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Primary Concerns in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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1967

PRIMARY CONCERNS IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

By

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B. A., Western Kentucky University

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Graduate School of
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PREFACE

My interest in the works of Robert Frost was first aroused some time ago when I read "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The rather elusive meaning of this poem prompted an investigation on my part into the themes of Frost; however, I discovered that while much has been written about Frost and his work, very little has been said about his important themes. It seems that the majority of articles and books that have been published have either had a biographical bent, or have been attempts to support certain theses about Frost's poetry, such as its regionalism, its humanism, its traditionalism, and the like. The few studies that have attempted to deal explicitly with Frost's thematic concerns apparently have been based on somewhat personal decisions regarding their importance and significance. No one, it seems, has categorized the themes in an effort to determine precisely what they are, which poems contain them, and what is their numerical distribution. Such an undertaking would reveal not only Frost's primary concerns, but also give a more accurate basis for analysis of his meaning in any given poem.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to classify the poems' themes and to reveal frequency patterns, thereby disclosing Frost's heaviest interests. The study is limited to an analysis of the poems contained in the Complete Poems,

which includes most of his poetry. The Masque of Reason and The Masque of Mercy, appearing at the end of the Complete Poems, are not included in the study because they are allegorical poem-plays of the Job and Jonah stories respectively. While the study is confined primarily to an interpretation of the poems themselves, important critical studies relating to the themes are included.

I would like to express my thanks to the members of my committee, Dr. Mary W. Clarke and Dr. Willson E. Wood, for their assistance and interest, and especially to my director, Dr. William E. McMahon, for his patience and many helpful suggestions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Robert Lee Frost once wrote that his epitaph should state he had "a lover's quarrel with the world." But the world was apparently unaware of the dispute, for by the time of his death, as Philip Gerber points out, Frost had received more honors than any other author in the world, failing only to receive the Nobel Prize.¹ In addition to innumerable literary awards and honorary academic degrees,² Frost had received four Pulitzer Prizes (more than any other poet).³ Moreover, he had been honored by a Resolution of the United States Senate on his 75th birthday (actually his 76th--he was born in 1874) for his contribution to America and its literature;⁴ he had been appointed Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress;⁵ and he had been the first literary figure in the history of the United States asked to participate in the

¹Philip L. Gerber, Robert Frost (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 35.

²A comprehensive list is given in Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964), p. 623.

³Malcolm Cowley, "The Case Against Mr. Frost," Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 36.

⁴Gerber, p. 43.

⁵Ibid., p. 44.

inauguration of a president.¹ As Gerber says, he started out to "lodge a few poems where they might endure," and ended as an American symbol.²

Although Frost became a veritable national institution in his lifetime, recognition of his work did not come early. As he says in one of his letters to Louis Untermeyer, he read his first poem at fifteen, wrote his first poem at sixteen, and wrote his first published verse, "My Butterfly," at the age of eighteen.³ This verse was published in The Independent in 1894, and Frost was so elated that he had his first book of poems, Twilight, privately printed at his own expense. The edition of this volume, containing five poems, consisted of two copies, one for his fiancée, Elinor White, and one for himself.⁴ In spite of the fact that during the next fifteen years or so several of his poems, and some prose works, were accepted for publication,⁵ his work did not receive much attention.⁶ Consequently, he became discouraged, and in 1912 moved his family to England, where he intended to devote himself exclusively to writing. On impulse one day he took a manuscript of his verses to a British publisher, who accepted it.⁷

¹Gerber, p. 47.

²Ibid., Preface.

³Selected Letters . . . , p. 223.

⁴Ibid., p. 1.

⁵Ibid., pp. li-liii.

⁶Gerber, p. 26.

⁷Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 98.

A Boy's Will came out in England in 1913 and North of Boston in 1914,¹ both of which were reviewed favorably.² Because of the war, the Frosts returned to America in 1915. North of Boston, coming out in an American edition at this time, received immediate acclaim by the critics and made Frost famous almost instantly.³

A Boy's Will, published in America in 1915, was followed by Mountain Interval in 1916. New Hampshire, for which Frost received his first Pulitzer Prize, came out in 1924, and West-Running Brook in 1928. In 1936, A Further Range was published, and in 1942, A Witness Tree, for which books Frost was awarded his third and fourth Pulitzer Prize (the second Pulitzer Prize was for the Collected Poems of 1930). A Masque of Reason appeared in 1945, followed by Steeple Bush and A Masque of Mercy in 1947; in 1962, his last work, In the Clearing, made its appearance.⁴

Since the publication of A Boy's Will in 1913, many articles and books have been written about Frost and his work. Although some of the material is either purely or partially biographical,⁵ the criticism itself is greatly diversified,

¹Thompson, Selected Letters . . . , p. liv.

²Gerber, pp. 28-29.

³Ibid., pp. 29-30.

⁴Thompson, Selected Letters . . . , pp. lv-lxiv.

⁵See, for example, Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost (New York: New York University Press, 1957); Miss Sergeant's The Trial by Existence; Thompson's Selected Letters . . . ; and Gorham Munson, "The Classicism of Robert Frost," Modern Age, VIII, (Summer, 1964), pp. 291-305.

covering such elements as Frost's technique, style,¹ subject matter, and attitudes, and ranging from attempts to classify him in a tradition to efforts at evaluating his art. Most of this criticism pertains to Frost's thematic concerns in a very general way only. The few studies which specifically deal with the themes attach equal significance to those included in the discussion, and appear to be based on the individual author's decision as to their importance. It would seem that in order to reach any conclusions about an author's work, it would be helpful to know his precise range of interests and his primary concerns as revealed by a list of his themes and a count of their numerical occurrence.

This, then, is the purpose of this study: to show what some of the main critics have said about Frost's work; to present the themes by frequency of occurrence; to show broad areas of interests and thematic meanings related to them; and to draw possible conclusions from the investigation. The study is based on themes obtained from a careful analysis of each poem contained in the Complete Poems, with the exception of A Masque of Reason and A Masque of Mercy.² Although at

¹Lawrance Thompson, for instance, has an excellent discussion of Frost's theory of poetry and use of metaphor in his book Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1961); Reuben A. Brower explains Frost's style in Chapters I and II in his book The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963); and Robert S. Newdick, "Robert Frost and the Sound of Sense," American Literature, IX (November, 1937), pp. 289-300 discusses Frost's use of tones of voice in his poetry.

²The volume which is the basis for this study is Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1949).

least one theme is assigned to each poem, the longer poems frequently contain several ideas. Consequently, some of the poems appear under several headings, and the number of themes listed in the tables do not coincide exactly with the number of verses in the Complete Poems. When possible, the themes are stated so as to reveal Frost's attitudes towards the central ideas; however, this is not always possible because of Frost's ambiguity and ambivalence. In addition, some of the poems reveal attitudes towards a subject rather than ideas themselves, and these are so classified in the tables.

The term "theme" is used to refer, generally, to the main idea contained in the poem and, if possible, Frost's attitude towards it. This is in keeping with the critical tradition which sees theme, central idea, attitude, and meaning as more or less synonymous terms. To treat theme in this fashion is countenanced, for instance, by one of the most respected scholarly handbooks, in which theme is defined as "the central or dominating idea in a literary work."¹ The term "topic" is used in this study to refer to a broad category of subject matter to differentiate it from specific themes.

