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THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: ROBERT FROST AND ROBERT LOWELL

© Anastasia Onyszchuk

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ABSTRACT

THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE
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In this thesis, I examine the dramatic monologues of Robert Frost and Robert Lowell, two of the major American poets of the twentieth century. I show how Frost and Lowell retained the framework of the lyric-narrative hybrid developed by nineteenth-century English poets and how they wrought their own changes upon the form, making it a viable twentieth-century genre. The thesis emphasizes the originality of each poet with respect to language, the use of the persona, and dramatic design. The thesis attempts to show how the dramatic monologue represents an important stage in each poet's development, and why the poems chosen for analysis should be considered among Frost's and Lowell's best work.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The dramatic monologue has evolved over the last two centuries into something very different from what it started out to be. A description of it is given in 1947 in an article by Ina B. Sessions: a poem distinguished from others by three definite attributes - a speaker, audience and occasion - which continuously interact to reveal character and unfold a dramatic action (preferably) taking place in the present.[1] In his full-length study of the form, The Poetry of Experience, Robert Langbaum takes great pains to probe into its origins and show that it arose mainly as a reaction on the part of Victorian poets in England against the subjectivity of the Romantic poets. He points out that "it imitates not life but a particular perspective toward life, somebody's [not the poet's] experience of it."[2] He differs sharply from Sessions when he states that it is unimportant whether or not there is an ostensible auditor, but agrees with her in feeling that characterization is of central importance and that dramatic monologue uses the method of drama, revealing a character through his speech.

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[1] I.B. Sessions, "The Dramatic Monologue", PMLA, Vol. 62 (1947) pp. 503-511.

[2] Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, New York: W.W.Norton and Co. Ltd., 1957, p. 137.

Alan Sinfield, in another full-length study, gives a historical sketch of the genre's development, and defines it broadly as "a poem in the first person spoken by or almost entirely by someone who is indicated not to be the poet."[1] He regards it as "a specially immediate way of presenting character", a poem that is "on the border" between "fiction and self-expression."[2] A recent article by Philip Hobsbaum repeats Randall Jarrell's earlier claim that the dramatic monologue is the dominant form of English-language poetry now and gives a simpler definition to the form. He says it is a poem that "should appear to be spoken by a person other than the poet, it should reveal some aspect of character, and it should feel like drama."[3]

All these critics see the form as a hybrid which developed from early nineteenth-century beginnings to a compelling form in its own right, a form which has been handled by most major English-language poets of the last two centuries. As a hybrid it is a curious combination of the lyric and dramatic modes, conveying intense emotion through speech. Often it seems like the meditation, the elegy, the soliloquy, or monodrama; often it has marked elements of

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[1] Alan Sinfield, Dramatic Monologue, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1977, p. 8.

[2] Sinfield, op. cit., p. 75.

[3] Philip Hobsbaum, "The Rise of the Dramatic Monologue", Hudson Review XXVIII (1975-76), pp. 227-245.

debate and satire. Its method may be partially or predominantly naturalistic, impressionistic, or symbolic. It may be organized in a logical way, say, as the narration of a sequence of events, or in a non-logical, associative way, as a series of reflections, memories, dream-like reveries, or observations. The range of themes it can carry is very wide, as poets have used it to convey social and political criticism and protest, religious themes, and the most personal utterance.

In spite of the great variety of emphases and effects to be found, the form has certain constants. Of these, the most important is the use of a single speaker, as mentioned above. The "I" of the poem is a fictional speaker, not the poet himself, although he may resemble him closely and mirror his concerns. The use of a fictional "I" is, of course, a device borrowed from novels, and requires that the telling of a story be done from the viewpoint of a single character. The novelist does not need to confine himself to this device for the duration of his book; he can combine different points of view or add his own. The poet of a dramatic monologue, however, usually makes use of a single, central speaker and thus a single, central outlook in order to achieve the concentration and brevity required in a poem. The speaker is the unifying element. Sometimes a diversity of viewpoints is one of the poet's aims, taking precedence over unity and brevity, such as in Clough's "Amours de Voyage", Tennyson's "Maud", and Browning's "The Ring and the Book".

In poetry the fictional speaker is often referred to by critics and scholars as a "mask" or "persona" to indicate an identity separate from that of the poet. In the dramatic monologue the poet works with vivid and concrete detail to realize this persona complete with his own setting and his own psychology. Often an entire historical period (different from the poet's) is evoked in the process. All the information the reader gets is presented through the speaker's limited point of view, so that the reader must adopt this point of view in order to understand and sympathize. As Langbaum says, the reader's adoption of the speaker's perspective, "both visual and moral", is his "entry into the poem", the "limitation and even distortion of the physical and moral truth being among the main pleasures of the form."[1] The form appealed to poets who wished to overcome subjectivity, he explains, and is part of a poetic development going on "since the end of the Enlightenment."[2] It also appealed to poets who were interested in character for its own sake and who could substitute the subjectivity of another (the persona) for their own (because poets know that poetry is inescapably subjective). Alan Sinfield objects to the terms "subjective" and "objective" poetry and says that the dramatic monologue fits into neither "camp", that such a dichotomy

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[1] Langbaum, p. 137.

[2] Langbaum, p. 30.

is misleading and inaccurate.

The procedure in this type of poem is another constant. The poet explores the thought processes and reactions of a person other than himself, and the best way to do this with the (seemingly) least amount of authorial interference is to let the character speak for himself, to present his case, as it were, from the inside. Thus the speaker talks to a listener and in doing so reveals not only his own viewpoint but the strengths and weaknesses of his own personality. The poet sees to it that he reveals more than he realizes. The speaker emphasizes his feelings through the relation of events in his life or through carefully chosen symbols. Landscape, for example, can function as symbol and can carry emotional meaning. The speaker relates his experiences (again carefully selected) in order to make his listener share these experiences and grant him sympathy. The monologue is always spoken to someone, even if to an imagined listener(s) or to the speaker's own self. It need not even be spoken aloud, but can be an interior monologue. Because the poem is couched as speech, as an address, it has a certain intimacy, or immediacy; a close relationship between speaker and listener (and reader) is invariably established. As a result, the reader's sympathy is often ahead of, or, as Langbaum puts it, in a state of tension with his judgment. The reader must listen to the evidence being presented, evaluate it, adjust his sympathy accordingly. He must form,

in other words, his own judgment. If the character of the poem is evil or fanatical there will often be ambiguity, and a clash between sympathy and judgment, and the poet is very well aware of this, and even exploits it. But the speaker is out, from first to last, to impress us with his own point of view, to let us see certain sides (again carefully selected) of his character because he wants us not only to sympathize and perhaps applaud him, but to accept his view of reality.

While self-revelation is the result of the speaker's self-expression he is not necessarily analysing himself. In most cases he speaks in order to clarify and understand better his experiences and emotions, or to justify his actions, or just to convince himself. He rarely perceives his own character flaws. There is much that he does not perceive, much that he distorts or exaggerates, much that he does not care to tell. He is just as fallible and biased as any other human being. The reader must determine his biases and fill in his omissions, expanding upon the speaker's limited view of reality and of himself. Ultimately, "we understand more about the speaker than he intends to reveal to his auditor and than the poet actually states."[1]

The poet adopts various strategies (discussed later on) to establish the speaker as a vivid, individuated, cred-

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[1]Sinfield, p. 4.

ible character. Any person can be a subject for the dramatic monologue but certain ones appear to be more popular with poets than others, and almost certain of appealing. Hobsbaum points out that "mostly the irresponsible, anti-social or weak" are used because such characters tend "to get themselves into situations which require self-revelation."[1] The description fits most nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century protagonists, but poets of the latter half of the twentieth century favor people who are not necessarily weak to begin with but who are weakened by the intense mental suffering they undergo. As I shall show later on, the protagonists of dramatic monologues written during or after World War II are torn by psychological or identity crises.

The final important constant has to do with the time frame of a dramatic monologue. Broadly speaking, the words are uttered in the present but the speaker draws upon the past for his subject matter. He reviews events of the past that, he feels, have contributed directly to his present situation. He arranges his memories into some sort of "plot" or causal development (not necessarily a chronological sequence) in order to create a rational explanation of his present psychological state and of the self-image his experiences have helped to create. One of the simplest time-schemes is used in the monologue of a person who is deceased

[1] Hobsbaum, op. cit., p. 232.

and speaks from the grave, looking back over his life to vindicate himself or to blame others for the fate that befell him. Such a device is used by Edgar Lee Masters in the epitaph monologues that comprise the Spoon River Anthology. Earlier examples can be found in Housman and Hardy. Hardy's ironic and humorous "Ah, Are You Digging on my Grave" (actually a dialogue), "The Levelled Churchyard", and "Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard" may have given Masters ideas for his own work. Another version of the monologue that goes far back to the speaker's youth is used in Tennyson's "Maud" and "Ulysses" and Browning's "Andrea del Sarto". These are all spoken by mature men who are disillusioned and unhappy, and hence remember their youths as happier times. But in most monologues the span of time is shorter - the speaker draws upon a more immediate past and focusses on a single set of important experiences and events of one particular time of his life. Browning's "My Last Duchess", Yeats' "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death", Housman's "Farewell to barn and stack and tree", Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady", Hardy's "A Trampwoman's Tragedy", and most of the dramatic monologues by Frost and Lowell use this narrower time-frame. A review of the speaker's past experiences can serve any of several purposes - apology, as in Browning's "My Last Duchess", regret and longing for death in Tennyson's "Ulysses", censure, as in Masters' "Minerva Jones", recognition of the inescapable blows of Fate, as in

Robinson's "Mr. Flood's Party" and Jarrell's "Death of the Ball Turrett Gunner". The possibilities are endless. Like a play, the dramatic monologue is enacted at a critical or representative time of the speaker's life. It "has no real beginning or end but is the door to a large, mostly hidden room ... The speaker lives before and after the events of the monologue but these events epitomize that before and after, sometimes by suggesting and recalling these events but often simply by making us know the character."[1]

Like any poem, the dramatic monologue is a means that the poet uses to present, although obliquely, his own views. This is how it was used by Ezra Pound in his Personae and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, when he modelled his approach on Browning's. The poetic "feint", as Sinfield terms it, causes us to "feel continuously the pressure of the poet's controlling mind" and "to experience in the dramatic monologue a quality not easily gained in other modes ... a divided consciousness."[2] I think it is more correct to term the reader's response as a multiple consciousness, for he must deal with 1) the speaker's view of reality (and of himself), 2) the auditor's (if there is one) view of this reality, 3) the reader's view of the speaker, 4) the poet's view of

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[1]Hazard Adams, The Contexts of Poetry, Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1965, p. 145.

[2]Sinfield, p. 32.

his character, 5) the reader's response to the poet's themes or general ideas embodied by the poem. These viewpoints will invariably react with one another and in this fruitful interaction lies the enduring appeal and fascination of this poetic form. The greatest threat to the success of the dramatic monologue is that the poet use his character as a ventriloquist uses a dummy - to put his own ideas into the mouth of a puppet who has no life of his own. This reduces poetry to preaching. Didacticism does not belong in the form any more than in any dramatic writing, whether poetry or prose.

Apart from Sinfield's and Langbaum's books and some isolated articles, literary scholarship has tended to neglect the dramatic monologue as an independent poetic genre. Sinfield's book is a valuable introduction and student guide to some of the great dramatic monologues of the past two centuries. It goes further than Langbaum's book into the present century and has more to say about American poets. Recent books on individual poets such as Betty S. Flowers' Browning and the Modern Tradition (1976) shed valuable light but do not consider the dramatic monologues separately. Books on Robert Frost such as John F. Lynen's The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (1960) and Lawrance Thompson's Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (1942) are excellent analyses of the poet's art but group Frost's dramatic poems with all the narrative poems. Book-length studies of

the art of Robert Lowell, such as Stephen Yenser's Circle to Circle. The Poetry of Robert Lowell (1975) and Steven Gould Axelrod's Robert Lowell: Life and Art (1978) are more concerned with following the chronological development of his work rather than with studying in detail his adaptations or modifications of traditional forms. This thesis examines the dramatic monologue as it was used by two major poets of the Twentieth Century in order to find what contributions each made to the form, and how the dramatic monologue brought out the strengths and weaknesses of each. Frost and Lowell both showed a long-lived interest in character, a strong sense of drama, and similar aims with respect to a colloquial poetic language. This thesis examines poems from the early part of their work, because both worked with the dramatic monologue in the early stages of their careers. Although they both abandoned the form later on some of their monologues were so successful that they must be numbered among their best poems. The thesis will examine aspects of these poems that have hardly been touched on by scholars of the two poets' art - the speakers' powers of persuasion and the techniques the poets have used to bring their speakers to life. Other matters that must be dealt with in such a discussion are the speakers' self-images and their insights into their own dilemmas. The thesis will note the differences and similarities in dramatic structure, the effective use of colloquial language and the modifications or variations each poet has

made to the dramatic monologue form.

II. ROBERT FROST'S DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES

Frost studied the work of Theocritus, Virgil and other classical poets while an undergraduate, and has acknowledged that their poems intrigued him and influenced his own work. Many scholars and critics regard Frost as a twentieth-century pastoral poet and have gone so far as to label his poems "eclogues",[1] a term hardly used any more and a form out of favor with other twentieth-century American poets. An eclogue or pastoral is defined as "an elaborately conventional poem expressing an urban poet's nostalgic image of the peace and simplicity of the life of shepherds and other rural folk in an idealized natural setting."[2] The only part of this definition that applies to Frost's poetry is "natural setting". Too much has been made of Frost's use of New England locales in his poetry[3] as though he were an American Hardy who had created an American version of Wessex, although his title, North of Boston, does suggest a regional concern. While the people that he met and the areas he came

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[1]John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1960.

[2]M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971, p. 120.

[3]John C. Kemp, Robert Frost: The Poet as Regionalist, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979.

to love in New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts furnished him with material, Frost's poetry transcends regional limits. Thomas Hardy and A.E. Housman also set their poems in poor rural areas of England, but no one would dream of labelling either of them "pastoral" poets. It is true that the long conversations in verse and the philosophical debates in Theocritus' Idylls and Virgil's Eclogues may have sparked Frost's interest in the potentialities of ordinary speech for the creation of new poetic forms, new, that is, in the traditions of American poetry. Obviously impressed by the effects which had been achieved by Browning, whose aim in respect to poetic language was similar to his own, Frost made an informal style with simple diction and American colloquialisms a salient feature of all his poetry. This informal, accessible style worked best in poems that were made up entirely of dialogue, and which showed men and women speaking and acting out the familiar dramas of everyday life in rural settings. His dialogues and monologues show the influence of Browning but the situations in his poems are taken from real-life counterparts in the New England of his time. Some of Frost's greatest poems are found in his second collection of verse, North of Boston (1915), exclusively made up of dramatic and narrative poems in contrast to the lyrics, quatrains, sonnets, couplets, epigrams, and odes of his other volumes.

