationship between a man and woman. Among these lyrics are "To Earthward," "Happiness Makes Up in Height for What It Lacks in Length," and "Carpe Diem." Miss Sergeant's description of the couple in "To Earthward" as "grateful seasoned lovers"<sup>185</sup> may be applied to the relationship between man and woman in each of these lyrics. The poet's deep love for Elinor is sensed in each. Frost's sonnet, "A Silken Tent," is such a tribute to Elinor.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup>Sergeant, op. cit., p. 267.

<sup>186</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 289.

Thus, Frost's most tightly-knit poem and sophisticated portrayal of woman is probably "The Silken Tent," a one-sentence sonnet into which is fused metaphorically the image of an ideal woman and an ethereal tent. Most critics agree that the poem is artistically brilliant. Untermeyer prefaces it in his collection by saying that it is ". . . a piece of sheer tenderness, a lyrical sonnet of gossamer beauty."<sup>187</sup> Brower believes ". . . Frost catches the perfection of a woman's nature."<sup>188</sup> Gould calls it ". . . the culmination of the thought expressed in the early 'Bond and Free,'" and proceeds to quote Charles Anderson's view that "The Silken Tent" is ". . . a sonnet to the sonnet form itself."<sup>189</sup> Each critic recognizes the poem's poetic beauty; however, the sonnet must be analyzed further in terms of the inseparable poetic devices used to create this perfect woman metaphorically.

Basically, Frost personifies a tent of silk, assigning it feminine qualities through a series of paradoxes.

Beginning with a simile, the poem reads:

She is as in a field a silken tent  
 At midday when a sunny summer breeze  
 Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent

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<sup>187</sup>Untermeyer (ed.), Robert Frost's Poems, p. 254.

<sup>188</sup>Brower, op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>189</sup>Gould, op. cit., p. 287.

So that in guys it gently sways at ease,  
 And its supporting central cedar pole,  
 That is its pinnacle to heavenward  
 And signifies the sureness of the soul,  
 Seems to owe naught to any single cord,  
 But strictly held by none, is loosely bound  
 By countless silken ties of love and thought  
 To everything on earth the compass round,  
 And only by one's going slightly taut  
 In the capriciousness of summer air  
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware.<sup>190</sup>

Alliteration is particularly functional in the poem; the "s" sounds predominate because they stress the ease, smoothness, and flowing quality of the subject matter. Sound, then, functions throughout the poem as a parallel to the "gossamer beauty" of the woman.

Another device Frost uses to develop his metaphoric sonnet is setting. The tent is "in a field" suggesting that "she" is set apart from all others. The time is "mid-day" in the summer sun. On one level, such a day suggests a light, blithe, holiday mood. On a deeper level the dry air, no longer humid or damp with dew, indicates a psychological, emotional stage in which the woman is bouyed up by love and is floating on waves of rapture permeating the atmosphere. However, the word "ropes" introduces an antithetical idea; she is floating yet bound to earth. It

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<sup>190</sup>Frost, Complete Poetry, p. 443. (Note that the poem has initially been quoted in its entirety, for it is constructed as one sentence and therefore cannot be divided fairly.)

becomes paradoxical, then, that ties with earth appear to offer her freedom.

The tent analogy suggests a stationary position, for it is fastened to the ground, perhaps indicating its immunity to destruction by time or intellectual currents. When the tent is personified as a woman, her spirit or soul appears as a mainstay which connects her to everything around her. This connection also allows her, however, to transcend through love and thought. Her movement remains harmonious and smooth although paradoxically an occasional wind destroys the semblance of this harmony and breaks the ease and oneness her image creates. It is important also that the tent is "silken," indicating a delicate, sensitive woman, yet a durable, lasting one. All of her sensory perceptions are being affected by movements and currents around her. Her earthly "silken ties" are relaxed, which causes her extra-sensitivity, light and pliant now, dried by the sun. Yet her core, the "central cedar pole" is durable, sturdy, fragrant, beautiful, similar to her spirit. Her soul becomes the essence here.

Through the personification of a tent, Frost has created a woman who is both delicate and strong, earthly and ethereal, bond and free. This is Frost's use of "contrariedades" at its best. Here, too, are Frost's complicated impressions of and fierce feelings for his wife Elinor. The

sonnet becomes ". . . a tribute to his beloved Elinor . . ."191 for it objectifies their complicated relationship built on just such contrary or paradoxical qualities found within the person of Elinor Frost.

Although Frost's women characters must ultimately be studied as individuals, each is more clearly understood when compared and contrasted with those displaying similar qualities. Frost creates the women characters in his poetry with characteristic sympathy and sensitivity. His perceptive portrayals reflect the poet's close observation and appreciation of the three women he knew best. They mirror also the same joys, longings, and disappointments of all women as they seek to be understood. Each woman is drawn with a clarity that is achieved through the poet's skillful use of poetic forms and his talent for recording accurately the sounds of sense heard in the speech of those about him. A close analysis of Frost's women figures cogently demonstrates his artistic achievements.

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191Gould, op. cit., p. 289.



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