¹William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature (Rev.; New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 486.

CHAPTER II

A SAMPLING OF FROST CRITICISM

One of the earliest important critics of Frost's work is Amy Lowell, who praises Frost for "portraying the New England that he sees,"¹ but who deplores the fact that his vision is limited to portraying the hills and people of a decadent New England.² Another early writer, Percy Boynton, finds Frost unconcerned with the every-day world and even a philosophy of life, interested more in understanding between people. North of Boston and Mountain Interval, Boynton claims, are about "men and women in the presence of nature," and "men and women in their relation to each other."³ The criticism of these two writers, however, is based only on Frost's first three volumes, and, as a result, is limited in its view of Frost's work. It also appears to be limited to rather superficial observations.

Writing several years later, after the publication of two more volumes, Gorham Munson asserts that Frost is a

¹Amy Lowell, "Robert Frost," Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 126.

²Ibid., p. 135.

³Percy H. Boynton, "American Authors of Today: Robert Frost," English Journal, XI (October, 1922), 460-62.

classicist--a humanist--because he sees a line between man and nature, and insists on "the dignity of man," finding man better than nature but less than God.¹ McBride Dabbs, on the other hand, states he does not entirely agree with Munson that Frost is more concerned with man. According to Dabbs, Frost is interested in nature, which, while threatening to destroy man, also exists as a challenge to him.² Frost, on a personal basis, Dabbs notes, is somewhat Romantic, finding the "dark woods" (nature) fascinating, and perhaps frightening even, but resisting its lure and remaining in the world of man.³ Although neither of these authors is explicit, it seems they find Frost's main thematic concerns, in general, to be about the dignity of man and man's relationship to nature and society. While both point out the line between man and nature in Frost's poetry, only Dabbs hints at any darker meanings in the poems.

Perhaps one of the best known of the early books on Robert Frost is a collection of critical essays entitled Recognition of Robert Frost.⁴ However, as Bernard De Voto states, this is not too useful as a critical work because it is primarily a "miscellany of opinion."⁵ De Voto's own idea

¹Gorham Munson, "Robert Frost and the Humanistic Temper," Bookman, LXXI (July, 1930), 420.

²J. McBride Dabbs, "Robert Frost and the Dark Woods," Yale Review, XXIII (March, 1934), 516.

³Ibid., pp. 518-20.

⁴Recognition of Robert Frost, ed. Richard Thornton (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1937).

⁵Bernard De Voto, "The Critics and Robert Frost," Saturday Review of Literature, January 1, 1938, pp. 4-5.

is that Frost's work emphasizes the worth of human life.¹

In his 1941 article, H. H. Waggoner proclaims that Frost reveals his doubts about the "limitations of human knowledge--and of scientific knowledge in particular," but instead of being pessimistic, he shows his belief in moral ideals and man's intelligence.² Although Frost is disappointed with the darker elements of life--impersonal nature and death and fate--Waggoner says,³ Frost maintains man's mind can overcome these obstacles.⁴ Frost believes, Waggoner argues, that "man is man" (not a lower form of life), that there are moral values, and that man is not necessarily in an "alien universe," for he has the ability to control his environment.⁵ In spite of the fact that Waggoner perceptively points out the bleaker elements in the poetry as well as Frost's doubts about the limitations of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, it appears, perhaps, that he over-stresses the optimism in Frost. George Whicher, like Waggoner, finds Frost similar to Emerson in his "conception of human wholeness." Whicher thinks Frost walks between extremes--woods and stars--rejecting them (nature and heaven) for the "normal human position."⁶ Neither

¹Ibid., p. 15

²Hyatt Howe Waggoner, "The Humanistic Idealism of Robert Frost," American Literature, XIII (November, 1941), 216-17.

³Ibid., p. 212.

⁴Ibid., p. 217.

⁵Ibid., p. 223.

⁶George F. Whicher, "Out for Stars," Atlantic Monthly CLXXI (May, 1943), 67.

of these articles deals specifically with total thematic intentions, but only with Frost's attitudes and positions on certain subjects.

In his discussion of the Complete Poems, Rolfe Humphries points out that Frost is familiar with the "night side of nature and life," but deplures the fact that Frost does not go more often into "areas of violence, madness, murder, rape, and incest,"¹ while Peter Viereck asserts that Frost's poetry shows he is among those who have "not only stared into the abyss but have outstared it."² Even though these two articles do not mention themes per se, their generalizations do show awareness of the darker elements in Frost's poems.

The more recent critical articles also show great diversity with regard to Frost's work and reticency about mentioning themes explicitly. James Hepburn, in commenting on "the dark woods," states there is a difference between mood and meaning in Frost's poetry, and, as a consequence, he says, it is difficult to determine Frost's precise meaning.³ This is a point well taken. According to W. H. Auden, Frost's nature is hostile to man, requiring courage of him;⁴ moreover,

¹Rolfe Humphries, "Verse Chronicle," The Nation, July 23, 1941, p. 93.

²Peter Viereck, "Parnassus Divided," Atlantic Monthly CLXXVII (October, 1949), 68.

³James G. Hepburn, "Robert Frost and His Critics," New England Quarterly, XXXV (September, 1962), 373.

⁴W. H. Auden, "Robert Frost," The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 347.

Auden adds, Frost believes in stoicism and independence.¹ Alfred Kazin, too, notes Frost's "bleak and stoical outlook," and comments that Frost's themes are not about poetry or making the "world safe for poetry," but about the human situation and the strength needed to live.² Harold Watts also says Frost's themes are concerned with tensions between isolated couples on decadent farms and with the preservation of human dignity.³ While Munson, in his more recent article, once again emphasizes that Frost is a classicist because he stresses the worth of man,⁴ John Nims classifies Frost as a classicist because he reveals a "tragic view of life."⁵ John Ciardi, too, feels the poems are from "life at a depth into which we cannot look unshaken."⁶ From this it can be seen that many of the critics are beginning to stress the grimmer elements in Frost's poetry. Yvor Winters, on the other hand, argues that Frost is a "poet of the minor theme," because he evades setting up examples of what people should be--which, to Winters, is the purpose of literature.⁷ Like

¹ Ibid., p. 352.

² Alfred Kazin, "The Strength of Robert Frost," Commentary, XXXVIII (December, 1964), 50.

³ Harold H. Watts, "Robert Frost and the Interrupted Dialogue," American Literature, XXVII (March, 1955), 80.

⁴ Munson, Modern Age, VIII (Summer, 1964), 296.

⁵ John Frederick Nims, "The Classicism of Robert Frost," Saturday Review, February 23, 1963, p. 22.

⁶ John Ciardi, "Robert Frost: American Bard," Saturday Review, March 24, 1962, p. 16.

⁷ Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost: or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet," Sewanee Review, LVI (October, 1948), 564-66.

the preceding articles on Frost, most of these are more or less generalizations of Frost's attitudes or beliefs, and the arguments do not arise from an objective discrimination of the patterns of thought in all of the poems.