Browning was not Frost's only model. Wordsworth,

Hardy, Housman, Hopkins, and the Georgian poets in England all influenced him. The monologues of Hardy and Housman, unlike those of Browning, reflected a tragic view of life that Frost shared to a great degree. Browning's people are all colorful, extraordinary figures from historical periods other than his own, while Hardy and Housman portrayed "common folk", i.e., poor laborers, vagrants and farmers, of their own time and place. These characters all speak in the vernacular; even if their words are set up as rhyming quatrains their diction is appropriate to their social station. Frost strove to give his poems the same kind of verisimilitude while still retaining the structure of blank verse. His characters too are common folk, based on friends and neighbours whose work and poverty were familiar to him because he lived among them and shared many of their concerns. At this time there were only two other poets in America who were interested in people as subjects for poetry. These were Frost's contemporaries Masters and Robinson, and from them Frost learned a great deal. Their monologues and dialogues embodied a wide range of themes but struck a modern chord in their presentation of people as victims. Robinson explored the timeless mysteries of life and death and constantly questioned man's place in the universal scheme of things, while Masters emphasized man's cruelty to his fellowman through his depiction of social evils. One of the things that seems to have affected Frost most deeply is the two

poets' portrayals of women - their fickleness, their courage, their helplessness, their exploitation and abuse by men, by social custom, and by Fate. Both Masters and Robinson created a variety of vivid and realistic portraits and presented them with all the pathos and irony of their protagonists' situations; it is to their great credit that they were the first American poets to show such profound understanding and keen sympathy for woman. (The inner and mostly silent sufferings of hard-working women had hitherto not been explored by American poets and hardly even by prose writers.) Frost displays these qualities too, and goes further than either Masters or Robinson in the complexity of his world view, the subtlety of his characterization, and the wealth of psychological details in his poems about women. His most memorable dramatic monologues are all spoken by women. He did not care for Masters' style, having no great opinion of free verse, nor could he achieve what he wanted to in such brief spaces as Masters allotted to his portraits. "Minerva Jones" from the Spoon River Anthology is a good example of Masters' procedure:

> I am Minerva, the village poetess,
> Hooted at, jeered at by the Yahoos of the street
> For my heavy body, cock-eye, and rolling walk,
> And all the more when "Butch" Weldy
> Captured me after a brutal hunt.
> He left me to my fate with Doctor Meyers;
> And I sank into death, growing numb from the feet up,
> Like one stepping deeper and deeper into a stream of ice
> Will some one go to the village newspaper,
> And gather into a book the verses I wrote? -
> I thirsted so for love!
> I hungered so for life!

This single example shows Masters' daring in bringing into poetry realistic themes that had never been so openly treated before; his is an ugly reality which he feels ought to be revealed in all its hideousness. It is not my purpose to enumerate the ways in which his poems were "modern"; I wish only to point out that had Masters and Robinson not broken new ground for the first time Frost's poetry would not have been possible. Like Robinson in "Eros Turannos", Frost could say,

> We'll have no kindly veil between
> Her visions and those we have seen, --

In order to remove the veil completely, it seemed best to let the characters speak for themselves. Robinson moved in this direction in his poem "Mr. Flood's Party" when Mr. Flood addresses himself in stanzas, two, five, and six.

In their monologues, Masters and Robinson do not set the scene or describe the surroundings of their people at all. By contrast, setting is extremely important in Frost's poems. His people are part of their surroundings; they are tightly-bound and shaped by them. Frost avoided the device of having his characters deliver their monologues from the grave, a device made popular by Housman and overworked in the poems of Hardy, Housman, and Masters. All of Frost's characters are living while they speak, and instead of simply looking backwards over a lifetime, as the characters in the Spoon River Anthology do, Frost's characters narrate events

from the past solely to explain or clarify the present situation. In doing so, they are looking backwards, forwards and all around them simultaneously. Hence they are more truly dramatic. Frost chose to have them speak during their daily, ordinary activities, yet they are doing so at a crucial or representative time of their lives. Thus Frost maintains the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action in the dramatic framework of his dialogue poems, very much as Browning had done. Like Browning's, his characters have a concentrated awareness that is fundamental for any character in a dramatic work. A final important point about Frost's people is that they are not really introspective types, but men and women of action. In the dialogue poems they speak from the pressure of emotions too strong for silence. Unlike the protagonists of Masters, they are either heroic or immensely likeable, and their words do not have the acrid bitterness that underlies all of Masters' portraits.

Frost's second volume of poems, North of Boston, which he named "A Book of People", recalling Browning's Dramatis Personae , shows his deep interest in the farm people of New England where he lived most of his life. The poems in this collection differ sharply from the personal lyrics of his first volume, A Boy's Will (1913), in that they are primarily long poems containing the elements of the short story - specific setting, few characters and a sequence of

events that reach a culminating point. Sometimes the events are external; sometimes the action takes place within the major character or speaker. This volume shows, too, how much Frost's intimate knowledge of rural life forms the strong base for his work. In this he can be compared to Masters who wrote a great deal but who is now remembered chiefly for his Spoon River Anthology. In reading the poems of North of Boston, one never forgets that one is reading poetry, as I will explain a little further on, but the same cannot be said of the Spoon River Anthology where the free verse forms, many of which consist of a single long statement, are dangerously close to prose. When North of Boston was published in England in 1914 it was praised by reviewers for its freshness of style and vigor of language. It was exciting because it contained much that was novel. Among other things it offered close-ups of American types who had hitherto been described by novelists and other prose writers -- farmers, laborers, loafers, tramps, and women, and it presented them with a spare realism and lack of sentimentality that made them unforgettable. Frost had learned to reconcile the two aspects of his art that are often difficult for writers to synthesize -- the need to be true-to-life and the need to impose a shape or design upon the raw material. Much praise has been given Frost for his convincing characterizations. Even Ezra Pound, who showed in Personae and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley that he too was interested in charac-

terization but had poetic aims and interests quite different from Frost's, paid tribute to Frost for creating fully-realized figures in moving circumstances, when Pound reviewed North of Boston for an English newspaper.

Frost's "talk" poems contain long monologues, but few consist of a single one. More attention has been paid to poems such as "Home Burial" and "The Death of the Hired Man" in which there are two or more speakers than to poems such as "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" or "The Witch of Coös", poems containing a single monologue. The dramatic poems with fictional speakers provided him with ways to distance himself from his poetry after the subjective styles and subject-matter he had used exclusively in the poems of his first volume. Like Browning, he adopted blank verse for all his dramatic poems. This thesis will examine the two poems that conform to the outlines of the dramatic monologue described in the Introduction of this thesis - "A Servant to Servants" and "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" - and two other monologues, "The Housekeeper" and "The Gum-Gatherer", which contain interesting variations of the form. Since the discussion centers on the various ways Frost handled the dramatic monologue, references to other poems will be made as well.

"A Servant to Servants" is generally agreed to be one of the finest of Frost's poems. For sheer power it has no equal among the dramatic monologues of other American poets. It is an extremely sensitive portrayal of frustration

and soul-corroding anxiety, exploring the depths of one woman's disillusionment and world-weariness. It shows the unmistakable influence of Thomas Hardy, who was unique among English writers of the time in casting the women of his poems and novels as tragic heroines. Hardy showed an unprecedented interest in feminine psychology, and emphasized the utter helplessness of women against overwhelming social forces, the utter lack of self-awareness that is required for self-preservation. Far From the Madding Crowd and Tess of the D'Urbervilles are well-known studies of the feminine psyche. His poetry is not nearly as well-known as his novels, but ought to be read for a complete understanding of Hardy's views.

The following comment on Hardy's poetry could equally well serve as a commentary on Frost's:

> ... in his best poems ... a tragic sense derived from intense personal experience. In these poems we have the stoicism which has not involved any evasion of the felt multiplicity and force of life ... no over-spiritualization of women ... most, though not all, concern a man-woman relationship. All are an outcome of intensely pondered experience. There is simultaneously a vivid evocation of the past and a vivid rendering of the feeling of the present moment.[1]

In "A Servant to Servants" the multiplicity and force of

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[1] H. Coombes, "Hardy, De la Mare and Edward Thomas" in The Modern Age, The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 7. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1961, p. 154.

life referred to above come from the speaker's several roles as child, wife and unpaid servant, all combining to create a prison. The first five lines of the poem swiftly and economically establish the speaker as the wife of a man who owns land near Lake Willoughby and who rents cottages to the occasional tenant or camper. The listener is a tenant who has come up to the house for some unspecified reason. The listener is a stranger, but the wife pounces on this person as a convenient audience for her unhappy tale. After a friendly greeting the wife indicates her discontent and struggles to express the reasons for it. Her first remarks indicate that it is boredom and loneliness together with the silence of the place that has made her "all gone wrong", although she does not put a name to these feelings. While her auditor apparently expresses admiration for the area, the speaker says she can no longer enjoy her surroundings as she used to do. The beauty of Lake Willoughby, for example, which she perceives with her eyes and recognizes with her mind, is negated by the feelings of resentment and fear that have grown stronger and stronger. Lines 40-55 indicate that the wife's unhappiness is due in large part to overwork and the monotony of repeated tasks that she cannot afford to pay someone else to do, as business is none too good. Then, as if fearing that her listener will blame her husband, she affirms that he is doing his best for her and for the farm. Some bitterness emerges when she claims that his men "take

advantage of him shamefully / And proud too, of themselves for doing so." With her exclamation, "Much they care!" and the remarks that follow, she shows the hurt she feels as the men treat her as a servant and ignore her.

There is a pause just before line 87, then she says, "I have my fancies; it runs in the family." In order to impress her listener further she recounts the story of her mad uncle and reveals her own stay in the State asylum. She now tells, without reserve, the harrowing tale of how her uncle was kept imprisoned in a cage in his own home until he died. The final line of her story, "They found a way to put a stop to it." reminds one of Browning's Duke when he says, "I gave commands; then all smiles stopped together." Although the woman never saw her uncle, she learned of his story as a child, and the cage was still there in the house to haunt her and make herself fancy that one day she herself would be in it. She states that marrying Len and moving to her own home made her happy for a while. It is in the next two lines that the poem reaches its culmination. The woman states, with utter weariness and despair, the full significance of her position:

> And there's more to it than just window views
> And living by a lake. I'm past such help ...

Too proud and fearful to ask her husband to change their way of life and take her somewhere else, she tries to accept her circumstances but fears that the family tragedy will be-

repeated when she succumbs to madness. Again, this thought is not expressed to her listener, but it is clearly there beneath her words. In lines 160 on she returns her attention to the listener; she compares herself to this person but knows that she could never appreciate freedom even if she had it. Lines 168-169 reveal how exaggerated and irrational is her sense of fear:

> The wonder was the tents weren't snatched away
> From over you as you lay in your beds.

The concluding lines are addressed directly to the listener in response to that person's attempt to get away. The poem ends when the listener departs. It is clear in the last part of the poem that the listener is not sympathetic, but only anxious to get away from a garrulous woman who appears somewhat unbalanced. Ironically, in opening her heart to a stranger, Len's wife has diagnosed her greatest need and hit on the one possible antidote to her suffering. Six lines from the end she tells the listener that she needs "to be kept" from her endless tasks; in other words she needs variety and change, but hasn't the means or even the courage to try to procure these. It is with great fairness or perhaps self-delusion that she blames no one, at least consciously, for her present dilemma. It is important that she has attained some self-realization; what she does not understand, as she lacks insight, is that it is the fear of going mad that is doing her the most harm. Characteristically,

the poet leaves us to decide the final outcome.

As J.R. Doyle, Jr. points out, "Frost has constantly sought to make dramatic that type of material and those situations which do not at once suggest drama."[1] At the very beginning of this poem dramatic tension is immediately set up because the comparative freedom of the tenant's life-style is placed in contrast to the wife's immobility and slave-like existence. The wife complains of neglect and overwork and does not realize the harmful effects upon her of the oppressive solitude. Dramatic tension is sustained and increased as the danger of her situation is brought out and her vulnerability is emphasized. The killing sense of isolation or alienation, actual and self-imposed, is a theme which has been treated so often by the poet that is has been named one of his three "obsessive"[2] themes, but it was a characteristic theme of Robinson too, movingly described in "Mr. Flood's Party" and "Eros Tyrannos". The wife is shown in the midst of a critical period of her life. Thompson states that "Frost learned from Browning how to strike into the middle of an emotional or psychological crisis."[3] She

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[1] J.R. Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis, New York: Hafner Publishing Co. Inc., 1962, p. 59.

[2] Randall Jarrell, "To the Laodiceans" in Poetry and the Age, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1973, p. 54.

[3] Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice. The Art and Thought of Robert Frost, New York: Russell and Russell, 1961, p. 107.

is no different at the end of her monologue than she was at the beginning, except that she has clearly articulated her unhappiness and perceived her impending madness. The poem conveys very powerfully the author's sympathy for his character and presents her case with "guarded pathos", to use a phrase of his own. She tries hard not to feel sorry for herself, not to be melodramatic, but every word and statement is charged with fear and anxiety.

The poem is patterned as a series of complaints. In lines 39 to 103 we have a number of criticisms of things that she cannot change but which have obviously been preying on her mind for some time. First there is the fact that business is bad: "It would be different if more people came." She then says she is no longer sure that their property is as valuable as her husband thinks it is, implying that they are wasting their time. She is worn out by work and realizes the injustice of it: "By good rights I ought not to have so much put upon me" but she cannot see any help for it. It disturbs her that all the doctors she has seen, except for Dr. Lowe, have been too cowardly to tell her and her husband what is really ailing her. It is only at the end of the poem that the reader realizes the full implications of her words uttered much earlier, "and then they'll be convinced." She cannot bring herself to criticize her husband openly - she is too loyal for that - but it is obvious that Len is not trying as hard as she is to make ends

meet: "He works when he works as hard as I do" (my emphasis). Her description of Len's workers is full of contempt; what bothers her most of all is not their laziness or large appetites but the way they take no notice of her and do not modify their behaviour or talk, as men often will, in the presence of a woman. She next criticizes her father's family for the way they kept her uncle locked up, and while she is willing to see their point of view, "it does seem more human", the fact that she herself spent time in the State asylum has taught her how inhuman their actions were:

> But it's not so: the place is the asylum.
> There they have every means proper to do with ...

The grisly details are more horrible and shocking than anything we might expect, but are told with great restraint on her part. Very unobtrusively she slips in the line, "You can't know affection or the want of it in that state", before launching into her story, yet she has made a judgment on the family and decided that lack of affection was the greatest cruelty inflicted upon her poor uncle.

The story of the uncle is tragic and hilarious at the same time. It is ironic but true-to-life that madness and the violence that sometimes results can be comical. The narrative changes the mood of the monologue and provides some comic relief from the overall grimness; at the same time, it intensifies the atmosphere. The cage symbolizes madness as the very worst kind of prison. The wife knows

that insanity is hereditary. The cage also represents the insensitivity of the family, which is repeated in her situation by the insensitivity of her husband: "He thinks I'll be all right with doctoring." Recent analyses of the poem, such as Frank Lentricchia's, that fail to mention the role of the husband, are therefore inadequate. The most appalling thing about the poem is that the speaker half-consciously welcomes madness as a way out of her present torment, a habit of thinking that began early:

> It got so I would say -- you know, half fooling --
> 'It's time I took my turn upstairs in jail' --

There is irony in her overprotectiveness regarding her husband. Modern readers are bound to see her as too self-effacing: "I waited till Len said the word."; "I won't ask him -- it's not sure enough." She never blames him, but the reader may. Yet it is not fair to blame Len for her own lack of self-assertion.

Understatement and irony enable Frost to make his poem imply much more than it actually says. There is enough experience here, Brower has said, to make a novel.[1] There is a side to these country people that is not very amiable, shown here by Len and his workers. There are the strains present in any marriage that has to endure poverty, the hard

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[1]Reuben A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost. Constellations of Intention, New York: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 171.

necessity of living and surviving in an unsympathetic, harsh environment. There is the sense of forces beyond human control pushing humans to their miserable or untimely ends. The same sense of indifferent Fate is present in many of Frost's poems, notably in "The Hill Wife" (a poem surely influenced by Robinson's stark tale, "The Miller's Wife") where the husband-wife relationship is similar to this one in that it too is affected by a lack of understanding on the husband's part. "A Servant" is more interesting as a portrait poem because the wife here is allowed self-characterization and reaches some degree of self-awareness. In "The Hill Wife" the monologues are interwoven with omniscient narration; there is no single point of view, and the woman remains an enigma. The wife in "A Servant" sees her situation clearly, but not clearly enough. In fact she may be deluding herself in believing that madness will overcome her and bring her respite. She certainly is deluded about her husband; she is too good a wife to put any blame upon him, and part of the poem's irony is that the reader comes to have a very different view of Len than the one his wife has. But the poem's greatest irony resides in the fact that Len's wife is describing the surface effects of pain that is buried deep and not mentioned at all - the pain that results from childlessness, neglect, sexual frustration, a husband not concerned or loving enough, a marriage eroded from beneath. These are the elements of domestic tragedy in our twentieth

century; but the speaker does not know her problems for what they are.

Imagery is at a minimum; what there is comes from the landscape and the speaker's environment, and turns into symbols of the woman's slave-like existence. The lake is a "river / cut short off at both ends"; its waters represent coldness and death. The speaker remarks with envy to the camper: "You let things like feathers regulate / your coming and going." "One steady pull" is how her husband describes the efforts they must make; the phrase immediately brings to mind oxen, or some other beasts of burden. She compares her uncle's cage to a "beast's stall", his mad laughter to a playful "crow"; later she refers to the cage as a "jail". One of the most telling metaphors is her comparison of marriage and a new home to a change that "wore out like a prescription." When she says "I shan't catch up in this world" she is expressing her sense of futility. And while she is pathetic enough, going from doctor to doctor with her "sickness", failing to get sympathy from her husband, doctors, and even the casual listener of the poem, helpless in the stifling confinement of her dreary existence, one finally wonders why she does not stop complaining and start asserting herself. But her character would never enable her to get up that kind of courage, and so she is doomed to continual humiliation.

"The Pauper Witch of Grafton" was published together

with its companion poem "The Witch of Coös" in New Hampshire (1923), Frost's fourth volume. Louise Bogan says of the two, "In both, the mania of extreme old age is described, with the utmost insight into, and sympathy with, woman's nature and character beset by time."[1] "The Witch of Coös" is a dramatic monologue with the structure of a narrative, and emphasizes the story at the expense of characterization. In other words the reader's interest is directed to the sequence of events, the suspense and the atmosphere, rather than to the characters of mother, son, or dead husband. In "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" the focus of interest is the personality of the woman speaking; there are no other speakers and the listener is unspecified. The lack of a designated auditor makes it less powerful than "A Servant to Servants" because there is no speaker-listener interaction, a necessary ingredient in dramatic writing. The poem resembles "A Servant to Servants" in that it is set up as a number of complaints throughout which are mingled various memories of the past. Although the old widow is just as isolated as the wife in "A Servant" and "The Hill Wife" she shows us that it was not always so, and indeed it is her wonderful memories of the past that sustain her and enable her to endure the present. Compared to the other poems in which a woman's soul is searched, "The Pauper

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[1] Louise Bogan, A Poet's Alphabet, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1970, p. 177.

Witch of Grafton" is lightweight but it is interesting as one of the few poems in which Frost openly treats the subject of sexual love. However, this is not made clear until we are well into her story.

Again the setting is swiftly established at the outset; the title indicates the social status of the speaker and the town's attitude toward her. The first five lines indicate her feelings about being the object of dispute between the two towns. Neither Wentworth nor Warren wants to give her the financial support to which, as a pauper, she is entitled. As a result, she is full of venom towards both town councils and vows to do mischief. She will force them to reexamine her case and make her a ward of Wentworth now that they have established that she is a ward of Warren. She defends her stubbornness by saying primly, "Right's right." but we can see that she is somewhat peculiar when she immediately adds that she could never help doing right whenever her actions could hurt someone. In line 36 she changes course somewhat and shows pride in the fact that she is regarded as a notorious witch. The reference to milking a bat and giving a sigh, as well as the enigmatic story about Mallice Huse are included to show her scorn for the superstition and credulousness of the townspeople; she revelled in their stupidity when she was only a girl of twenty. In line 70 she begins to talk of her dead husband, Arthur Amy, from the time he began courting her. He

defended her against Huse's accusations, and married her. She implies that he too was angered by the townspeople's bigotry enough to change his attitude and enter into the game: "I guess he found he got more out of me / By having me a witch. Or something happened / To turn him round." Rather than continue as her defender he joined her in mocking the townspeople and encouraged them to believe in her witchery; thus the two had their little jokes at the people's expense. A pair set apart, they were ecstatically happy in their own little world. This is the message of the final part of the poem, lines 89 to 102. In a few lines of the utmost simplicity the woman conveys the passion felt by both as they made love in the woods "Off from the house as far as we could keep." There is something primitive and almost illicit in these trysts:

> Up where the trees grow short, the mosses tall,
> I made him gather me wet snowberries
> On slippery rocks beside a waterfall.
> I made him do it for me in the dark.
> And he liked everything I made him do.

The final line, summing up the essence of their relationship, is the culminating point of the poem. The pauper witch's story is presented as a carefully-planned divulgence; "the action", as Lynen rightfully points out, "consists in the gradual unfolding of her secret as we come to regognize the sexual basis of her eccentricity."[1] The last eight lines of

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[1] Lynen, op. cit., p. 116.

the poem return to the present and she contrasts her lonely, loveless state to the supreme joy she once possessed with Arthur. Bitterness, longing, regret, and self-contempt are expressed one after the other in these last lines.

It is characteristic of old or aging people to recall the high points of their lives and dwell on them to the exclusion of others; it is typical also for them to think that they would have acted differently had they known how things would turn out. Whatever antics, sexual or otherwise, this woman may have committed and however wild or spiteful a person she may have been in her youth, she commands sympathy now when the tables are turned. Everyone knows the truth of her rueful statement, "You can come down from everything to nothing." The last three lines change the mood completely. No longer exultant, or defiant and boastful, she sees that she has made a serious mistake in playing the witch. "Kicking up in folks faces", if she ever did, has caused the townspeople to hate and ostracize her. Loneliness and remorse are the reward she reaps for past bravado but she is honest enough to take the blame upon herself, although the ending does leave some ambiguity.

"The Pauper Witch of Grafton" is more explicit than "A Servant to Servants" in its presentation of general truths. Line 103, for example, is a variation on the how-are-the-mighty-fallen idea; the line fits in with the speaker's situation coming at the end of her account and is a perfectly

appropriate remark for her to make. At the same time we seem to hear the voice of the poet, silent in the previous two dramatic monologues considered and we are reminded of other poems such as "Provide, Provide" in which the idea is enunciated with a different emphasis. Lawrance Thompson deplores Frost's fondness for moralizing:

> With stubborn assertiveness, generalized thoughts and ideas crop out of certain poems. In New Hampshire the dramatic narratives continue to move further away from those in North of Boston because they are too often made to serve as vehicles for ideas which have become so firmly fixed in the poet's mind that they assert themselves with too much bluntness for poetry.[1]

In "The Pauper Witch" the woman's statement "You can come down from everything to nothing", because it is so personal, does not stand out as a "tacked-on moral"[2] such as certain lines do in "Wild Grapes" and other poems of which Thompson's charge is justified. One can see Frost spelling out a moral right from the beginning of his work. In both "A Servant" and "The Pauper Witch" he has kept this tendency in check and allowed the story to speak for itself. His protagonists are presented with acuity but with detachment also. Whatever comments they make about the society in which they live, or life in general, or Fate, arise naturally from their own responses and their own points of view; they are not merely

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[1] Thompson, op. cit., p. 135.

[2] John Ciardi in Robert Frost: An Introduction, eds. R.A. Greenberg and J.G. Hepburn, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961, p. 22.

mouthpieces of the poet. The monologues work as poems and not just as vehicles for ideas, as many of the later poems do.

Yet, after all these considerations, one must keep in mind the fact that "the monologue itself seems to make little difference to the life of the character ... he is not interested in finding the truth or in self-analysis but in trying to impress a certain point of view on the outside world."[1] It is doubtful, therefore, whether we can take Len's wife in "A Servant" entirely at her word. Obviously she is an emotionally disturbed person. She is convinced that she will eventually be as insane as her late uncle, but this is not necessarily so. In her attempts to hold the attention and elicit the sympathy of her listener she has created a very pathetic picture of herself, but the reader cannot really tell how far her complaints are justified and how much is exaggeration. Thus the poem has a certain ambiguousness. Dickey's remark about Robinson's poetry describes "A Servant to Servants" and "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" exactly:

> ... he actually brought to poetry a new kind of approach, making a refusal to pronounce definitely on his subjects a virtue and of speculation upon possibilities an instrument that allows an unparalleled fulness to his presentations, as well as endowing

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[1] Betty S. Flowers, Browning and the Modern Tradition, Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1976, p. 104.

> them with some of the mysteriousness, futility and proneness to multiple interpretation that incidents and lives possess in the actual world.[1]

Similarly in "The Pauper Witch," the speaker is bent on impressing her listener with "truths" about herself that other people are unaware of because she wishes to show off her "real self" against her public image. But she is so twisted and bitter and eccentric that it is impossible to know when she is speaking the truth and when she is fabricating. She has succeeded in arousing our suspicions. These suspicions as to her credibility are fatal to our sympathy.

"The Housekeeper", a dramatic monologue from North of Boston, illustrates a variation on the form. The woman's monologue is elicited by the words of the narrator/listener, so that there are two speakers, and at the very end when John Hall enters, three. However, the poem is essentially a monologue; although the old woman's remarks begin as responses to the visitor's questions, they develop momentum and the visitor drops into the background. It is the same in "The Witch of Coös". The visitor is unimportant as a character but useful as a device. Frost might have spared himself the trouble of including the visitor's words in "The Housekeeper" as this person could have served his purpose just as

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[1] James Dickey, Introduction, Selected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson, ed. Morton Dauwen Zaubel, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965, p. xxviii.

effectively as a "silent" listener, like the tenant in "A Servant to Servants". Perhaps he is intended to function as a one-man chorus, as he echoes the trite comments and questions that neighbours usually voice whenever a disaster occurs in the community. Whatever Frost's reasons for including him, the visitor as a component weakens the poem by dissipating some of the tension, by making the poem less compact dramatically. The visitor is a neighbour; he is the listener/narrator who gets the story from the old woman by a series of questions and comments. The story is a study of a complex, triangular relationship of some fifteen years' duration. The farmer John Hall, his common-law wife Estelle, and Estelle's mother, the speaker of the monologue, have lived together and combined their efforts in making a living from John's farm until now. Estelle has run away and the neighbour, having heard about the event, has come to find out why.

Unlike the two monologues previously discussed, "The Housekeeper" is dependent on a narrative to give it shape; that is to say, it has a clearly-defined "plot". The neighbour's curiosity is what brings him to the house. Since John is out, Estelle's mother is free to tell her own version of why Estelle left. Her story ends when John returns and takes his friend outside so that he can give him his own version of the facts.

The note of helplessness, the keynote of the poem, is

struck early in the poem as the woman draws attention to her huge, useless body, confined to a chair, as she is unable to move without assistance. But she does not direct the neighbour's attention to herself. Instead, she speaks long and lovingly about John who has given her a good home and has been kind to her, and everything she says about him points up the fact that he is the helpless one. In line 50, for example, she announces her overriding concern:

> This is the last of it.
> What I think he will do, is let things smash.

In her mind, the rundown farm and hapless John are as one, and she is full of anxiety as she sees what their end will be:

> I don't just see him living many years,
> Left here with nothing but the furniture.
> I hate to think of the old place when we're gone.

Her first remarks about him tell the neighbour what he already probably knows - that John Hall is a poor farmer. The old woman is exasperated as she sees John neglecting his work. Somewhat primly she pronounces, "that's no way for a man to do at his age." Having a farmer's mentality herself she feels that the farm and animals must be attended to, regardless of John's private problems. As she continues to give details of his ineffectualness pity and affection remove the harshness from her tone. She knows he is not cut out to be a farmer but has come to love him anyway, for his goodness and gentleness. And when she talks about the care they all

lavish upon their livestock, showing the neighbour the bill of sale for the Langshang cock, pride and satisfaction are plainly there too. She is indulgent towards John because she realizes that he needs, more than other men obviously, the kind of support and understanding only women can give. She tells the neighbour

> He's helpless
> In ways that I can hardly tell you of.

Lest we feel too much sympathy Frost is careful to give details of John's character that will balance the picture. He has been good to both women but has ignored Estelle's needs. The old woman's pity is all for her daughter when she tells her visitor very pointedly that John ought to have married Estelle. One may agree with Cox's view that John was an idealist who could not accept marriage as a sacred union, because he said that he and Estelle were "better than married", and did not care that "Marriage is a decent recognition of one's neighbours",[1] as Estelle did. Actually John is an egotist, if one accepts the old woman's view that marriage would have saved the union. John knew that Estelle and her mother both wanted it, but obstinately refused to compromise. In his self-centeredness and lack of sensitivity he resembles Len, the husband of the speaker in "A Servant to Servants".

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[1] Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches. A Portrait of Robert Frost, New York: New York University Press, 1957, p. 152

In line 175 she intimates that John's worst mistake was his refusal to give Estelle children. Her train of thought changes towards the end of the poem and she blames John for Estelle's actions, calling him a fool. It angers her that he thinks she is concealing Estelle's whereabouts, when she has done all she can for him. Her unspoken opinion is that he deserves what he has got and she wants the neighbour to feel this too, and not blame her daughter. For this reason she has been careful to point out that the rift between John and Estelle had been growing for some time, and that he let it happen. She is not being honest here, perhaps because it is too painful to face the truth: Estelle has simply not loved John enough to remain with him. Rather than recognize this, and admit it, the old lady has made a great deal of John's inadequacies. She is too fond of him herself to accept the fact that he is an unsatisfactory partner.

The poem might have ended with line 204, as the speaker looks out of the window and sees John, his face grim: "My, but he looks as if he must have heard!" She has finished telling her story, and the appearance of John with his harsh words add nothing to the meaning and structure of the poem.

Humor and charm pervade the poem because of the visual images, all symbolic, interspersed throughout. The dainty beadwork the woman embroiders on the dancing slippers is the first of a series of actions which make us like and admire

the old woman's resourcefulness and courage. The hoe that John threw and which stuck in the tree is an indication of his despair and neglect of the farm work. The preparation of chickens for the local fair and the general loving care given to the animals make up one of the poem's most attractive features. The tending of livestock here conveys clearly one of Frost's favorite themes - the strong satisfactions that country people derive from their work. Yet the imported rooster, symbol of the male, also symbolizes John's impracticality. The two are linked together - fine specimens, yielding no tangible profits.

Equally important as the symbolism is the changing tones of voice as the speaker moves through various stages of her story. We know that Frost attached such great importance to this aspect of human speech that he affirmed "the tone adds definitely to the meaning; it can change meaning entirely."[1] One does not have to agree with Frost's statement completely to appreciate that variety of tone is an essential element of any dramatic monologue. The changing of the speaker's mood or thought is reflected in the changing of the speaker's tone; these changes help to prevent monotony and move the action of the poem along. Estelle's mother displays a great range of mood in her monologue -- pleasure,

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[1]Eric W. Carlson, "Robert Frost on Vocal Imagination, the Merger of Form and Content", American Literature, Vol. 33, No. 4, 1962, p. 521.

sadness, helplessness, amusement, despair, prim disapproval, impatience, irritation, resignation, asperity, pride, disgust, regret, anxiety, and so on. Her final words of fury direct us to a last, most terrible judgement. John Hall is worse than a fool -- he is a failure, not only as a farmer but as a man.