In his recent book, John Lynen attempts to get at Frost's meaning in the poems by analyzing them from the standpoint of the pastoral mode. Lynen claims that while Frost's ideas lie at the surface of the poems, the deeper significance can only be derived by paying attention to the form of the verses.¹ Although Lynen does point out the "contrast between man and nature is the central theme of Frost's nature poetry,"² the study is limited to those poems which he believes are in the pastoral mode.³ Lynen concludes that Frost is a modern poet because he deals with the "uncertainty and painful sense of loss" of the twentieth century.⁴

George Nitchie, in his study, attempts to judge the "ethical and philosophical convictions" in Frost's work.⁵ According to Nitchie, Frost's main theme is that of making choices,² but he himself could never choose "his own conviction

¹John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. viii-ix.

²Ibid., p. 145.

³Ibid., p. 7.

⁴Ibid., p. 181.

⁵George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1960), p. viii.

⁶Ibid., p. 158.

about the world he inhabits,"¹ and the result is that he never developed "sustaining themes, themes with a tragic potential."² Nitchie makes the point that the duality and ambiguity which critics find in Frost, and which makes it possible for anyone to "select his own Frost from the variety of the Complete Poems,"³ is due to Frost's "basic philosophical indecision."⁴ The point about the difficulty of determining Frost's position is well taken.

The stated purpose of Brower's book is to "bring out some 'constellations of intention' of both form and meaning in Frost's work,"⁵ and although his study does not discuss thematic ideas explicitly, they are at times implied when Brower shows Frost's attitudes towards nature, his metaphysical thoughts, and his treatment of love.⁶ While Brower's study is concerned with several aspects of Frost's poems, it does take up some of Frost's primary interests. However, these are not specifically stated as such, and appear to be chosen at the discretion of the author.

In a section of his book, "Attitude Towards Life,"

¹ Ibid., p. 187.

² Ibid., p. 218.

³ Ibid., p. 168.

⁴ Ibid., p. 184.

⁵ Brower, p. viii.

⁶ See, for example, Brower's chapter "Design of Darkness," pp. 102-129; the chapter called "For Once, Then, Something," pp. 130-51; and the section entitled "The Renewing of Love," pp. 180-97.

Thompson has attempted to delineate certain of Frost's themes that would reveal Frost's beliefs. While admitting that it is difficult to ascertain an artist's attitude from single poems, Thompson points out that from a large body of the poet's work, certain concepts can be obtained which will show the author's viewpoint. Thompson then discusses Frost's religious "Skepticism," and the theme of "Love," which Thompson claims is basic to all Frost's work; Frost's "Response to Systematic Thought," which he rejects; the theme of "resourcefulness and doing," which makes "The Individual Life" understandable and worthwhile; "The Individual and Society," which shows Frost's dislike of self-pity and "sentimental humanitarianism"; and "Witness Tree and Real-Estate," concerning property and man's relationship to it.¹ This is an excellent discussion of Frost and his work; however, Thompson leaves out some very important aspects of Frost's concerns--nature in its various roles.

Radcliffe Squires classifies the themes from his recent study into six general divisions: "Weather: Inner and Outer," "The Poet as Naturalist," "Heaven and Earth," "The Literate Farmer," "Thanks to the Human Heart," and "West-Running Brook." According to Squires, these reveal Frost's attempts to synthesize the discrepancy between inner and outer nature, the permanence and transience of nature, and truth learned through intuition and truth obtained by reason.²

¹Thompson, Fire and Ice, pp. 177-232.

²Radcliffe Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1963), pp. 25, 41, and 53.

The themes also show Frost's attempts to reach his fellow man through work and through thought, Squires says, while retaining his independence.¹ And regarding communication, Squires adds, Frost prefers to leave this to chance.² However, Squires notes, Frost does have a vision of evil separating things,³ but this is only subtly revealed in a few poems, giving them a "purified seriousness."⁴ In "West-Running Brook," Squires points out, Frost stresses the permanence of God to offset relativistic concepts obtained from nature.⁵ Although the title of this study leads one to believe it is a discussion of Frost's major themes, the book actually is concerned with "those aspects of Frost's work which will always make it valuable."⁶ Squires has therefore chosen those ideas from the poems which support his special purpose and has made no effort to attach any significance to the number of times various themes have occurred.

In his recent book on Frost, Gerber devotes a chapter to a discussion of Frost's themes, which he divides into fifteen categories: "The Trial by Existence" (man's education by nature); "Finalities Besides the Grave" (man's acceptance or resistance of the inevitable); "Together and Apart," (man's brotherhood and separateness); "Storm Fear" (man's fear of

¹Ibid., p. 68.

²Ibid., p. 76.

³Ibid., p. 84.

⁴Ibid., p. 85.

⁵Ibid., pp. 92-107.

⁶Ibid., Preface.

isolation); "Set the Wall between Us" (man's need of friendship); "Our Hold on the Planet" (nature's harshness and mildness); "There Are Roughly Zones" (man's knowledge of boundaries); "Temples in the Woods," (man's friendship and enmity with nature); "Man the Preserver" (man's care of nature); "Man the Destroyer" (man's destruction of nature); "God Speaks at the End" (Frost's questions about the next world); "Out for Stars" (man's faith in stars); "Dust of Snow" (snow's resemblance to stars); "Spring Pools" (water's similarity to stars); "The Enormous Outer Black" (man's threat from the cosmos).¹ This is an extremely interesting and comprehensible book on Frost; however, the chapter devoted to a discussion of the themes is somewhat limited. Moreover, it gives no indication of the themes or topics which interested Frost most, for some of the themes are only shown in one or two poems, according to Gerber.

Doyle, in a different fashion, divides the poems into twelve categories revelatory of Frost's ideas and attitudes, which, while not themes per se, are closely interwoven with them because themes reveal not only ideas, but attitudes. His labels are as follows: "Love of Earth," "Contrasts and Contradictions," "Refusal to Give Absolute Answers," "Good Neighborliness," "Concern for the Sorrows of Others," "Ready to Make a Courageous Attack upon Adversity," "Best Good Self-Inspired," "Admiration for Courage to Walk Alone," "'The Trial by Market'," "Accomplishment the Goal of Life," "Life Lived

¹Gerber, pp. 138-170.

at the Meeting Point of Powerful Forces," and "Reason and Mercy."¹ As in the other studies, the categories are treated equally even though some relate to a relatively small number of the verses. Moreover, there seems to be little relation shown between the various categories, and no definite conclusions drawn.

In her article on Frost, Marion Montgomery calls attention to a basic theme in Frost: the use of barriers-- between man and nature, between man and God, and between man and man.² While her conclusions seem to be valid, they do not take into consideration any of Frost's other themes, such as love, which form an important part of his work.

Most of the critics have illuminated important aspects of Frost's basic ideas. Earlier critics, not having access to all the poems, were perhaps less discriminating in their judgments. The later critics are inclined to see more of the dark parts in the poetry, and there are signs of a growing effort to estimate Frost objectively and completely as a unique artist, not as a famous American.

¹John Robert Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., Inc., 1962), pp. 201-250.

²Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature toward God," A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox, pp. 138-150.