Estelle's mother is a thoroughly warm-hearted, fair-minded and likeable old girl. Full of pity for John, and resignation as far as Estelle is concerned, she shows no pity for herself or anxiety about her own future. Remarking "I've been built in here like a big church organ" she views herself, as well as the whole mess, with detachment and ironic humor. Her common sense and good nature are somewhat shaken by her awareness of the consequences to follow, but she is not the least bit querulous or neurotic, as some of Frost's other female protagonists are. It is remarkable how little she says about her daughter, or at least, how little she defends her. Her appraisal of the situation, and of the characters of John and Estelle, are accurate:

> Too late now: she wouldn't have him.
> He's given her time to think of something else.
> That's his mistake.

Her judgements are shrewd and just; she impresses us as a perfectly reliable witness anxious to establish the true facts in the eyes of the world, for her praise and censure of both parties seem perfectly balanced. She is more clear-sighted and less biased than other speakers of dramatic

monologue, and in this respect a rather unusual central figure. Unlike other protagonists of Frost, such as the wife in "Home Burial" or Mary in "Death of the Hired Man" and the speaker in "The Pauper Witch of Grafton", she is not out to get any sympathy from the listener for herself. Like the speaker in "The Witch of Coös" she has a story to tell, and her main concern is to tell the truth, to impress upon her visitor that what he is hearing are facts. Unlike the deranged woman in "The Witch of Coös" Estelle's mother relates her sad story without digressions or touches of fancy or any melodrama whatsoever; the restraint and economy with which the poet has endowed her help to turn a sordid little series of episodes into a story with universal and tragic implications. The same technique is used successfully in " 'Out, Out —' ", as I shall show a little further on.

"The Housekeeper", "The Fear", "A Servant to Servants", "The Witch of Coös", "The Pauper Witch of Grafton", and "Home Burial" are monologue and dialogue poems allied to each other by theme. In each one a woman is the principal speaker, and a man-woman relationship provides the central conflict. Each poem is, among other things, a portrait not only of the speaker but of a marriage (legal or common-law), and thus each poem makes implicit statements about what has come to be known as the position of women. It is not within the scope of this thesis to examine the social aspects of the lives of Frost's women; I wish only to point out that

these poems are among the very best of Frost's work, and that in them he "had a final, identifying knowledge of the deprived and dispossessed, the insulted and injured, that one matches in modern poetry only in Hardy."[1] His skill in characterization and his insight into feminine psychology make his speakers come alive. While Masters and Robinson both wrote poetic portraits of suffering women, their characterizations are flat and shallow compared to Frost's. For example, in the Spoon River Anthology Masters shows many women victimized by men who were completely brutal. But Frost's women are victimized or repressed not only by their men but by Fate and by their own fears and frustrations (such as childlessness, for one). Frost took care, in his best dramatic poems, to create protraits that were as complete as possible within the limits he set himself, of the dramatic situation in the poem. Early in the century E.M. Forster, in his influential book Aspects of the Novel, described the requirements of characterization, pointing out the difference between "flat" or one-sided characters and "rounded" ones. Looking over Frost's best poems about people, it is easy to see that he tried to give his characters depth or "roundness" and that there was enough evidence in the poem to enable the reader to imagine such details and facts that were not actually stated. Thus Frost was able to

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[1] Jarrell, op. cit., p. 40.

make a virtue out of the dramatic monologue's apparent limitation - its brevity (as compared to a play) - and to handle the form in such a way that, taken all together, the monologues and dialogues give a total picture of individual persons as well as the society in which they live. No other type of poem except the epic can do as much.

While Frost's characterizations are skillfully put together, his poems are imbued with a sense of tragic inevitability. One can feel the force of an indifferent "Fate" working against his personae. One has only to look at the terse narrative monologue, " 'Out, Out —' " to see how powerfully blind Chance interferes to ruin human aspirations.

Here Frost, acutely conscious of the bewildering hardships and dangers faced daily by his rural characters, presents a story of an incident that occurred not far from his own home in Vermont. The poem is a monologue, but the narrator is unimportant as a personality - he is simply a reporter, and the reader must construe his own "human angle" from a few clues - the title, a couple of well-hidden criticisms, the last few lines. We have here a poem that represents several interesting variations on the dramatic monologue hitherto considered: the impersonality of the narrator, the emphasis on event or story, the rendering of a tragedy as both horrendous or insignificant, depending on one's point of view. Throughout the poem the speaker tells his story in a deceptively matter-of-fact tone. He describes the setting

briefly - a farm at sunset - but conveys the beauty of the scene and the symbolism implicit in it (the dying light echoes the title). He mentions the participants - a family engaged in sawing logs - but does not take time to describe any of them in detail, not even the principal character, because he wants to get on with the important part - the sequence of events as they happened. The boy is simply an unfortunate victim; the only significant thing about him is his youth. Scholars have failed to point out how Frost uses the story of the accident to show that all these people are, in a sense, victims, dependent on machines that they cannot entirely control. They have also failed to mention his hidden criticism of the attitudes of country people. The narrator clearly distinguishes himself from them. He tells us nothing about himself except that he was there at the time, a by-stander but not a participant, but there are places where he lets escape a comment that hints at rage hidden beneath the impartial surface:

> And nothing happened: day was all but done.
> Call it a day, I wish they might have said
> To please the boy by giving him the half hour
> That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
>
> .....
>
> Since he was old enough to know, big boy
> Doing a man's work, though a child at heart --

The phrases I have emphasized point to the unexpressed but palpable regret and disapproval felt by the narrator. In rural communities it is a commonplace for a boy to do a man's

work: everyone expects it, and the boy himself is proud of it. But, the speaker implies, there are times when it is stupid and dangerous to carry that precept out. The end of the poem is open to many interpretations, but it conveys positively the fact that the narrator does not share the others' fatalism. The final lines are not to be taken literally as the expression of the speaker's own opinion. On the contrary, a small masterpiece of subtle understatement, they reveal his revulsion at the callousness and stolidity of his neighbours:

> No more to build on there. And they, since they
> Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.
> (my emphasis)*

These lines create a kind of dramatic epilogue; they shift the focus away from the narrative to indicate two possible human responses to meaningless events. There is a third - the response of the poet himself - that remains ambivalent. The boy's family see his death as tragic for the boy himself, and for them, "No more to build on there", but the speaker-narrator tacitly interprets the accident: the boy's family are partly responsible for it, and they, along with the other workers, are blameworthy for their insensitivity and quick acceptance. The poet places the accident in a larger, universal context by choosing the title from a line in Macbeth's soliloquy of cynicism; at the same time his own sympathy, (transmitted through the speaker), so carefully (and pointedly) kept out of the poem, underlines the monologue from

beginning to the end. George F. Whicher remarked, "The neighbourliness of Frost has been from the first a keynote of his poetry too obvious to be missed."[1] But critics have missed it in this poem. The neighbourly concern, the sense of shock and rage, are present in the unemotional, quiet tone of the speaker. As in "Mending Wall", Frost's poet-farmer persona admires and feels affection for his neighbours, but does not identify with them to the point that he concurs in all their attitudes.

"The Gum-Gatherer", also from Mountain Interval (1916), moves the narrative monologue still further away from personality or characterization. Again the interest is directed away from the speaker. But the events are not important, for they are fairly mundane. The emphasis is on the theme presented through a single image. Frost is alone among twentieth-century poets in his ability to imbue a simple story with the kind of appeal present in folk tales, parables and other kinds of allegorical genres, as he has so well demonstrated in his shorter poems. In fact, many critics have pointed out frequent instances in which "the descriptions or narrations .... turn imperceptibly into Aesop's fables ..."[2]

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[1] George F. Whicher, in Robert Frost: An Introduction, eds. R.A. Greenberg and J.G. Hepburn, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961, p. 123.

[2] Malcolm Cowley, quoted in Greenberg and Hepburn, p. 110.

Among the monologues which fall clearly into this category are "The Grindstone", "Wild Grapes", "To A Young Wretch", and, to some extent, "The Gum-Gatherer". In each of these Frost's aim is to embody a group of ideas in a single, central metaphor. So intent is he on perfecting the metaphor or image that characterization of the speaker is subordinate, sketched only enough to provide the human voice that Frost always insists on having. As a result, the people in these poems are masks for the poet, speaking his ideas in his voice (in the voice of the farmer-poet persona) and the poems are memorable because of the power of the metaphors, not because of their characters. Many critics such as Sidney Cox and Richard Wilbur ignore such characterization as does exist, or prefer to demonstrate how "many an individual poem is one analogy entire."[1]

"The Gum-Gatherer" is seen by both these critics as a metaphor for the life of an artist. Cox points out various parallels in the activities of the gum-gatherer to those of the poet. There are similarities, he says, in their raw materials, freedom, independence, solitariness, physical difficulty of the work, and the unusual and impractical quality of their product.[2] Richard Wilbur repeats the assertion that sprucegum-gathering is "most obviously a

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[1] Cox, op. cit., p. 98.

[2] Cox, op. cit., p. 94.

metaphor for the poetic experience."[1] This is tantamount to saying that the narrator and the poet are one and the same person. Certainly the speaker tells us nothing about the character of the stranger, and does not even indicate any words the man spoke. He stresses the old-worldly and fabulous side of the man and his occupation when he tells us that once upon a time he met a man upon the road carrying a sack full of something mysterious but valuable. His choice of words in describing the man reveals how much he identifies with him and admires him as a self-made, self-sufficient being living alone but in perfect harmony with nature. The speaker lingers twice to underline the harshness of these mountain regions:

> He came from higher up in the pass
> Where the grist of the new-beginning brooks
> Is blocks split off from the mountain mass --
> And hopeless grist enough it looks
> Ever to grind to soil for grass.
>
> (lines 13 - 17)
>
> .....
>
> Visions of half the world burned black
> And the sun shrunken yellow in smoke.
>
> (lines 23, 24)

Awe and real delight come through his words:

> He showed me lumps of the scented stuff
> Like uncut jewels ...
>
> (lines 30, 31)

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[1] Richard Wilbur, "The Gum-Gatherer" in Gone Into But Not Explained: Essays on Poems by Robert Frost, ed. Greg Kuzma, Crete, Nebraska: The Best Cellar Press, 1976, p. 142.

With the opening of the sack to reveal its contents, the high point of the poem is reached. The sight of the "golden-brown" gum prompts the speaker to sum up grandly in a lofty, poetic tone:

> I told him this is a pleasant life,
> To set your breast to the bark of trees
> That all your days are dim beneath,
> And reaching up with a little knife,
> To loose the resin and take it down
> And bring it to market when you please.
>
> (lines 34 - 39)

Significantly it is the speaker, not the man himself, who pronounces this a "pleasant life" and says so with such playful lightheartedness in the final five lines. Thus the speaker, the gum-gatherer, and the poet all fuse into one another to form one persona - a solitary but not unsocial figure, content with a meagre living obtained with great difficulty in an environment that is harsh but full of a wild and primitive beauty. For this composite persona, "the stress is on the joy of working at a pure and lonely altitude."[1] The same joy and self-sufficiency are praised in the companion poem to this one, "The Figure in the Doorway". In other words one need not be an artist to feel and to live the way the two men in "The Gum-Gatherer" do.

There is one flaw in the theory that "The Gum-Gatherer" is an analogy or metaphor for the poetic experience.

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[1] Wilbur, op. cit., p. 142.

It is simply that in the writing of poetry there is plenty of pain as well as pleasure, as any poet will attest. Just because the speaker of this poem chooses not to mention the agonies of the gum-gatherer's work and situation does not mean that they do not exist. If we ignore them, or lose sight of them, then we are forming a view of the poet based not on fact but on romance. To put it another way, if the gum-gatherer is meant to represent the poet, then the picture of both is highly idealized.

The tone of the speaker's voice does not help us decide how far we should accept this idealized image of the artist or poet. Serious and playful at the same time, the speaker asks us to share his admiration for an eccentric and iconoclastic way of life, one that does not require much human intercourse but one that has its deep, private rewards. In his lighthearted manner there is an unmistakable tinge of superiority. He does not come right out and say it, but he means plainly: this is the best sort of life one could ever have. He also implies that the satisfactions one gets from working with unprepossessing (to all appearances) material are not to be understood by many. I suggest that the poem is convincing as a metaphor for the rare kind of personal independence, self-reliance, and self-employment that only a few people command. Of the narrator and the gum-gatherer himself, there is no very great attempt at psychological delineation. As in "Wild Grapes" and "The Grindstone" Frost

has used metaphor to turn the dramatic monologue into something close to fable, for these poems are memorable for their underlying messages, not their characters.

In "The Grindstone" the theme of human endeavor is elaborated in great detail, the analogy much more pointed and emphasized than in the previous poem considered. One could say that the metaphor finally runs away with the poem, so far is the analogy stretched. The speaker is curiously isolated; the man he works with does not seem human but an embodiment of a dumb, moving force. The speaker recalls an afternoon, long ago, spent sharpening a blade and remembers vividly the distaste and boredom he felt all the while. Fact and fancy play against each other all the way through this little parable, but the speaker never really comes to life. Apart from some typical youthful impatience to get a boring job finished there is little that characterizes him. His non-involvement with his task contrasts sharply with the serene absorption of the old man; and perhaps this is all he is meant to do. In piecing together his thoughts about the grindstone and the kind of mindless, unending effort it demanded, the poet-speaker's monologue becomes a meditation similar to, but much more discursive and inconclusive than, "The Wood-Pile".

In "Wild Grapes" Frost's didactic purpose is quite naked, and the dramatic monologue form is used openly to convey philosophic truths. The speaker is a young girl who

rather long-windedly tells the tale of climbing birch trees with her brother in order to gather grapes, and of having a frightening accident. In spite of her brother's teasing and sensible suggestions she is unable to descend because "I had not taken the first step in knowledge; I had not learned to let go with the hands." John Lynen has a very good analysis of the poem in his book The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost, but even his persuasive arguments fail to endear the poem to the reader. Perhaps it is a case, as in "The Grindstone", of the language being unequal to the thought expressed. At the end of the poem we have an example of the "tacked-on moral" that critics deprecate. "Wild Grapes" is a fable of the same type as "The Grindstone", spun out too long, and lacking the clash of wills that produces the dramatic situation in Frost's better monologues. However, it is a more attractive and memorable poem than "The Grindstone" because it has a clearly-indicated dénouement, humor provided by the brother to counterbalance the girl's fear, and a few superb images:

> I said I had the tree. It wasn't true.
> The opposite was true. The tree had me.
> The minute it was left with me alone
> It caught me up as if I were the fish
> And it the fishpole.

Both poems delineate the speaker's consciousness. Beginning with a concrete object vis-à-vis the speaker, the poem develops through the central situation to a full expansion of an idea. We see them working out their answers to a problem

but are aware that the answers are being formulated by the poet. Both poems are visually captivating but this does not hide the fact that there is little characterization. If the poem is to retain the features of the dramatic monologue, then Frost ought "to be concerned more with the speaker than the statement"[1] but the opposite is true.

It seems a great pity that Frost abandoned the dramatic monologue as well as other forms of dialogue poems as his career progressed. To continue the moralizing tendencies evinced by "The Grindstone" or "Wild Grapes" would have been disastrous, however. Lynen has indicated how Frost's interests shifted. He points out:

> As the regional context became less important and he turned from characters and events to ideas, his interest in the dramatic poem declined.[2]

Longish poems consisting of people talking appeared only occasionally in the volumes of poetry after North of Boston, interspersed with shorter lyrical and satirical pieces, and poems expressing philosophical ideas. Having portrayed a wide variety of New England rural types he no longer needed "personae" to embody his themes. He continued to use the voice of the poet-farmer in the first person throughout his career, for it was his own distinctive voice, and the rural

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[1] Ioan Williams, Browning, London: Evans Brothers Ltd., 1967, p. 120.

[2] Lynen, p. 130.

sage his own original creation. Many readers and critics feel that because of their psychological strength the "talk" poems are his best works, superb verse plays that need only be read aloud or performed on radio to show how perfect the fusion of style and theme is in Frost's poetry. Certainly he ought to have given the dramatic monologue more of a chance in his poetic canon.