CHAPTER III

CLASSIFICATION OF THE POEMS BY THEMES AND TOPICS

In comparison with many modern poets, the work of Robert Frost, at first reading, seems relatively simple and straightforward--the words are familiar and the meanings appear obvious. However, this is not necessarily true, for Frost once made two statements which must be borne in mind when any effort is made to interpret his work. When speaking of poetry at one time, Frost said, "There are many things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another" ¹ Moreover, in writing to Sidney Cox, Frost remarked, "I have written to keep the curious out of the secret places of my mind both in my verses and in my letters." ² These two statements must therefore be taken into consideration when attempting to analyze the poems and draw conclusions from them.

Table 1 gives a list of the themes (central ideas) as derived from an analysis of each individual poem in the Complete Poems (excluding A Masque of Reason and A Masque of

¹Selected Prose of Robert Frost, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 24.

²Selected Letters . . . , p. 385.

Mercy). A few of the poems, however, are either lyrics (such as some love and nature lyrics) and reveal no precise theme, or else emphasize attitudes, and they are so shown on the table. The themes are also stated as precisely as possible so as to show Frost's range of interests. Table 1 also gives a numerical count of the themes as they occur in the poems.

Since many of the themes in Table 1, however, deal with the same general area (the diverse themes on nature, for example), these themes have been grouped together under broad categories ("topics"), when feasible, in order to show the areas of Frost's major concerns and to permit more intelligible discussion of thematic meaning. Table 2 gives a list of the topics and the number of themes that occur under each.

TABLE 1
LIST OF THEMES BY NUMERICAL OCCURRENCE

	Number of times used
The uncertainty of attaining metaphysical truth	30
Nature lyrics (nature and man as friends)	19
Love lyrics	14
Nature as a malevolent force	13
Barriers between men	12
Nature and man in separate zones	9
The desire to escape	9
A gulf between male and female	9

TABLE 1--Continued

	Number of times used
Fear of night	7
Political attitudes	7
Mortality of man	7
Anti-scientific attitudes	6
The difficulty of improving mankind	6
The grimness of human existence in general	6
Suspicion of set plans	6
The special grimness of a woman's life	6
Anti-A-bomb attitudes	5
Celebration of labor	5
The limitations of scientific knowledge	5
The insignificance of man	5
Man and God in separate zones	5
The impermanence of beauty	5
Making choices	5
Poetry as art	4
What to make of a diminished life	4
The frustrations of modern man	3
The trial at the market place	3
Love of country	3
A bond between men	3
His love of life	3
Doing good	3
Man's aloneness in the universe	3

TABLE 1--Continued

	Number of times used
Man's duty to man	3
Facing reality	3
The continuity of life in nature	3
Overcoming nature's challenge	3
Man as a caretaker of nature	3
The isolation of the artist from society	3
The physical nature of love	3
The need to get out of the present	3
Acceptance of death	3
Fear of an empty house	3
The boundaries of man's realm	3
Religion, man, and greed as the causes of war	3
The horror of war	2
The permanence of heaven and the chaos on earth	2
The acquisition of religious faith	2
The satisfaction of walking in the woods	2
Man as a destroyer of nature	2
Man as a destroyer of nature	2
Obtaining perspective	2
Love as more important than mind	2
The fatal consequences of false pride	2
The use of symbols	2
The unimportance of news	2
Regeneration	2

TABLE 1--Continued

	Number of times used
The contrast between youth and age	2
The need for meditation	2
A concern for "darker" things	2
The barrenness of New England soil	2
The sin of nature worship	2
Nature as a giver	2
Wisdom as desirable in literature	2
Rejection of regionalism	2
Ideal love	2
The ideals of the past as touchstones	2
Inability of the living to understand death	2
Fear of man	2
Fear of the unknown	2
Fear of death	2
Acknowledging limits	2

Themes that occur only once

The indifference of heaven
 The loss of spiritual values
 The need for faith
 Man's need of "higher" things
 Religious hope
 Why Christ was sent
 Speaking to God
 Over-specialization in work
 Nature's attempt to foil man
 Definition of nature
 Man's attempt to tame nature
 The poetic imagination
 The link between poet and reader
 Lack of appreciation for old poetry

TABLE 1--Continued

Immortality from poetry
 The writing of poetry
 Welcoming all poetry
 The pain of love
 The passion of love
 Woe as a part of love
 Provision for retreat from society
 No need for society
 Preference for the country
 Society's limitations
 Man's debt to the past
 Nature's victory over death
 Fear of trees
 No desire to know the future
 The bleak outlook for man
 Irrational hatred between races
 The superiority of man to monkeys
 Sweetness brought to the world by women
 Anti-Asiatic attitude
 Anti-systematic philosophy
 Devotion
 The humane qualities of man
 The ideal woman
 The idealism of youth
 Immigration
 Man's need to prove himself
 The inadequacy of words
 Providing for the future
 The question of making things too perfect
 Rebellion against reason
 The strength of man's mind
 The power of vindictiveness
 The wisdom of going backward
 The eternity of war
 The unholiness of war
 The waste of war
 The senselessness of killing

TABLE 2

LIST OF GENERAL TOPICS SHOWING NUMBER
 OF TIMES RELATED THEMES FROM TABLE 1
 OCCUR UNDER EACH TOPIC^a

General Topic	Frequency of Occurrence of Related Themes
Nature	64
Metaphysics in general	60

TABLE 2--Continued

General Topic	Frequency of Occurrence of Related Themes
The grimness of human existence	60
Demarcation lines	27
Aspects of love	22
Some positive human values	20
Art and Literature	19
The limitations of science	17
Modern life and society	16
Politics	7
Suspicion of set plans	6
The past	6
Making choices	5

^aThe themes from Table 1 that occur less than five times and relate to none of the general topics above are not included in Table 2, since this study is primarily interested in Frost's major concerns. As a result, some of the more important poems may not be discussed in the following chapter because their central ideas may have occurred too infrequently.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION OF THEMATIC MEANING IN THE POEMS

In order to arrive at any intelligible conclusions about Frost's primary interests, it is important to discuss the meanings and relationships of the themes as derived from the poems. The topics in Table 2 offer a convenient way to approach such a discussion.

NATURE

The largest single category of poems about nature are those which include many of Frost's early lyrics. The poems in this group, which show man and nature on amicable terms, include: "To the Thawing Wind," "Rose Pogonias," "The Last Word of a Bluebird," "Blue-Butterfly Days," "My Butterfly," "October," "In a Vale," "The Last Mowing," "Dust of Snow," "The Valley's Singing Day," "A Hillside Thaw," "Our Singing Strength," "Atmosphere," "Clear and Colder," "A Nature Note," "A Young Birch," and "Two Leading Lights." Somewhat representative of this group is "Rose Pogonias":

There we bowed us in the burning,
As the sun's right worship is,
To pick where none could miss them
A thousand orchises.