III. ROBERT LOWELL'S DRAMATIC MONOLOGUES

Robert Lowell was a great admirer of Frost, but he never tried to emulate the older poet's methods. The dramatic monologues of Lowell would not, perhaps, be wholly approved by Frost. For one thing, Lowell's personae, though fully deserving of pity, are hardly likeable or heroic - they are profoundly disturbed and self-pitying individuals. Another very great difference in the dramatic monologues of the two poets is that Lowell took liberties with the form that Frost neither cared nor dared to do. For although Lowell was sincerely interested in understanding and describing the psychology of others, it was because in doing so he could come closer to an understanding of himself. As I will show in the following discussion, Lowell's constant protagonist was really himself, though disguised in many ways. The monologue form provided him with an oblique way to voice his criticisms of America, past and present, and of his own ancestors; it also enabled him to voice his concerns through fictional characters. Perhaps he felt, at this time, that the use of personae would compel him to eschew a romantic subjectivity in his work; he would not have to commit himself to the naked "I" of autobiography. Kalstone suggests that "Something in him resists the casual

"I" of autobiography"[1] but Lowell clearly showed later on (i.e., after his dramatic monologue period) less and less of such resistance. In fact, commitment to his personae weakened until he dispensed with them altogether.

The dramatic monologues discussed in the following pages are all taken from his first three volumes of poetry -- Lord Weary's Castle (1946), The Mills of the Kavanaghs (1951), and Life Studies (1959).

When Robert Lowell was learning to write poetry he drew on his knowledge of the ancient Greek and Latin poets as well as the French symbolist poets, deriving continued inspiration from their subject-matter, forms, and styles. As he was born some forty years after Frost, it is understandable that he would turn to poets closer to his own generation rather than to the Georgian poets in England or their American counterparts to help him develop a distinctive style of his own. Thus he heeded the criticisms and advice of Randall Jarrell, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and W.C. Williams; however, the poet who influenced him most profoundly was T.S. Eliot, whose work showed greater originality than any of the other American poets of the time and close affinities to the work of the great French symbolist poets Laforgue, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud. Like Eliot, Lowell

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[1] David Kalstone, Five Temperaments, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 48.

voiced urban disillusionment, spiritual anguish, and a profound sense of insecurity, which in his case was exacerbated by World War II and its repercussions in America of the forties.

Lowell found the dramatic monologue a challenging and useful poetic form and used it extensively in the first half of his career, the work that culminated with the poems of Life Studies (1959). Like Frost, he later abandoned the form to work mostly with lyrical modes, notably the sonnet, and plays and translations of other poets. His dramatic monologues are interesting as revelations of his developing poetic techniques and his sincere interest in human character as subject-matter. (He has been accused, unjustly I think, of being self-absorbed, "cocooning himself in the orbit of his psychic concerns".[1])

While Frost's characters are all situated within the region of New England and are consistently rural workers of no great wealth or education, Lowell's gallery includes a great variety of personae drawn from a number of places, occupations and historical times. Through his characters Lowell wrestled with problems that, to the end of his life, he never resolved entirely. Like Frost, Lowell knew that the dramatic monologue, which provides the opportunity for

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[1]John Druska, "Aspects of Robert Lowell", Commonweal, 9 Dec., 1977, p. 783.

looking backward into the past in order to understand the present, was a superb instrument for his purposes -- to make sense of human experience, to perceive the human condition as clearly as possible, and to explore the possible responses that human beings can make to the pressures exerted upon them. Lowell was as exacting a craftsman as Frost. Like him, and other distinguished practitioners of dramatic monologue - Browning, Eliot, and Jarrell - Lowell's best compositions were not static collages but careful arrangements of events, memories, images, and feelings that interacted with one another while illuminating central themes.

One of his early experiments with the form is published in his first collection Land of Unlikeness (1944). At this time in his life Lowell was preoccupied (one might even say obsessed) by religious and spiritual questions. In this respect he was akin to T.S. Eliot, whose spiritual trials and conversion formed the core of his own poetic oeuvre. "The Drunken Fisherman" bears some striking similarities to Eliot's "Gerontion"; it is useful to note some of them here.

The two poems have roughly the same overall theme, being expressions of religious failure, spoken by aged men who are tormented by their inability to find sustenance in faith yet are unable to stomach the spiritual barrenness within themselves and that which they observe in their fellowmen. Eliot's protagonist is a witty, cultured,

articulate man, not above pettiness and prejudice. His pessimism and bitterness are evident first in personal recollections and then in his criticism of historical process and in his cynical appraisal of human aspirations. For him, sensual excitements are no longer pleasurable consolations but horrors that revolt the soul. The only force that works against the utter despair expressed is the sense (or hope) that his state is temporary, that he may sometime rid himself of these

> Tenants of the house,
> Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

The speaker's thoughts are not arranged in a logical sequence. In general, he moves outward from images of himself to visual snippets of scenes from his past containing various individuals. At the same time he is moving abruptly back and forth in time (his own lifetime) and referring to our history's past and present. Gerontion makes copious allusions - biblical, historical and literary; he is meditating upon the process of time as well as bewailing the failure and futility of his own life. Thus the poet fuses his themes - man's distortion of knowledge for evil purposes and the utter futility of human effort - with the old man's personal suffering. In identifying his own barrenness with that of his age and society he is the precursor of the speaker in Lowell's "Skunk Hour"; in bitterly viewing a past that is suddenly empty of meaning

because it yields no joy in the present he recalls the speaker of Tennyson's "Ulysses", who has only death to look forward to. Gerontion states at the very beginning that he is an old man "waiting for rain" and this is also what Lowell's fisherman wants so desperately. Eliot's speaker has experienced "Christ the tiger" who "springs in the new year. Us he devours ..." but Lowell's speaker yearns towards the experience of faith as an ideal that he can never attain, though it is so tantalizing.

"The Drunken Fisherman" has a much narrower compass and greater concentration than "Gerontion". As in the Eliot poem, however, the speaker is alienated from society; we are given only the sorrowful meditations of a mind that is wholly absorbed in itself, while aware of the war-torn world around ("this bloody sty"). Avoiding a narrative method or logical sequence (as Eliot did) Lowell makes the old fisherman's monologue entirely a series of images that develop the themes through symbolism. In both poems, the speaker is more a consciousness than an individual person.

The fisherman does not seem to be addressing anyone in particular (although "children" in stanza three may be taken as a reference to the next generation) but talking to himself or silently pondering. He is supposedly drunk but his ramblings have remarkable coherence and purpose. Viewed against the background formed by the other poems in the volume, the poem at once suggests that the speaker's griefs

are identical to those of the poet, and that the drunken fisherman expresses Lowell's own religious experiences.

At first, the poem's subject appears to be the inevitable loneliness and suffering of old age with its yearning towards the past, but as the poem moves the theme reveals itself in an elaborate analogy of the speaker-fisherman with Christ, the Fisher of men. Yet the speaker laments his inability to "catch Christ", to be one with him, and by implication, the widespread decline of Christianity. The first part of the poem, the first two stanzas, shows the speaker bitterly reviewing his present spiritual and physical poverty (the two representing spirit and flesh) and indicates that he is lamenting the death of Christianity (the dying fish) at the same time. His physical and spiritual conditions are one - the visible objects he names represent the deterioration of his and others' Christian beliefs. The words and images - "moth", "corrupted", "flopped about", "unstable cloth" - carry a double meaning, emphasizing both the death of Christianity and the inevitable decay of human life. He names a series of shabby tokens of his inner degradation, his disgust giving way to shame at the end of the second stanza. Lowell seems to have learned how to compress and convey the greatest number of suggestions in a single image, but here the effect is weakened in the violent mixture:

are these fit terms

To mete the worm whose molten rage
Boils in the belly of old age?

The second part of the poem, stanza three, contrasts sharply with the first. The speaker recalls a former happy life in a series of playful antitheses, crowded one after the other. There is some obscurity in phrases such as "fluent and obscene catches" but most convey the speaker's aching emotions in some unusual combinations, e.g., "raging memory drools". The stanza builds up to a climax of regret and longing. In the third part of the poem, the last two stanzas, the speaker leaves the past and returns to dwell on his present misery. "Once" and "now" express the contrast, the latter word representing not only the present but the end that is almost upon the old man. The ebbing waters of the river echo the image of drought that Eliot used so often to represent lack of faith; here it also indicates the fisherman's life ebbing away. The remorse he feels does not take him any closer to salvation but increases his self-hatred and sense of hopelessness. Although he tries to see himself as a part of a vast process of decay, he remains self-pitying and self-absorbed, "thrashing" in his "pothole of old age". His powerlessness is well expressed in the phrase "whale's rage". From the nadir of despair he tries to move out:

Is there no way to cast my hook
Out of this dynamited brook?

This agonized cry marks the emotional and thematic climax of the poem. Ebbing hope is conveyed in the puns on "casting

about" and "peter out". The speaker finally asserts his belief in the existence of Christ, even if he himself has not been able to reach him. The drama enacted in the poem -- the struggle of the soul destined for the Prince of Darkness to avoid its doom and unite, somehow, with Christ -- ends with that positive affirmation. It is the wish, and not the fulfilment of the wish, that the poem describes. The last line, with its vague vision, has a calming effect and a lyrical intensity. The reference to Christ's power is meant to reassure and comfort, to resolve all conflict. It is a quiet ending that contrasts with the turbulence that has gone before.

"The Drunken Fisherman" is not meant to be, any more than Eliot's "Gerontion" is, a realistic portrait of a particular individual in a particular setting, such as the portraits in the dramatic monologues of Browning and Frost. The time, place, and exact identity of the speaker are not given; nor are any details regarding his personality or his personal relationships. This is no simple-minded old poverty-ridden fisherman speaking but the poet behind his mask, giving a carefully-phrased and sophisticated religious lament for our time, and describing his own slipping hold on Christianity as a system of moral and spiritual support. Despite its non-realistic quality (such as one finds in other kinds of religious poetry, notably in hymns) and its heavy use of symbol, it carries a great emotional power.

This is partly due to the poet's choice of formal devices.

Lowell wished to intensify the feelings expressed in the poem and to this end he used rhyming couplets in a balanced and regular stanza pattern - fairly short lines in five stanzas of eight lines each. One way to vary the movement and avoid rigidity was to allow his lines to run over frequently. He achieved considerable fluidity without resorting to the irregular line lengths and loose rhythms of Eliot's poem. The symmetrical plan and the regular rhyme and the ever-so-slightly varied iambic tetrameter rhythms all contribute to the poem's strength, present not only in symbol but in the elevated tone and intense language. The short statements, varied by the occasional question, furnish a long inventory of concrete objects loaded with symbolic suggestion and embodying the speaker's shifting thoughts. The poem thus moves from symbol to symbol, each one representing, somewhat in the manner of Eliot's "objective correlatives", some aspect of the speaker's past and present life. Thus the moth, the gnats, the worms, the rabbit's foot, the sperm-whale, the grain of sand, and the moon are all metaphors for the fisherman's degeneration. Many of the verbs or verbal adjectives are similarly charged; wallowing, flopped, corrupted, unstuffed, boils, danced, drools, ebbing, puddled, dynamited. Words like "pothole" and "dynamited" add a contemporary flavour. Close inspection of the poem reveals many superb choices of near-rhymes and alliteration.

But taken all together the poetic techniques and formal devices work against the realistic quality of the speaker's utterances, in spite of the colloquial and contemporary diction. They indicate clearly that the poem is a highly decorated artifice, not the natural-sounding speech of a recognizable fellow human in a real setting. The human aspect is all but strangled and smothered by the symbolism and formal pattern. Eliot was careful to avoid such excesses in his poem. The ending of the poem is unsatisfying because it is unconvincing; the weight of despair in the body of the poem cannot allow of a positive affirmation.

"The Drunken Fisherman" must be viewed as an attempt at a poem that belongs in a tradition - that of poems dealing exclusively with religious despair and the will to believe. Religious poetry of this kind was written almost as soon as men began to write down their thoughts, in pre-mediaeval times, but the finest examples in the English language are found in the poems of the Metaphysical poets, those of John Donne, and later in the work of G.M. Hopkins. Lowell's diction, with its distinctly contemporary and slangy quality, its use of puns, paradoxes and violent combinations, and its leaning toward rhythms of living speech, recalls Donne's "holy" Sonnets. The organization of "The Drunken Fisherman" recalls both Donne's and Hopkins' method: it is a dramatized argument the speaker is having with himself, asking many rhetorical questions and moving from complete negation to

vague certainty of positive hope at the end. In one of his "Terrible" sonnets Hopkins's speaker seems to be the drunken fisherman's prototype. He laments:

> I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
> Bitter would have me taste: my blood was me;
> Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.
> Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
> The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
> As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

The sonnet ends there; but in another poem the dramatic movement is almost identical to that of Lowell's poem. Union with Christ is the ultimate reward of all suffering. (The emphasis is mine.)

> Across my foundering deck shone
> A beacon, an eternal beam. Flesh fade, and mortal trash
> Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:
> In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
> I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am and
> This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchword, immortal diamond,
> Is immortal diamond.

Both poems have triumphant endings that fuse the speaker with Christ through Death, mortality with immortality, the human with the divine. T.S. Eliot could have said of both Hopkins and Lowell, as he said of the Metaphysical poets, that "they were ... engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling".[1] "The Drunken Fisherman" is typical of Lowell's early poetry.

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[1] T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets", Selected Prose, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1953, p. 118.

The imagery and metrics are impressive, but too aggressive, too demanding of attention to themselves. They obscure the fact that the poem is almost all feeling - hopelessness, grief, despair - and devoid of "plot" or argument. As Lowell continued his attempts to master the dramatic monologue he wrote with more economy, fewer metaphors, and a more clearly-defined narrative line.

The eighteenth-century Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) who lived and preached in Connecticut so fascinated the young Lowell that after Lowell graduated from Kenyon College he prepared to write a biography of Edwards. A powerful and persuasive orator, Edwards believed it was his mission to spread the Puritan doctrines in order to gain converts. Due partly to his fiery sermons a widespread religious revival in New England which came to be known as the Great Awakening took place. It is described by Edwards in his book A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God. Published in 1737, the book served as inspiration for many other preachers. During the years of this religious revival people newly converted to the Puritan faith expressed their religious feelings in bizarre ways. Many went into trances, experienced visions, or claimed that direct confrontations with God or Satan had taken place. Shrieking and writhing during prayer meetings was common. Preaching against these unhealthy excesses Edwards delivered many sermons which gained him a reputation for being extremely

strict in his views regarding divine punishment. His most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741), and one of his juvenile books, Of Insects, were used by Lowell for material when he was composing his dramatic monologue "Mr. Edwards and the Spider". Hugh Staples has demonstrated the great extent to which this and the other early poem on Edwards, "After the Surprising Conversions", borrow phrases and images from Edwards' sermons and books.[1]

Lowell abandoned his intention of writing a biography of Edwards but he drew an enduring and accurate portrait of him in the poems. Edwards had often compared man to a spider; Lowell found in this concrete symbol a perfect "conceit" that could be elaborated to represent man's position in the universe. The metric pattern of the poem imitates the one used by Donne in "A Nocturnal on St. Lucy's Day". Donne's poem consists of five nine-line stanzas, all roughly the same shape, with a recurring end-rhyme pattern of a b b a c c c d d. Lowell clearly recognized the originality and brilliance of Edwards' ideas, but his intention in the poems was to satirize the preacher and to show up the morbid Puritan preoccupation with death and the comical aspects of exaggerated rhetoric. Staples points out that in "Mr. Edwards and the Spider"

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[1] Hugh B. Staples, Robert Lowell. The First Twenty Years, London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1962, p. 98.

"nearly every line ... has ... phraseology taken directly"[1] from two of Edwards' sermons; yet Lowell is not concentrating on the man's human aspects so much as on his qualities as preacher of damnation and hellfire. Edwards' voice comes through not as concerned and intimate, but stern and distant, the voice of an expert orator playing on the emotions of his listeners with questions such as, "What are we in the hands of the great God?"; "But who can plumb the sinking of that soul?". This is a preacher who is melodramatic ("treason crackling in your blood"), fond of hyperbole ("the apparitions of the sky", "the bowels of fierce fire"), persuasive and terrifying (... will destroy / baffle and dissipate your soul"). In the last two stanzas he seems a sadist as well. He performs his oratorical duties very well but stops just short of self-parody; the poet has made him too clever to be carried away by his own cleverness. In the final stanza the speaker addresses one Josiah Hawley (Josiah Hawley was one of Edwards' relatives) whose suicide is described in the sequel poem, "After the Surprising Conversions." Thus the monologue is made to be an address to Hawley for the purpose of warning him of the agonies of a sinful death (suicide) which Hawley was apparently contemplating.

The intricate stanza form and rhyme pattern are beautifully handled and command attention as the work of a

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[1]Staples, op. cit., p. 98.

meticulous, gifted and very skilled wordsmith. In the final stanza, for example, Lowell sums up all the agony of damnation and death, linking traditional descriptions of Hell with a contemporary version of it as a blast furnace into which one is imprisoned. The rhymes - "soul" and "coal", "cast" and "blast", "glass" and "pass" - are unforced and emphatic words in themselves, each loaded with suggestiveness. The speaker moves from a rhetorical question, to an urgent admonition to Hawley to imagine the certain suffering he would undergo as punishment, to a quiet and conclusive statement uttered with barely-controlled relish, of the final anguished "infinite" moments undergone by a damned soul. The speaker has artfully built up his arguments to culminate in this horrible vision. There is not a shred of pity in the whole address, although the picture of man (spider) in torment is pathetic enough. The speaker is so sure of himself that he is hateful and cruel. With great subtlety and sophistication Lowell has used Edwards' own words to make him a brilliant, but utterly repellent figure.

"After the Surprising Conversions" contains the narrative of Hawley's suicide, although his name is not mentioned in the poem. For this dramatic monologue Lowell borrowed from Edwards' "Narrative of the Surprising Conversions", a letter to a fellow minister "dated November 6, 1736, in which Edwards describes the initial success and

later failure of his evangelistic programme."[1] Lowell's poem is also set up as a letter which recounts the unfortunate event that took place at the end of May. The times of the year are established because they have a religious significance, but the names of the suicide victim, of his town, or of the letter's recipient, are not given in the poem. This is perhaps because the narrative broadens out to include the fate of the entire district and of the society of which his district is a part (Concord being the seat). As the speaker begins to describe the man who later killed himself, in an attempt to make sense of the suicide, he reveals himself as a self-righteous snob who could not possibly understand the mental suffering of another. While allowing that the gentleman had "more than common understanding" he says the family members were odd - "melancholy parents"; "for years they kept alone" - and implies that madness runs through the family: "Good people, but of too much or too little wit." The speaker seizes on madness as the explanation: "he seemed beyond advice or reason", i.e., beyond the speaker's advice and reasoning, and shows that this must be the true explanation as it is supported by the coroner who "judged him delirious". Two-thirds of the poem are taken up with describing the man's growing terror. In the last third the speaker relates how, immediately after

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[1] Staples, op. cit., p. 86.

the suicide, unrest and evil spread throughout the village and the whole area as more and more people abandoned their Puritan faith. He now uses "we", "us", and "our" instead of the singular pronoun as he complains that God has deliberately "abandoned us to Satan" and "All the good work" (i.e., of the Church) "was quashed". The speaker implies that the people have brought about God's withdrawal of his favour through their own unworthiness and sins (suicide being one of the worst). All they can do now is kill themselves. With such a picture of bleakness and desolation the monologue ends, as the letter concludes by a reference to the ungathered harvest, signifying chaos, the destruction and disappearance of man and the return of primeval nature. The "bass gorged with spawn" is perhaps a reference to the miraculous multiplying of fish just before Christ walked on the water in St. John, Chapter 6; the poet may be hinting at rebirth or renewal of mankind in this veiled way.

Like its companion poem this one is not meant to be a complete or realistic portrait of the famous preacher. It continues the satire begun in "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" by pointing up the narrowness of the ecclesiastic's view and the jejune quality of his thinking. A perusal of Edwards' sermons shows that Lowell was not caricaturing his personae unduly. As a dramatic monologue it reveals enough of the coldness of the speaker to turn the reader against him completely, and in this respect it reminds one of Browning's

"Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" or Tennyson's "St. Simeon Stylites".

The poem is not divided into stanzas but composed of rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter, lines that flow with great ease and smoothness, and are rarely end-stopped. The language is less rhetorical and more natural; it is more colloquial than that of "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" and its tone is less elevated. It is comparatively sparing in its use of religious symbolism and allusion. It is delivered not in a voice of thunder and menace but in a quiet, respectful manner of one anxious to explain. All these characteristics are appropriate to the informal letter. Horror enters the speaker's tone when he intimates that the disappearance of God will inevitably be followed by the disappearance of mankind. The story narrated in the poem recalls similar tales of divine wrath and punishment in the Old Testament.

> We were undone.
> The breath of God had carried out a planned
> And sensible withdrawal from this land;

In telling it to his colleague, Edwards has revealed his utter self-absorption and lack of human sympathy, his arrogance and sureness of his opinions and mission. Again, the speaker of this poem, as in the companion one, is, in spite of his wit, vain and repulsive. In his appraisal of Lowell's early work, Hayden Carruth has grouped this poem with other poems of Lowell's which are "poems of faith".

He says they are a large number of "set pieces in a high style ... which had ... a very great but purely literary success."[1] His judgement that the Edwards poems and others like it are "sententious" is a just one.

Lowell's next volume of poems The Mills of the Kavanaghs (1951) shows Lowell concentrating on the dramatic monologue form exclusively and choosing a greater variety of types for his personae. Throughout his career Lowell seemed to go back and forth between two groups of characters - those of a stature above the ordinary and those of the common citizens of America whose domestic or personal crises could be understood by most readers. All seven poems of this volume are dramatic monologues, but most are quite short compared to the title poem of 608 lines, the longest poem Lowell ever wrote. "The Mills of the Kavanaghs" is considered by many critics to be an interesting and ambitious poem but an unsuccessful one. Since it has been analysed competently and in great detail many times, notably by Hugh Staples and Steven Yenser, I shall confine my observations about it to those features that contribute to its failure as a dramatic monologue.

The poem traces the decline and end of a once-great

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[1] Hayden Carruth, "A Meaning of Robert Lowell" in Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time, eds. Michael London and Robert Boyers, New York: David Lewis, 1970, p. 231.

Maine family whose line goes back to the time of the Indian wars. The poem has no real "plot" or development, but presents the history of the Kavanagh family in a fragmented way through the consciousness of the speaker, dwelling on her place in the family, but not concentrating on the speaker as the centre of interest. In fact it is difficult to say what the centre of dramatic interest is; the poem's fundamental, thematic vagueness is one of its great flaws.

Anne Kavanagh, the last member of the family (through her marriage to the last son and heir Harry Kavanagh) reflects on her marriage, her brief happiness, her husband's career in the navy, his ignominious retirement from it after the attack on Pearl Harbour, his madness and death, their childlessness and failure to carry on the Kavanagh line and traditions. Death and loss seem the major underlying themes; so strongly do they pervade the poem that it becomes elegiac instead of dramatic. In all the welter of episodes from different times of the past and present, there is little psychological delineation of the speaker beyond showing her courage and resignation in the face of a barren solitude.

The second great flaw of the poem concerns the movement or development of the argument. While it is true that the "changeable currents of her mind"[1] move the poem forward,

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[1] Ralph J. Mills, Contemporary American Poetry, New York: Random House, 1965, p. 146.

Anne's thoughts switch too abruptly back and forth from reminiscence, reverie, speculations on life and death, musings on classical myths whose figures such as Persephone she identifies herself with. The effect is not one of a careful and meaningful arrangement but of disjointedness. The parts containing allusions to classical mythology and biblical symbols are overlong and too numerous; they weigh the poem down and slow its movement to a crawl. What ought to be a direct or at least a purposeful progression towards a culminating point is instead a laboured hobble with little sense of direction. Furthermore, the counterpointing of fact and fiction (or history) in Anne's mind weakens instead of maintains a necessary dramatic tension. One is left with the sense that Anne's portrait is an unfinished and unsatisfying one. Both she and her husband are victims of the war, of circumstances, of time, forces strong enough, it is true, to make personality seem irrelevant: yet apart from Anne's tragic loss of self-fulfilment and the pathos of her present situation there is little that makes her or the Kavanagh family memorable. There is too much extraneous information and not enough character development in the poem. Still, any student of Lowell's poetry will recognize that the poem is an impressive work of apprenticeship and has many interesting features. It contains, in embryo, the themes of all the great later poems and includes (although disguised) many autobiographical elements that he worked with openly in his

next two volumes with great success. The rhyming pairs of iambic pentameter lines are exquisitely composed and very musical, even though they are at odds with the harsh contemporary subject-matter, and the rhymes are good though often very insistent. Lowell used rhyming iambic pentameter couplets with greater flexibility and effect in "Falling Asleep Over the Aeneid" and "Mother Marie-Thérèse", two of the most completely realized character poems in the volume.

Lowell admired Frost for his ability to get inside a "character's skin and language"[1] in his dialogue poems. Lowell displays this ability himself in "Mother Marie-Thérèse", one of his finest dramatic monologues. The poem presents, through the eyes of an elderly nun, an endearing portrait of a vibrantly alive personality. Mother Marie-Thérèse is mourned by the affectionate nun because the qualities she possessed are so rare in ecclesiastics. The speaker remembers the salient traits of the dead Mother Superior with such sharpness of detail and sympathy for the joie de vivre fearlessly displayed by her that Mother Marie-Thérèse stands out not only as a forceful individual but as an embodiment of the fleshly yearnings and enjoyments that ecclesiastics generally repress, and cease to feel.

The poem has a clearly designated setting, a convent

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[1]Steven Gould Axelrod, Robert Lowell: Life and Art, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 99.

named Maris Stella House near Carthage, New Brunswick, where Marie-Thérèse was Mother Superior until her death by drowning in 1912. (These details are all fictional.) The speaker, now sixty years old, sitting beside the fire on a cold winter night, warms herself with fond memories of her beloved Mother Superior in order not to yield completely to soul-weariness and disgust sharpened by the cold. Her first reminiscences concern the activities, inspired by the dead nun, that the sisters engaged in but which were not really in keeping with their religious purposes. These are all summed up in the speaker's present judgement of them, "For we were friends of Cato, not of God." Mother Marie-Thérèse's love of hunting and sport is drawn as a background for their "cabals", and while the speaker is glad that all that is over, she regrets the excitement and the drama of those days. The images of of heat and cold are used to signify vitality and emptiness and are first mentioned to drive home the idea of the convent's faded splendor:

> It strikes us now, but cannot re-inspire;
> False, false and false, I mutter to my fire.

Her words about the dead Mother Superior's love of hunting emphasize the Mother's keen enjoyment of physical pleasures - "... her trophies hung / Fresh in their blood and color." The speaker imagines that as a young girl, "a lordly child", Marie-Thérèse already feared the excesses her sensual nature might lead her into and so she decided to enter the Church

and place herself in a position where she would, when necessary, be "chastised to the Rule's restraint." Although this was a deliberate and unforced decision, for "Christ enticed her heart", the speaker considers the change a terrible comedown for the lively girl. Her choice of words reveals this opinion - "with little heed"; "surrendered"; "Like Proserpina, who fell ... to flower in hell" - and mixes pity, affection and admiration. However, Marie-Thérèse only "half-renounced" this unseemly pastime after she took orders. She also found compensation in reading the novels of Rabelais and following the political events of her native country in the newspaper Action Française. A whole aristocratic and a religious way of life has come to its end, the old nun says sadly -- "Our world is passing" -- and refers to the rusting guns, emblems, ring, etc., of the dead Mother Superior. She viciously satirizes Father Turbot, "that porpoise-bellied priest" whom she despised as much as she loved the Mother Superior. The caricature of this ineffectual man serves as a bit of comic relief and stands as a contrast to the colorful Mother. The sea imagery, begun in the magnificent lines

> the gluttonous gulls
> That whiten the Atlantic, when like skulls
> They drift for sewage with the emerald tide.

becomes more and more insistent, as she refers to the "sixty-knot Atlantic squall", the sea's dead, "bilged by her thoughts", and "worked on by the worms". The sea represents

certain death for them all, "always on the move / for virgins" and no religious beliefs of after-life offer consolation to the speaker who sees vividly only the degradation of physical decay.

> ... We cannot say
> Christ even sees us, when the icefloes toss
> His statue ...

She implies that their efforts in this isolated community to carry on the work of God are futile and fruitless. The death of Mother Marie-Thérèse has, for the speaker, more than a human dimension. When she reaches this, the lowest point of despair, she rallies a bit and comforts herself with the imagined vision of the Mother Superior near her -- "You watch your orphan swording at her fears." This final part of the poem addresses the dead Mother directly, as the speaker remembers how they two secretly rebelled against the others, making fun of them and ignoring the calling of the bells to prayer.

As a distinct character Mother Marie-Thérèse comes to life mostly because of the accumulation of concrete detail around her[1] but in describing her the old nun who speaks reveals herself as well. She has no such worldly and political interests as her dead heroine had to absorb her attention and enliven her gloomy hours. She does not

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[1] Vivian Smith, The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1974, p. 50.

care for material possessions and she regards the others with whom she lives in the "fossil convent" with revulsion -- "our snuffling crones"; "hysterical hosannas"; "Surely, he is one of those / whom Christ and Satan spew!". A good third of the poem is given over to a list of bleak attributes of the place and the climate, rendered in echoing, majestic lines. These are all to be taken symbolically.

> The dead, the sea's dead, has her sorrows, hours
> On end to lie tossing to the east, cold,
> Without bedfellows, washed and bored and old,
>
> .....
>
> And water oozes from us into wells;
> A new year swells and stirs. Our narrow Bay
> Freezes itself and us.

The section beginning "Now all the bells are tongueless ..." is as skillful and inspired a painting of psychological landscape as Lowell ever created. It succeeds in drawing the reader's sympathy in the same way as Lowell was able to do in the poems of later volumes, evoking horror as well as pity. Although the two nuns occupy the spotlight throughout, the poem dramatizes some of Lowell's own concerns at the time. One of these is the conflict between the temptations of the flesh and the ascetic requirements or sacrifices of the religious life, embodied here by the person of Mother Marie-Thérèse but felt by all ecclesiastics who devote their lives to the Catholic church as nuns, monks, or priests. There is no doubt that the poet's sympathies are for the nuns here because of the rather senseless privations they

must undergo. The poem clearly evinces a critical attitude toward the Church that the poet would not have held or shown earlier, but progressive disillusionment with Catholicism changed his views and led him to abandon the faith he had embraced and tried to hold.

Another dramatic monologue in this volume that expresses criticism of Christian beliefs is "Her Dead Brother". It is a powerful and disturbing poem although the speaker is not as fully realized as the subject of "Mother Marie-Thérèse". A married woman gazes one evening at a portrait of her brother, killed during the war while at sea. She lives in a New England town; it is sunset, and she is waiting for her husband to come home. Her words are addressed to the figure in the painting, so that this poem too is an interior monologue. The pattern of the speaker's thoughts shapes the poem as Anne's are meant to do in "The Mills of the Kavanaghs". Unlike that poem which is clogged with too many mythological references, "Her Dead Brother" moves forward to its tragic end with economy and sureness of direction. However, the poet has filled the poem with complex symbols; not all seem to arise naturally out of the woman's meditations. The diction is closer to colloquial and contemporary speech than that of the other poems in the volume.