In most of these poems, the author is on a friendly basis with nature--the birds, the flowers, the butterflies, birch and fruit trees, and the sun and moon. Apparent, at

times, however, is his sadness at the approach of winter, as in "Now Close the Window" and "My November Guest."¹

In two poems, nature is seen as sharing her bounty with man: "Blueberries," in which the Loren family live off what nature offers, and "The Gum-Gatherer," who makes his living casually gathering gum from trees. And the theme of man as caretaker of nature appears in three poems: "Pea Brush," "The Exposed Nest," and "Good-bye and Keep Cold," in each of which man is specifically concerned with taking care of natural objects.²

Although the life cycle in nature is the specific concern in only three poems, "In Hardwood Groves," "The Woodpile," and "The Onset," it is implied in many of the nature poems through the cycle of the seasons, such as in "A Hillside Thaw," "The Last Word of a Bluebird," and "October." Closely related to this is the theme of the impermanence of beauty, which is also implied in the nature poems, but is explicitly brought out in "A Prayer in Spring," "Nothing Gold Can Stay," "Spring Pools," "October," and "My Butterfly." Since both of these concepts involve death, they should be considered in conjunction with other themes involving death.

¹For other poems in which nature and man are on friendly terms, see, for example, "Mowing," "A Mood Apart," and "Birches." Nature, in these poems, is generally confined to flowers, hay stacks, birds, or trees like birch or apple.

²According to Gerber, Frost shows an almost religious attitude in the poems dealing with the "preservation of clear running water, emblematic of the life-gift of the natural world." He says they celebrate "growth along the margin of pond and stream" (pp. 159-161). It appears that Gerber is right in noting the spiritual overtones in connection with water; only a few poems, however, are concerned with revitalization of nature by water.

In contrast to the amiable nature poems, Frost also depicts nature as operating in an area distinct from man. For instance, in "The Mountain" the town is confined to the base of it and is kept from getting any larger because of "that thing" which "takes all the room." In "Two Look at Two," the theme is even more obvious, for the wall between the human couple and the buck and doe is a man-made wall. "The Birthplace" shows how nature might tolerate man for a short time, but then:

The mountain pushed us off her knees.
And now her lap is full of trees.

"There are Roughly Zones," "To a Moth Seen in Winter," "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things," and "The Most of It" all express Frost's view that man and nature are separate. However, the most specific reference to the wall between man and nature is the statement in "New Hampshire":

He knew too well for any earthly use
The line where man leaves off and nature starts,
And never over-stepped it save in dreams.

The line "and scared a bright green snake," in "Mowing," also shows that man and nature operate in separate zones.

An even darker theme is found in a group of poems showing nature as an active threat to man.¹ In "On Taking from the Top to Broaden the Base," an avalanche annihilates those who defy it; in "Storm Fear" the "wind works against us in the dark" and "whispers with a sort of stifled bark";

¹In addition to these allusions to nature as a malevolent force, numerous poems include reference to nature's (the woods) biding its time, ready to take over as soon as man abandons a place. Examples are "Ghost House," "In the Home Stretch," and "The Last Mowing."

in "A Loose Mountain" the moon is aimed at man:

Nevertheless it constitutes a hint
That the loose mountain lately seen to glint
In sunlight near us in momentous swing
Is something in a Balearic sling
The heartless and enormous Outer Black
Is still withholding in the Zodiac,

and in "Bravado," Frost says:

Have I not walked without an upward look
Of caution under stars that very well
Might not have missed me when they shot and fell?

Even more violent are the scenes of the Pacific Ocean threaten-
ing to unleash its fury on man in "Once by the Pacific," and
the sun biding its time in "It Bids Pretty Fair":

The play seems out for an almost infinite run.
Don't mind a little thing like the actors fighting.
The only thing I worry about is the sun.
We'll be all right if nothing goes wrong with the
lighting.

In spite of the fact that years are blamed for the author's
white hair in "They Were Welcome to Their Belief," the eerie
tone of the poem gives the double meaning that it was nature
and not years that caused his graying:

But whenever the roof came white
The head in the dark below
Was a shade less the color of night
A shade more the color of snow.

Nature creating havoc with the land is shown in "In Time of
Cloudburst," and "Bereft" proclaims:

Somber clouds in the west were massed.
Out in the porch's sagging floor,
Leaves got up in a coil and hissed,
Blindly struck at my knee and missed.

Even more emphatic is the statement made by a character in
"New Hampshire" who had dendrophobia (fear of trees). "Nature
is cruel," he says, terrified, "Remember Birnam Wood! The

wood's in flux!" Furthermore, "On a Bird Singing in Its Sleep" implies that man does not dare to unconsciously reveal his position in the woods and the dark, and "Assurance" says:

The danger not an inch outside
Behind the porthole's slab of glass
And double ring of fitted brass
I trust feels properly defied.

However, Frost adds in "Our Hold on the Planet," although "there is much in nature against us," man seems to be gaining a little.¹

Closely connected with Frost's view of nature as a force threatening man is the thought in "On a Tree Fallen across the Road" that nature throws obstructions in man's path "just to ask us who we think we are." Although Frost seems to say that this is not really malicious on nature's part because nature "knows obstruction is in vain," the subtitle of the poem is "To Hear Us Talk." However, Frost adds in the same poem:

We will not be put off the final goal
We have it hidden in us to attain.

The same idea that man will meet nature's efforts to obstruct him is also shown in "Willful Homing" and in "Snow," in which Brother Meserve makes the arduous journey through the blizzard because

'That says I must go on,
That wants me as a war might if it came.
Ask any man.'

¹Brower perceptively points out that Frost's attitude towards the "possible malevolence of the natural world" is complicated in his mature poetry (p. 89).

Frost's skeptical attitude towards man's ability to tame nature is revealed in "The Aim Was Song":

Before man came to blow it right
The wind once blew itself untaught.

But man came and showed the wind how to sing:

A little through the lips and throat.
The aim was song--the wind could see.

The important phrase in this, of course, is "the wind could see." But the wind did not necessarily follow man's instructions. Saying that "nothing not built with hands of course is sacred," Frost moreover warns, in "New Hampshire," against the worship of nature, for

Even to say the groves were God's first temples
Comes too near to Ahaz' sin for safety.

Likewise the farmer in "The Gold Hesperidee," worshipping his apples, comes close to "the sin that Ahaz was forbid."

Two poems, "The Line-Gang" and "Range-Finding," show man as a destroyer of nature. In the former, advancing industrialization is tearing down the trees, while in the latter a bullet destroys a flower and temporarily interrupts the lives of some creatures. Neither one of these poems discloses any forthright condemnation of man for this action. As Nitchie declares, Frost's attitude in "The Line-Gang" is not explicit enough to say whether or not he is condemning the cutting down of trees in order to bring the telephone and telegraph.¹

A poem that seems to play a significant part in revealing Frost's ideas on nature is "Lucretius versus the

¹Nitchie, p. 11.

Lake Poets," in which Frost says the concept of nature as just "Pretty Scenery" is absurd:

For I thought Epicurus and Lucretius
By Nature meant the Whole Goddam Machinery.¹

METAPHYSICS

The theme most frequently employed by Frost is that of the uncertainty of man's ever attaining knowledge about metaphysical truth. For Frost, metaphysical knowledge seems to be information about the existence of God, heaven, death, and eternity. In Frost's view, man would like to know the truth and constantly searches for it. As he says in "Fragmentary Blue," the "blue so far above us" gives "our wish for blue a whet." In "A Star in a Stone-Boat" he declares:

Some may know what they seek in school and church,
And why they seek it there; for what I search
I must go measuring stone walls, perch on perch.

This desire to know is also shown in "Neither out Far nor in Deep":

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

However, Frost states, man cannot look out far enough or in deep enough; all he can hope for are occasional glimpses of pseudo-stars in an "Evening in a Sugar Orchard," or the sight of "a piercing little star" through cloud or smoke, as in

¹Watts claims Frost is just ridiculing an academic debate on the concept of nature (American Literature, XXVII [March, 1955], p. 86). Nitchie, however, asserts Frost's attitude towards nature has "Lucretian elements" (p. 35). While Watts's comment may be right, Nitchie's appears to be close to one of Frost's views of nature.

"Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter." Occasionally there will be "Fireflies in the Garden" emulating the "real stars," or a glimpse of something that may be a flower, as in "The Quest of the Purple-Fringed" and "A Boundless Moment." Some times things are plain "that men have thought about in vain," but that is only for a moment, according to "An Unstamped Letter in Our Rural Letter Box." The truth is also revealed briefly to the young couple in "West-Running Brook" by the contrary wave which pays tribute to its source. They realize that there is something greater than themselves. Most of the time, however, man only gets a glimpse of truth, and even then he cannot be sure he has seen it, as Frost reiterates in "For Once, Then, Something." These elusive sightings, Frost adds in "A Passing Glimpse," are only given to those "not in position to look too close."

In "The Mountain," Frost's farmer expresses some skepticism about the strange spring on top, but says, rather equivocally:

'I guess there's no doubt
About its being there. I never saw it.

"Design" also discloses skepticism about a supernatural power: "If design govern in a thing so small." Frost's uncertainty about Christ's divinity is shown in "From Plane to Plane," and wonder about himself as a sinful being is revealed in "Afterflakes." Although man may try to figure out his "place among the infinities" ("The Star-Splitter") and look to the heavens for answers ("On Making Certain Anything Has Happened"), the only reply he will get is not very profound ("Choose Something Like

a Star"). The reason for this is that "The Strong Are Saying Nothing"; only "the Secret sits in the middle and knows" ("The Secret Sits"). As a result, Frost comments in "Voice Ways," "some things are never clear." In fact, Frost says in "Revelation," God hides Himself "too well away."

Frost also shows skepticism towards the possibility of attaining metaphysical knowledge through philosophy ("Boeotian") or science ("Too Anxious for Rivers"). He even says in "Too Anxious for Rivers" it would be advisable to "Cease Questioning What Doesn't Concern Us."

In "Fire and Ice," Frost states that he does not know how the world will end. And the only knowledge he has about death and resurrection, he says in "In Hardwood Groves," is that there is a death and life cycle in nature; he does not know if it is like this anywhere else. The question of what death is like is also taken up in "After Apple-Picking," when he wonders if it is just like the woodchuck's "long sleep." Frost's concern with this is also implied in "The Cocoon," wherein the house and its occupants are seen as being enclosed in a cocoon.

Frost implies, in "Into My Own," that the only method of ascertaining knowledge about God and eternity is by escaping into the "dark woods," where he will be "only more sure of all I thought was true." This idea of escape (most often into the "dark woods") occurs frequently in the poems and, at times, appears to reflect his metaphysical concerns. In addition to expressing the desire to escape in "Into My Own,"

Frost also shows it in "The Sound of the Trees," which beckon to him.¹ Some day, he says, he will respond, and then

I shall have less to say,
But I shall be gone.

Although the woods in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" lure him because they are "lovely, dark, and deep," he rejects them. While the dying leaves of autumn speak "to the fugitive" in him in "A Leaf Treader," he does not follow them. On the other hand, in "An Empty Threat," he claims he wants to go to Hudson Bay to share "the old captain's dark fate," for defeat, if clearly seen, is better even

'Than life's victories of doubt
That need endless talk talk
To make them out.'²

In "Misgiving" he admits that by going with the falling leaves, when his time comes, he will obtain "knowledge beyond the bounds of life." "Birches" also expresses his escapist desires (to go towards heaven), but the desire is seen as a weakness. In "Come In," although the woods fascinate him, he refuses to enter because he is "out for stars."

While most frequently this desire to escape, particularly with the dying leaves, seems to reveal at times a death-wish, the exact use of the symbol of the dark woods, which is evident throughout Frost's poems, is somewhat ambiguous.

¹According to Miss Sergeant, these were trees which Frost saw at The Gallows in England, and "seemed to urge the American to uproot himself again" (p. 145). This, however, does not explain Frost's fascination with trees in the poems.

³In Fire and Ice, Thompson argues that this poem is a defense of "middle-ground skepticism against . . . agnostics" (p. 136). But Thompson's statement does not mention Frost's wish to escape.

According to Cowley, they symbolize "the uncharted country within ourselves, full of possible beauty, but also full of horror." Frost, unlike other American authors from Hawthorne to Faulkner, fears to enter the hidden recesses of the human mind and stays at the edge of the woods, Cowley asserts.¹ Lynen, however, interprets the woods in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" to represent an abnormal wish for death,² while Nitchie claims they represent impersonal nature.³

In "Into My Own," the dark trees seem to suggest rejection of civilization, for in their "vastness" he would be

Fearless of ever finding open land,
Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

While falling leaves in "A Leaf Treader" and "Misgiving" are associated with death, the meaning of the tree in "Tree at My Window" is somewhat obscure. It might be that the tree represents the sensual side of his nature ("the outer weather"), whereas he is concerned with "inner weather" of the mind.

When one arrives at "Come In," the implication is more obvious than in the other poems. Although lured by the woods, he rejects their appeal and proclaims he is "our for stars." This could be construed as his rejection of the animal side of his nature. In addition to these poems in which Frost acknowledges the lure of the trees and the dark woods, one

¹Cowley, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox, pp. 43-44.

²Lynen, p. 4.

³Nitchie, p. 44.

must add the following: "Dream Fang," in which the male lover hides in the woods while the female comes to the edge but does not enter; "The Vantage Point," in which the writer says that when he is tired of woods, he "seeks again mankind"; "Going for Water," in which the young lovers hide from the moon like gnomes in the woods; "Pan with Us," in which Pan, the lecherous goat-god, comes out of the woods; and "The Demiurge's Laugh." Although the theme of this poem remains obscure, it must be noted that the Demiurge was believed by the Gnostics to be the god of the sensual soul. Consequently, it could be that the dark woods represent the darker half of Frost's nature which draws him and must be resisted.

From this discussion it can be seen that Frost's use of the dark woods, as well as trees, involves some ambiguity. While at times they seem to symbolize death, at other times they appear to hint at the animal side of his nature. To neither of these will he capitulate. However, he does imply in "Misgiving" that only after death will one learn about the "knowledge beyond the bounds of life."

In addition to the symbol of the dark woods, the symbol of springs and brooks runs throughout much of the poetry. In "A Brook in the City," Frost explicitly calls the brook an "immortal force." When this interpretation was warranted, it was used. Some of the poems in which springs and brooks appear as symbols include "The Mountain," with its spring that is "always cold in summer, warm in winter"; "After Apple-Picking," in which the ice causes a "strangeness" in the author's sight; "The Generations of Men," in which the

brook is an oracle; "Directive," in which the reader is urged to drink from the spring and "be whole again beyond confusion"; "The Pasture," with its pasture spring that Frost may wait to watch clear; and "West-Running Brook" and "Too Anxious for Rivers," in both of which the running water represents life.