The poem consists of two parts, each having three identically-shaped stanzas, and a regular, slightly varied rhyme scheme at the ends of the lines. The rhythm is

basically iambic throughout, but is quite ragged and uneven in places, perhaps to compensate for the regularity of the stanza format. The rhymes seem natural, the words well chosen.

> Enough light
> Remains to see you through your varnish. Giving
> Your life has brought you closer to your friends;
> Yes, it has brought you home. All's well that ends:
> Achilles dead is greater than the living;

As in "The Drunken Fisherman" Lowell uses rhyme for power and emphasis. One cannot imagine blank verse or even rhymed iambic pentameter couplets yielding quite the same intensity and point. All in all the poem displays, more than perhaps any other so far, Lowell's metrical virtuosity.

A thorough analysis of the poem's imagery and symbolism has been made by Stephen Yenser. He finds that the poem contains "images that encourage contradictory interpretations, presumably because the mystery of God defies comprehension."[1] I do not agree that the mystery of God is the poem's central thematic concern. The speaker begins by stating the paradox that her dead brother is now more alive than ever, as death has made a hero of him, like Achilles. Her love for him torments her as does her sense of guilt and remorse. In stanzas two and three she relives the idyllic summer afternoons they spent as children, a time of innocence,

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[1] Stephen Yenser, Circle to Circle. The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, p. 86.

which led to their incestuous lovemaking when they were adolescents. Sin and the knowledge of evil follow their early, Edenic experiences. In the third stanza she reveals her bitterness at being betrayed by her brother, and recognizes that only death can provide a release for her. She wants to die, partly to join her brother and partly to atone. Her suicide is recounted in Part II of the poem, taking place, as the author's note tells us, three months later.

Part II consists, as Part I, of three ten-line stanzas. Here the scene moves back and forth from land to sea and from present to past as the speaker creates an imaginary sequence of events leading to her brother's death. At the same time she is preparing for her own death by suicide. We get a kaleidoscope of rapidly shifting scenes as she feverishly imagines herself on board their sailboat, "Our fingers lock behind the tiller", sharing a voyage into the darkness of death, then sees her brother's squadron "by the Stygian Landing", then the torpedoes that destroyed his ship, then a vision of him shouting to her "Quick, the ice is out". Finally the speaker equates the violence and destruction of war with the illicit passions felt by herself and others, "O Brother, a New England town is death / and incest ...". At the very centre of the poem she indicates her ambivalent religious feelings:

> The Lord is dark, and holy is His name;
> By my own hand, into His hands! My burners
> Sing like a kettle, ...

Her statement, "Life is a thing I own", is a defiant affirmation that she does not regard suicide as a sin. But these religious ideas are not developed at all. We are left with a hazy portrait of a person at the mercy of her emotions, unable to control them or understand them. Morbid and melodramatic, Part II of the poem is quite different in imagery and tone from Part I, so that if one is to consider the two parts together as one poem, "Her Dead Brother" takes on a different focus than that in Part I alone. In Part II attention is shifted from the woman's grief and quiet hysteria to man's senseless self-destruction in war (paralleled by the speaker's overwhelming need for self-destruction) and the mental confusion that the war represents. In the words quoted above (line six, stanza two) there is an implication that God is responsible for these suicidal urges in man; yet this thought is contradicted by the speaker's words, "Life is a thing I own." She could not say that if she truly believed in God. The poem is anti-religious; it reflects the poet's questioning position regarding his faith, and shows how far he has progressed from the simple doubt and despair of "The Drunken Fisherman", the satire of the Edwards poems, past the sympathetic mockery in "Mother Marie-Thérèse". Jerome Mazzaro considers "Her Dead Brother" an unsuccessful religious poem that fails to "achieve mystical vision". He affirms that the poem's subject-matter (without stating what the subject-matter is) cannot be

reconciled with its "contemplative structure" and that Lowell "seems to avoid new structures which may be more appropriate to his needs" as his current concerns are not metaphysical but worldly and moral.[1] Whether one agrees with that view or not, it is clear that the speaker is too "cumbersomely devised to account for her ... pressing psychological despair", as M.L. Rosenthal states.[2] Lowell himself was dissatisfied with the characters in this volume and felt that they did not have "the vitality of Chaucer and Frost's ... monologues ... which he had been reading with great admiration."[3] Perhaps they did not have this vitality precisely because there is so much of Robert Lowell in them. Chaucer's characters all have an identity of their own and one does not need to look for elements of Chaucer's autobiography in their lives. The same is true of the men and women in Frost's best dramatic poems.

Lowell's experiments with the dramatic monologue yielded surprising results in the poems of his next volume, Life Studies (1959). The book attracted much critical comment because it showed a great shift away from religious themes

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[1] Jerome Mazzaro, in Critics on Robert Lowell, ed. J. Price, Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1972, p. 59.

[2] M.L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets. A Critical Introduction., New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 231.

[3] Axelrod, op. cit., p. 80.

and a striking modification of Lowell's poetic techniques.[1] He began to use free verse and looser, irregular stanza patterns with unobtrusive rhymes and rhythms that varied more than they had previously. Like Frost's North of Boston, Life Studies is a book of people - figures from history, people who were living at the time he was writing the poems, people he knew or that he encountered who affected him profoundly, and imaginary characters. The group includes four writers - Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz, and Hart Crane - who were artists at odds with society like himself. Of these Yenser writes, "These four poems are closely related by several motifs, with the result that what we have is less a gallery of portraits than a composite picture of the writer as hero."[2] This is a just comment, for Lowell continued to use the dramatic monologue, with speakers other than himself, to convey his own concerns and reflect aspects of himself and of his life. Lowell also uses men observed in prison, parents, grandparents and other relatives, his wives and daughter, and, in the centre of them all, himself. The title indicates that the poems are sketches based on his own experiences and reactions to people and events that influenced him and his development as an artist. They are not intended to be detailed portraits and

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[1] John Hollander, in Critics on Robert Lowell, p. 66.

[2] Yenser, op. cit., p. 130.

complete realizations but unfinished studies, i.e., rather rough sketches that capture the essence of the subjects. The poems are written in a variety of free verse and stanza forms. Some half dozen are dramatic monologues, each having a place in the overall design of the book, each being a "study" of some aspect of the writer's developing thought.

"The Banker's Daughter" is about Marie de Medici, wife of the French king Henri IV. It is set in Paris just after the king had been assassinated. The speaker introduces herself as a "poor country egg" from Florence and sketches briefly her rise, through her marriage to Henri, to queenship. She admits to driving Henri out of her bed through her "brutal girlish mood-swings" and to amassing "wardrobes that dragged the exchequer to its knees.". She has no illusions about herself, her future, or the sanctity of her political position:

> I rock my nightmare son, and hear him cry
> for ball and sceptre; he asks the queen to die ...
> And so I press my lover's palm to mine;
> I am his vintage, and his living vine
> entangles me, and oozes mortal wine
> moment to moment. By repeated crime
> even a queen survives her little time.

At the end of this somewhat confused "apologia", she asks her dead husband's pardon for the fleshly pleasures that occupy her now and command all her attention. The tone throughout is cynical, worldly-wise, a little sad, full of witty touches. The poem seems to be a trenchant indictment of political leaders, a cynical exposé of the victory of

fleshly temptations over principles. It is quite Browningesque in subject matter and style, covering sordidness with persuasive rhetoric.

"A Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich" contains more violent and open criticism of government. The black soldier is a victim of forces that he does not comprehend, while the French queen cannot be said to be portrayed as a victim. The speaker is an ordinary G.I. who, like thousands of others, is a war casualty, a prisoner in a mental hospital, who gets into fights and takes his consolations when and where he can - in his meals, in his furtive rendezvous with a German nurse or attendant. The speaker's babblings reflect the disorder of the war-torn world beyond his confines but at the same time they reveal that he is fully aware of his plight. His violent outbreaks signal the misery and resentment he feels at being reduced to an animal existence. I disagree with Patrick Cosgrave who finds the poem "vulgar and undisciplined".[1] I think it is a little masterpiece of portraiture. Surely it is impossible not to feel sympathy at the closing lines:

> and fancy minnows, slaves of habit, shoot
> like starlight through their air-conditioned bowl.
> It's time for feeding. Each subnormal boot-
> black heart is pulsing to its ant-egg dole.

It may be melodramatic, but it eloquently conveys the poet's

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[1] Patrick Cosgrave, The Public Poetry of Robert Lowell, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1970, p. 141.

antiwar sentiments, and his concern for the senseless suffering of individuals in wartime. Yenser is correct to say that the speaker, "in his isolation, madness and tendency to violence, foreshadows the poet-speaker in later poems of Life Studies."[1] Mazzaro is equally correct in saying that the negro soldier is a "forceful and fully-drawn character - one of Lowell's most successful nightmarish monsters."[2]

The most memorable poems are in the last section of the book, itself entitled "Life Studies", in which Lowell writes about his immediate family and focusses on his own experiences as child, son and husband. However, these are used only as starting points as his poems manipulate, modify and finally transcend the facts. In contrast to poems of his previous volumes, these contain dates, names and places so definite that the poems take on a documentary quality. Most critics have pointed out the evidence of many new forces at work in this poetry - the influence of the Imagist poets such as W.C. Williams, for example, the free verse of Eliot, the prose of Flaubert and Chekhov, the naked horrors of personal crises poeticized in the work of "confessional" poets such as Snodgrass and Plath and Berryman, and the dependence on Proust-like visual effects reminiscent of

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[1] Yenser, op. cit., p. 129.

[2] Jerome Mazzaro, The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965, p. 95.

modern cinema-camera techniques. Tying all these together is Lowell's characteristic reliance on symbol and object to encapsulate meaning after the manner of the great French symbolist poets Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. The poem that best exemplifies all the new trends in Lowell's poetry together with continuing thematic motifs is "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow". It is a dramatic monologue, not an elegy as it purports, and it shows Lowell at his absolute best - a poet in supreme control of his material and art, an original poet who can take a poetic form previously used and varied by many other poets and make it uniquely his own. The heavy-handedness of his touch in earlier poems has disappeared forever.

The poem appears to be an elegy because it treats of disease, destruction and death yet it is not in the least bit mournful, especially not of the uncle doomed to a premature death at twenty-nine of Hodgkin's disease. Paradoxically, it is a happy poem, the most light-hearted and tender of the entire collection. In all of the poems of this section the poet speaks as himself, and he does so here, but his voice is a composite one - that of the young child and that of the remembering adult. This fusion of two perspectives is the first of Lowell's innovations in the dramatic monologue.

The poem begins with an anecdote that leads to a description of the setting. The farm and house are cold,

clammy, austere, but dignified and fascinating - a real paradise for a five and a half year old boy. Yet, because the adult Lowell is also viewing it (and thus judging it) it becomes a kind of wasteland, in spite of the space, the water, the places to play and hunt. The descriptions of his grandparents, parents, and aunts and uncles are not harsh; Lowell has selected their faults and eccentricities and made them absurd with gently mocking satire. The mockery is rendered mainly through his choice of a concrete object which functions as symbol, a technique of which the poet is by now a real master. The cuckoo clock, for instance, is "slung with strangled wooden game"; the farm is absurdly and pretentiously entitled "Char-de-Sa" in the Social Register; the chaise longue has "legs of shellacked saplings". To the child it is the place he would rather be than anywhere else - it is his grandfather's place and he makes it clear in many other poems as well that he much preferred the company of his grandfather to that of his father and mother. The adult poet's satire is always being tempered by the delight and love and awe that the child feels. Everything fascinates - the poplars, the roses, the coolness of the stone porch, the billiards-room overlooking the lake, the cabin by the waters, the sounds within and without, the colors. There is a wealth of descriptive detail that appeals to every sense. At the end of the fourth stanza in part one of the poem, as the speaker lovingly dwells

on teatime and grandfather's shandygaff, it is clear there is a strong sense of loss in the retrospective process. The nostalgic poet is looking backward to a part of his childhood in which he was loved and was happy. Thus is begun, in part one, the underlying pull between the past and present that continues throughout the poem in a delicate seesaw movement. This pull represents or points to the contrast between the comparative security and non-involvement of childhood and the strains of adult reality. The same tension (under slightly different circumstances) can be seen in dramatic monologues as different as Tennyson's "Ulysses" and Frost's "The Pauper Witch of Grafton". The poem also images the terrible contrast between illusion and reality in the picture of Aunt Sarah "thundering" on her dummy piano, or between appearance and reality, as shown in the situation of Uncle Devereux himself - outwardly smart in his immaculate blue and cream outfit but only a "gingersnap man" at the brink of death. Again, irony and satiric humour are possible because the speaker is both adult and child at the same time, and because the poet's attitude towards his family was always an ambivalent one. At this stage of his poetic career, using his own relatives and himself as subjects and symbols, he adopted a distinctively ironic stance, combining affection and mockery in his portraits. This is evident in his choice of descriptive adjectives, placed in antithesis:

Like my Grandfather, the decor

was manly, comfortable,
overbearing, disproportioned.

There are many proofs that the adult-child is terribly aware of death, that "everything in this poem is seen in terms of life and death"[1], for Lowell's choice of opposing symbols makes this very clear. Among the concrete objects thus used are the puppy gobbling toads, the stuffed toucan, the Greek statues, the "phoenix" figure of Aunt Sarah, Agrippina, and Nero. In fact all the characters represent a deadness-in-life, as they are shown to be absurd, superficial, spiritually and intellectually arid, trapped by their illusions and dreams.

The poem does not present events in a chronological linear sequence. Instead, the summer of 1922 is used as a starting place for the speaker's memory of things seen and heard at different times. For example, he reports the family gossip about Aunt Sarah's jilting an Astor, supposed to have taken place twenty years earlier, and he refers to Uncle Devereux's death, which had not yet taken place but would occur "come winter". He refers also to 1911, when his uncle had stopped growing at "just six feet" and to the last cruise Devereux took with his wife this particular summer.

The different moments that are captured throughout have the sharpness and clarity of photographs, but none of

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[1] Yenser, op. cit., p. 145.

their static quality. Lowell used the word "snapshot"[1] to describe his technique but it is more accurate to say that he has created scenes with certain symbolic contents and juxtaposed them so that they could interact with one another, as scenes do in a film. In this respect I believe he contributed another important innovation to the dramatic monologue. Each character has his scene or two, as in a family album: his parents drinking martinis and making "pipe-dreams" as they plan a trip; his grandfather disapproving of Devereux's "last honeymoon"; his grandmother needing a fourth at bridge; Great Aunt Sarah practising at Symphony Hall; and Uncle Devereux closing up the cabin for the winter knowing that he will never open it again. All these pathetic figures are part of the tableau of the poet's own history; he looks at them here with humor and love and sadness, while he himself remains the central, most important figure of all.

His looking backward includes a view of himself as a fledgling artist and a child knowing more than he should for his age. The most memorable image, repeated twice, is that of the passive child-artist absorbing with quiet joy all that is happening around him as well as the colors, shapes and textures of his surroundings. With sensuous pleasure the speaker mixes piles of black earth and white lime,

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[1] A. Alvarez, "Intimations of Mortality", The Observer Review, London, Sunday, March 5, 1978.

dreaming of sailing far away to unknown places, knowing, without putting his thought into words, that coming and going, life and death, past and present, are all part of the same circle of human existence.