Throughout several of the poems runs the theme that God is in a separate zone from man. "I Will Sing You One-O" says that God is beyond

the furthest bodies
To which man sends his
Speculation,

implying that man cannot even comprehend God. In "Fragmentary Blue," Frost claims that heaven and earth are separate, although "some savants" do not believe this. The implication is strong in "The Mountain" that God will be found at the top, separated from man below, and nature, between. "Revelation" flatly states that God keeps Himself hidden from man. As in "The Mountain," the implication is also strong in "To the Right Person" that God will be found at the top of a high mountain.

Both "I Will Sing You One-O" and "On Looking up by Chance at the Constellations" emphasize the idea of the permanence of heaven versus the chaos on earth. "Stars," on the other hand, stresses the indifference of heaven, staring down with "neither love nor hate."

Since the idea that man is insignificant has importance as a metaphysical attitude, this theme is included under this topic. The insignificance of man is shown in such poems as

"Canis Major," in which Frost calls himself an "underdog"; in "On Going Unnoticed," wherein Frost points to man's size compared with a forest's height; and "Any Size We Please," which calls attention to man's infinitesimal stature as compared with the immensity of the universe. In "The Lesson for Today," the point is specifically made that in the Dark Ages man was like "the vilest worms/God hardly tolerated with his feet," whereas modern man's concern with space makes him out "as small/As a brief epidemic of microbes." "Iota Subscript" also acknowledges man's insignificance.

Frost very seldom spoke about religious faith, but in "Sitting by a Bush in Broad Sunlight," he comments;

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

In spite of the fact that one cannot feel a ray of sunlight with the fingers, it is there, Frost adds. He also discusses the acquisition of faith, rather ambiguously, in "A Steeple on the House":

What if it should turn out eternity
Was but the steeple on our house of life?

To which he answers that it "means that a soul is coming on the flesh." "Religious faith is a most filling vapor," he comments in "Innate Helium," but, unlike helium, it does not have to be innate. In "Choose Something like a Star," Frost points out man's need of "higher" things to "stay our minds on and be staid." "Astrometaphysical," while expressing religious hope, is also extremely skeptical in tone. Part

of the difficulty of speaking to God, Frost notes in "Not all There," is that the lines of communication are not always open. In "From Plane to Plane," Frost points out that since people do not like to receive gratitude; they invent scape-goats to receive the thanks. The implication of this poem is that is why Christ was sent by God; however, the ending leaves the reader in doubt as to Frost's position on the matter. Although religion is the subject of these poems, it is difficult to ascertain from them Frost's views about faith and religion.

THE GRIMNESS OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

While it is implied in many of the verses, the fact of the grimness of human existence is explicitly stated in "The Trial by Existence," which claims that man chooses this life of "pain that has but one close" and all he can do is bear it "crushed and mystified." This thought is also revealed in "A Question," which asks,

If all the soul-and-body scars
Were not too much to pay for birth.

The brevity of life and its horror is brought out in "'Out, Out--'" with its sudden, tragic, and senseless death of the young boy, and "The Lesson for Today" stresses "Memento Mori." The theme of the grimness of life is also shown in "The Wind and the Rain" and "Lodged."

Although "The Broken Drought" proclaims that the outlook for man is indeed bleak, it does not reveal who is the "prophet of disaster"—whether Frost agrees with him or not.

This bleak outlook is also implied in "Oven Bird," "Once by the Pacific," and some of the anti-A-bomb poems; however, the speaker retorts in "Acceptance," he does not care to know the dark future--"Let what will be, be'."

Some of Frost's poems deal with places that have been abandoned by man, bringing melancholy over the fact that men have to die. This is the theme of such verses as "A Cliff Dwelling," "The Ingenuities of Debt," "Ghost House," "The Census Taker" (in which he says his sadness must be because he wants "life to go on living"), "The Black Cottage," and "Directive."

The difficulty of life for a woman forms the basis of "A Servant to Servants," whose protagonist is going insane from overwork:

It's rest I want--there, I have said it out--
From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them--from doing
Things over and over that just won't stay done.

Her mother, too, as a bride, had to take care of an insane brother-in-law

And accommodate her young life to his.
That was what marrying father meant to her.
She had to lie and hear love things made dreadful.

"Home Burial," in which the young mother loses her first-born child; "The Hill Wife," whose loneliness drives her to insanity; "Snow," in which the minister's wife has ten children under ten years of age; and "The Housekeeper," all stress the grimness of a woman's life. Perhaps the most poignant of these poems, though, is "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," which describes how unkindly the Fates deal with

women, turning all joys into pain and sorrow.¹

The grimness of the human situation is likewise shown in "The Night Light," "Were I in Trouble," "Bravado," "In the Long Night," "Good Hours," and "Locked Out," which all take up the theme of fear of the night. In spite of the fact that Frost asserts he likes walking at night ("Good Hours"), he implies that he wants the companionship of lit-up houses on his stroll--he does not like to go beyond the bounds of society. "Acquainted with the Night" reveals that he knows what fear of the night is. (This theme of fear of the night might well be related to the symbol of the dark woods.)

Other human fears are also expressed in the poems. Fear of an empty house is explicitly revealed in three poems: "The Fear," "The Hill Wife," and "An Old Man's Winter Night." Both "The Fear" and "The Hill Wife" have the theme of the fear of man, as does the "Fear of Man." Fear of the unknown haunts many of Frost's verses (particularly those about falling leaves, dark woods, trees, and night), but is the basis for "The Fear" and "The Runaway," the story of a colt frightened by the unfamiliar snow. Although "New Hampshire" discusses a man who has a fear of trees, trees in this poem are closely connected with nature and phallic literature, but in "The Hill Wife," fear of trees plays an important part in driving the young wife mad. This theme also may be related to the dark woods and night.

¹According to Miss Sergeant, Frost admitted that this poem is about his mother (p. 304).

War is a grim fact of life, and in addition to poems about the atomic bomb, Frost has written nine war poems. "To E. T." is written to his English friend, Edward Thomas, who was killed in World War I. In the poem Frost states that war is never over, either for the living or the dead. In "The Peaceful Shepherd," Frost bitterly comments:

I should be tempted to forget,
I fear, the Crown of Rule,
The Scales of Trade, the Cross of Faith,
As hardly worth renewal.

For these have governed in our lives,
And see how men have warred.
The Cross, the Crown, the Scales may all
As well have been the Sword.

In "The Flood," Frost further emphasizes that man himself causes war because it is part of his nature, but in "The Black Cottage," he points out that it is man's greed which brings about war. The horror of war is the theme of both "The Bonfire," which states that children are also involved, and the haunting "Not to Keep," in which the soldier is reunited with his wife, but "not to keep." In "No Holy Wars for Them," Frost ironically comments on the fact that only the big nations wage holocausts and call them "Holy Wars." The idea of the waste of war is brought out in "November," and the senselessness of all killing is stressed in "The Rabbit Hunter."