The drama of the poem is provided by the "conflict of opposites" that Jarrell spoke of in his review of Lord Weary's Castle, a conflict that Lowell incorporates so often in his poems. In this poem heat and cold, passion and intellect, dullness and imagination, sensuality and coldness, fertility and barrenness - these all do their work and are unified by the consciousness of the child-adult speaker. The poem illustrates the truth of Jarrell's statement that Lowell's method "does not present themes or generalizations but a world".[1] It is the poet's own position in that world that interests him - he is at the centre of it but he has already begun to find his way out of it. The poem concludes with the image of the poet as a young boy mixing and shaping the elements. Thus the image of the young artist is elevated to something near divine. "The child who experienced the death and the adult artist are united",[2] writes Jay Martin, and this idea emerges as the major theme of the poem. Underneath the nostalgia is the

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[1] Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age, London: Faber and Faber, 1973, p. 195.

[2] Jay Martin, Robert Lowell, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970, p. 32.

adult Lowell's strong satisfaction of his art, for unlike Great Aunt Sarah, for one, he has become a real artist, a maker and shaper of experience and emotion and thought into his own music. It seems as though the poet is measuring himself against his own relatives and ancestors, as though the photo is used by him as a mirror, and as he contemplates his grandfather, aunts, uncles, and parents, he sees more and more of himself; he sees their strong individual bents and that their failures and absurdities are forerunners of his own.

The poem successfully fuses time present and past by its use of the double point of view already referred to, the same technique Lowell used in his prose reminiscence in the section "91 Revere Street". It is the child who remembers the small things and who watches without comprehending, but it is the adult who mocks and judges and arranges his memories into an artistic unity. It is remarkable how good the characterization is considering the brevity of the vignettes. It is as if Lowell had studied Chekhov (as we know he did) and had learnt from him how to capture the essence of a person with a few well-chosen but important details. He does not need to accumulate a great many facts around them in order to bring them to life; it is enough to show them in a characteristic action, to quote a snippet or two of conversation, and to show his own feelings towards them in so doing.

In spite of all this excellence the poem fails to keep a promise inherent in any dramatic monologue: to reveal the character of the speaker. The poet-child-adult is at the centre of the poem but he has no definite face or voice; he hides behind the others and submerges his personality in theirs. The "I", as Steven Axelrod points out, "remains relatively neutral and transparent, a camera eye".[1] Perhaps then, what seems a failure is after all another innovation. For a complete characterization of the poet-speaker (as well as the members of his family) we must consider all the poems of "Life Studies", as Lowell intended us to do. "My Last Afternoon" is not an isolated work but a key poem of the whole sequence in which Lowell transforms autobiography into myth.

Looking back over Life Studies for its stylistic dynamics, we can see that Lowell has made sophisticated use of the whole modern tradition of the poetic sequence. This tradition includes as its main representatives Song of Myself, Spoon River Anthology, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, and The Cantos, The Wasteland and Four Quartets, The Bridge, and Paterson.[2]

In the subsequent poems of the volume Lowell adds to the portraitures of his relatives and then goes on to recount

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[1] Axelrod, op. cit., p. 110.

[2] M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 60.

his own experiences during his imprisonment, while he was in hospital after a nervous breakdown and in a period when his marriage to Elizabeth Hardwick was ending. Many of these poems are monologues in which he himself is the speaker; the only exception is "To Speak of the Woe That Is In Marriage". In these poems there is much social criticism. They are structured around events, seldom giving a direct glimpse of the poet-speaker as an individual, ordinary suffering man until "Man and Wife", "To Speak of the Woe", and "Skunk Hour". In "Man and Wife" he thinks back to the time twelve years earlier when he met the young woman who is now his wife, in New York. All that he reveals about himself at that time is that he drank heavily, kept company with other intellectuals in Greenwich Village, and was painfully shy. The strongest impression that the poem conveys is his love for his wife, expressed through the phrases that describe her, and the sense that her love for him is not enough to keep him from entering "the kingdom of the mad" even though she has tried so hard. Near the end he says, meaningfully, "Now twelve years later, you turn your back." What Lowell is doing in this poem is contrasting past and present, his early romantic excesses of feeling -- "outdrank the Rahvs"; "fainting at your feet" -- and his present mental violence and instability -- "the rising sun in war paint dyes us red"; "blossoms on our magnolia ignite / the morning with their murderous white" -- that is destroying himself and his

marriage.

The poem begins by establishing the setting and indicating the psychological turmoil of both husband and wife in the word "tamed". The couple, full of tranquilizers but having had a bad night nevertheless, watch the sunrise one spring morning. The first seven lines describe the weariness of soul and the exacerbated sensitivity of the speaker. The clue to his condition is given in the next line, "All night I've held your hand." With the agonized cry, "Oh my Petite" the poet (silently) addresses his wife and thinks back to their first meeting. He contrasts her vivacity and boldness with his own lack of aggression. The pause or break between stanza one and two indicates a time span of twelve years. It is an ominous space, foretelling the failure of the marriage. The second stanza comes back to the present to say that his wife has given up. Unable to cope with the magnitude of his illness she is "like a child". The last three lines return to himself, showing him on the very edge of a complete breakdown.

Thus the poem is a narrative but an oddly telescoped one that traces the marriage severely damaged by the poet's recurring mental illnesses. It has the impersonality of a short story narrated in the third person, because there is little of the personality of either husband or wife in it; they are shown as victims of time and circumstance, not participants in a demanding relationship. Yet what informa-

tion we are given makes the poem extremely moving, autobiography notwithstanding, as the story concludes with the poet expressing his fear, his vision of impending madness, his helplessness to avoid it or to prevent his marriage from crumbling.

Like the other poems of the "Life Studies" section this one is written in free verse with lines of varying length. All of these poems are excellent examples of the perfect union of form and subject-matter. "Man and Wife" consists of one long and one very short stanza - the first indicating the past twelve years of the marriage, the second indicating the end of the relationship. The first stanza has rhyme at the ends of the lines in a rather flexible pattern, the second has only repeated sounds of "o" and alliteration of "l" words to emphasize the rolling movement of the darkness that is closing in. Lowell uses lines of different lengths to great effect, placing heavy emphasis in adjectives in the shortest:

> abandoned, almost Dionysian.
>
> its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye --
>
> too boiled and shy
>
> loving, rapid, merciless --

Short lines like these placed right after much longer ones tend to slow the movement and rhythm and make the reader pause on the words. Breaks in the poet's sentences, indicated by dashes, also serve to emphasize his unhappy, rather

disjointed thoughts:

> your old-fashioned tirade --
> loving, rapid, merciless --
> breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.

The final line is the culminating point of the poem; simple words, a simple but powerful image, they gather in to themselves, because of their placement, all the symbolic meaning and power the poet intended them to have, to sum up and convey the pain of his situation.

The complement to this poem is the sonnet-like "To Speak of the Woe That Is In Marriage", a lament uttered by a despairing wife. The poem began as a translation of a poem by Catullus, but developed into something else, although Lowell states that it "couldn't have been written without the Catullus".[1] The title comes from the prologue of the Wife of Bath's tale by Chaucer. The epigraph from Schopenhauer sets the tone of cynicism and defeat with which the brief narrative is imbued. The poem serves as a comment on, or an extension of, "Man and Wife". In both poems the subject under scrutiny is the marital state. While the figures in "Man and Wife" are two individuals who love one another yet who are drifting apart, there is not the least glimmer of love or concern, past or present, between the husband and wife of this poem. The husband seems indifferent, the wife is full of disgust and hate. They still have

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[1] Frederick Seidel, "An Interview with Robert Lowell" in London and Boyers, p. 280.

a sexual relationship - a brute physical need on the part of the husband and a degrading violation as far as the wife is concerned. In the first two lines the speaker reminds us that the experience of sex is supposed to be a beautiful one, as well as an important one.

Our magnolia blossoms. Life begins to happen.

After this haiku-like beginning, the poem tells how the marriage has gone completely sour, the husband resorting to drugs, liquor, and nightly searches for prostitutes, partly to escape the marital quarrels, as the speaker admits. There is a lightning-swift turnabout from the calm opening lines to the degradation and sordid reality of the speaker's present situation. The wife feels no sympathy for her husband. She calls him a "screwball"; nothing that he might do would surprise her. His craze for sex is the form his madness takes. Having learned to fear his drunken rages she takes precautions for her own life. It is an extreme situation, and the characters are in extreme psychological states. The bewilderment of the wife commands sympathy as she asks "What makes him tick?". She continues, nevertheless, to endure "the monotonous meanness of his lust", trapped by the marriage ties. In the final four lines she describes herself as a helpless victim imprisoned and abused by a mindless brute.

The poem is a remarkable tour de force. It is composed as a sonnet, the traditional form centuries-old for

the expression of love and devotion. Here it is used to convey the opposite emotions and forces - hate, fear, moral decay, the dissolution of willpower. Within the sonnet framework of fourteen end-rhymed lines the speaker describes her mate and her marriage in a sequence of bare, ugly facts, using the clichés and energetic slang of mid-twentieth century America: "hopped-up", "hits the streets", "free-lancing", "swaggering home", "screwball". Other phrases such as "the razor's edge", "whisky-blind", and "stalls above me like an elephant" convey her hatred and disillusionment while making him out to be sick, bestial and insensitive. Instead of pitying herself the speaker rages against the injustice of it. We do not learn anything about the characters of the pair, or about the causes of the husband's "madness". Instead, the poem presents a situation in order to give a visual image, as in scenes from a film, of a marriage that has degenerated into a trap. The last two lines of a sonnet (of a Shakespearean type) always provide a clear summation of the poet's thought to end the poem with a graceful flourish. Here the poet makes the last two lines a night-marish picture to serve as his final, devastating comment; to this climax of hate and mindlessness the other details of the poem have built up. There is almost no characterization in the poem, a fact that, together with the wife's curious passivity, underlines its being a comment upon marriage, a criticism of the institution of matrimony.

All the poems in Life Studies lead up to the final poem of the volume, in which Lowell dispensed with other characters except as scenery and put the focus on his own exposed suffering. "Skunk Hour" is a dramatic lyric poem, not a dramatic monologue, as the poet is the speaker, and talks of himself. The all-seeing, disillusioned eye which views the wreckage of the outside world and dares not look inward to the chaos within is that of Lowell at one of the most critical times of his life. The poem has an emotional, rather than an intellectual structure - another feature of the lyric rather than the dramatic mode. As the poet examines the various symbols of the scene which represent types of phoniness he feels unbearable pain that he, as a witness to the decay of society's traditional values, and the growth of materialism like a cancer, is so alone and apart, not knowing which direction to take, not knowing how he will survive a mental breakdown. The image of the skunk rooting through the garbage fuses the poet's own crisis with the search for new values and a true identity undertaken by so many American intellectuals of his time.

Lowell's subsequent volumes showed a continuing use of themes present in "Skunk Hour" in the lyric mode. There is a conspicuous absence of the dramatic monologue in the treatment of character, or in the using of characters to carry his themes. Having passed through the stage in which he sought for greater impersonality in his poetry by using

personae, he wrote poems in which he himself, like all Romantic poets, was the subject. So often in Lowell's poems there are echoes of an English poet who wrote, a couple of centuries earlier,

> I am the self-consumer of my woes;
> They rise and vanish, an oblivious host,
> Shadows of life, whose very soul is lost.
> And yet I am, -- I live, -- though I am tossed
>
> Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
> Into the living sea of waking dream,
> Where there is neither sense of life, nor joys,
> But the huge shipwreck of my own esteem
> And all that's dear. Even those I loved the best
> Are strange, nay, they are stranger than the rest.

The poet was John Clare, who lived from 1793 to 1864 and who died in an asylum.

IV. CONCLUSION

Lowell's career went through many phases, but his work retained its autobiographical base from beginning to end. His search for a personal poetic style went hand in hand with a growing realization that the poems in which his autobiography was brought out into the open, were his strongest and most compelling poems. Critics can now see this even in his early work. Hayden Carruth says his autobiographical or partly autobiographical poems such as "Mary Winslow" and "At the Indian Killer's Grave" are more interesting than the Edwards poems (and other dramatic monologues); "in spite of the high gloss of artifice that remains upon them, they speak with urgency",[1] he claims. But the dramatic monologue represents a valuable testing-ground for Lowell. He began by writing monologues with fictitious speakers, imagined or real, but used them to express his own feelings and views. He knew that the form could be used not only to portray individuals but to dramatize aspects of his own self. In spite of the wide range of his personae, and the great inventiveness that Lowell displayed in portraying them, it must be conceded that they all sound, as Randall Jarrell said, like Robert Lowell. This is their major weak-

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[1] Hayden Carruth, "A Meaning of Robert Lowell" in London and Boyers, p. 231.

ness as dramatic monologues but they are fine poems nonetheless, and the characters are all vivid creations. The great difference between Frost and Lowell's monologues, apart from their differences in style, is that Frost projected himself imaginatively into the souls of his characters while Lowell actually experienced the anguish and rage of his personae. Thus Lowell could not remove himself from his poem to the extent that Frost, Browning or Chaucer could. As his work developed Lowell stopped using personae and adopted the "I" of autobiography although he had avoided it at first when he sought, like other writers of dramatic monologues, to distance himself from his poetry. When he realized that it was not distance that he wanted but immediacy and complete frankness, he discovered his true style, and wrote in the voice that is candid, self-conscious and ironic, the voice of the final section of Life Studies and all poems thereafter. In short, he moved from concentrating on character to a concentration upon himself and his private griefs as the most important source of his material. It is my belief that the necessary studying and thinking that went into the making of his characters gave him valuable insights and increased his self-awareness, and helped him to put his bitter criticisms of his family, his society and his age into perspective.

> But the ease of language was only the outer sign of Lowell's new attitude towards his own nature. Without losing the tone of fascinated disgust, he now found it

> possible not only to treat himself as part of history but to treat history as part of himself. The course of his life became the analogue of the life of his era; the suffering of the poet became a mirror of the sufferings of whole classes and nations.[1]

Perhaps the most important way in which the dramatic monologue proved valuable for Lowell was in helping him to loosen his style. From the taut, formal pattern of "The Drunken Fisherman" to the rhyming couplets of "The Mills of the Kavanaghs" and the free verse lines of "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" the poet moved a great distance from his early formalism to the kind of varying lines and relaxed rhythms that Eliot, Pound and Williams had always used. While composing his dramatic monologues Lowell must have become aware of the desirability (Frost, Eliot, Williams and Pound had always been aware of it) of writing lines that were as close to real conversation as he could get them. Lowell spoke of his desire to achieve the directness and unpretentiousness of good prose. One has only to study the poems of the last section of Life Studies, especially the skillfully managed modulations of "My Last Afternoon", to see how successfully he achieved his artistic goals.

In his essay "The Three Voices of Poetry" T.S. Eliot said:

> I risk the generalization, which may indeed be far too sweeping, that dramatic monologue cannot create a

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[1] Irvin Ehrenpreis, "The Age of Lowell" in London and Boyers, p. 174.

> character. For character is created and made real only in an action, a communication between imaginary people... When we listen to a play by Shakespeare, we listen not to Shakespeare but to his characters; when we read a dramatic monologue by Browning we cannot suppose that we are listening to any other voice than that of Browning himself.[1]

Therein lies the difference between the drama and the dramatic monologue, that provides a clue to the proper understanding of both: in the former the creator is absent, in the latter the creator is absent too, as a ghost may be said to be absent from the body it once inhabited, and only the voice is left, speaking through a fictitious body. But it does not much matter, so long as the reader does not feel he is being addressed by mouthpieces, so long as he can believe that the persona is an authentic representative of the poet's concerns and has enough life in him to arouse interest and sympathy. In this thesis I have tried to show that Frost and Lowell achieved this much and more in their dramatic monologues, and were able, by quite different means, to make a somewhat old-fashioned genre into a viable contemporary form.

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[1] T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets, London: Faber and Faber, 1957, p. 96.

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