While the idea of death plays an important part in many of the poems concerning nature and metaphysical knowledge, it forms a basis for some of the other verses also. The gulf between the husband and wife in "Home Burial" is caused by

the fact that the husband accepts the death of the child while the wife does not. In "'Out, Out--'," the family accepts the death of the young boy and goes about its business. The inability of the living to understand death is specifically brought out in both "Home Burial" and "'Out, Out--'." "In a Disused Graveyard" emphasizes how much man hates to die, and even mention of death makes men flee ("The Times Table"). The idea of victory over death is, of course, implied in the nature poems with their life and death cycles. In "The Onset," however, Frost especially points out that nature is always victorious over death, and, with the "church" in the last stanza, he seems to show perhaps some hope for man, too.

The question of what to make of a diminished life is raised in "The Oven Bird," but is not answered. However, in "In the Home Stretch" and "An Old Man's Winter Night," the people just go on living. Although "The Flower Boat" shows an old boat converted into a container for flowers, once death comes for the master, Frost comments, the boat will once more go to sea.

Man's aloneness in the universe is quite obviously stressed in "Bereft," in which Frost says,

Word I was in the house alone
Somehow must have gotten abroad,
Word I was in my life alone,
Word I had no one left but God.

And in "Desert Places," Frost claims that the vast spaces in the universe do not frighten him nearly as much as his desert places at home. In "The Most of It," the man "thought he

kept the universe alone." He cried out for assurance that he was not alone, but the only answer he received was the sight of a buck.

DEMARCATIION LINES

Because of the popularity of "Mending Wall, " one of Frost's best-known themes is that of walls between men. Although it is said in the poem that "fences make good neighbors," Frost wonders why:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.

"A Hundred Collars," "The Code," and "The Self-Seeker" show man's lack of understanding and his inability to communicate because of differences in social or professional backgrounds. Pointing out in "A Missive Missile" that time is also a barrier to communication between men, Frost also states that a difference in mood will provide walls ("A Mood Apart"). "A Rogers Group" shows the indifference of people to other people, whereas "The Fear of Man" reveals man's fear of others because his actions may be misunderstood. Also, "The Cow in Apple Time" expresses what happens when walls are ignored. The view that men need walls is stated in "Build Soil," in which Frost says men should "keep off each other and keep each other off," and in "Triple Bronze," in which he says he needs three walls for defense "between too much and me."

While the idea that there are zones between men and God and between men and nature and between men and men has

been mentioned previously, the theme that man has boundaries, both physical and spiritual, is taken up in "Beech" and in "Sycamore." In close conjunction with this subject is the one of acknowledging property rights, which is the basis for the poems "Trespass" and "A Christmas Tree."

Several of Frost's poems show a difference between male and female attitudes, which causes a gulf between them. In "Wind and Window Flower," for example, the winter wind is

Concerned with ice and snow,
Dead weeds and unmated birds,
And little of love could know.

But even though he courted her, the flower "thought of naught to say." Perhaps the best example of Frost's allusions to the dichotomy between male and female psychology is in "Home Burial," in which the distraught wife abhors the husband's acceptance of death and claims he has no feelings, while the husband says to the wife:

My words are nearly always an offense.
I don't know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught
I should suppose. I can't say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With women-folk.

In both "A Servant to Servants" and "The Hill Wife" the husbands do not understand their wives' loneliness, and in "The House Keeper," the man does not comprehend why his common-law wife wants legal marriage. The statement is also made in "Snow":

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

"West-Running Brook" also points out the difference between men and women when the husband and wife speak of the "contraries" between them, and the husband says of the wife's thoughts about the wave:

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

The dissimilarity between male and female is likewise stressed in "The Death of the Hired Man," in which the wife's point of view is almost the complete opposite of the husband's way of thinking. The inability of males to understand females is also brought out in "The Subverted Flower":

He smiled for her to smile,
But she was either blind
Or wilfully unkind.
He eyed her for a while
For a woman and a puzzle.

Although Frost mentions equality of men in "The Black Cottage" and "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," he only broaches the thought of irrational hatred between races in "The Vanishing Red," which is also a play on words.

ASPECTS OF LOVE

Many of Frost's poems are about romantic love: "Flower Gathering," "Waiting," "In Neglect," "A Line-Storm Song," "Going for Water," "The Telephone," "Meeting and Passing," "The Rose Family," "A Late Walk," and "Moon Compasses." In addition to these verses which speak of mental telepathy between lovers, first meetings, bringing flowers, and such, there are two poems which reflect lovers' quarrels: "A Dream Pang" and "The Thatch." While "The Master Speed" advises lovers

to retain their sense of being one, "Happiness Makes up in Height" declares that love will always brighten everything.

Along with the love lyrics, Frost has written two love stories in poetic form: "The Discovery of the Madeiras" and "Paul's Wife." The former tells the tale of two contrasting pairs of lovers: the female Negro slave who preferred dying with her lover, and the white woman who had run away with a man but who could not make up her mind to yield to him. She eventually dies from thinking about the problem. "Paul's Wife" is the story of a brawny lumberjack and a beautiful woman whom he brings to life. When the coarse world intervenes, the goddess dies, or at least disappears from prying eyes (the story is not quite clear). In this poem Frost implies that intimate aspects of love are not for public treatment.¹

"The Subverted Flower" is based on sexual passion between young lovers, a rather unusual theme for Frost. The poem is ambiguous, and it is difficult to determine exactly what has taken place. Brower asserts that the lines reveal not only the lust of the lover, but the "perverse unloveliness of frigidity" on the part of the girl."² Nitchie, on the other hand, argues that the bestiality revealed in the countenance of the girl shows guilt and fear and horror at her fallen state.³

¹Joseph M. De Falco in "Frost's 'Paul's Wife': The Death of an Ideal," Southern Folklore Quarterly, XXIX (December, 1965) interprets this story as the death of St. Paul's Christianity (pp. 259-265).

²Brower, p. 120

³Nitchie, pp. 104-105.

In "To Earthward," Frost contrasts adult love (which knows pain) with youthful love (which knows only joy). There is no love, Frost states,

That is not dashed with pain
And weariness and fault;
I crave the stain

Of tears, the aftermark
Of almost too much love

He wants love, Frost says, that will hurt him to the very fiber of his being--that is love; love is a physical hurt. Moreover, Frost announces in "Birches," "Earth's the right place for love." The mind may range free, he says in "Bond and Free," but love will possess all by staying on earth. In fact, he states in "A Winter Eden," "near to paradise all pairing ends." But since love belongs to earth, he asks in "Love and a Question," is it possible to shield love from the cares of the world?

SOME POSITIVE HUMAN VALUES

Because of the fame of "Mowing," Frost is frequently associated with the advocacy of working with one's hands; however, only five of his poems actually have this for a theme. These include "Mowing," "The Ax-Helve," "Two Tramps in Mud Time," "To a Young Wretch," and "From Plane to Plane." In the latter, though, the question is raised whether a profession is in reality a job.

The idea of bonds and duty among men is brought out in a few of the poems. "The Tuft of Flowers" points out that "men work together" whether they are near or far, and "Iris

by Night" and a "Time to Talk" take up the subject of friendship and neighborliness. Whether or not man has a duty to his fellow man is asked in "Love and a Question," but seems to be hesitantly answered in "The Death of the Hired Man." In "The Runaway," the point is made that someone should be responsible for the young. However, the risk in doing good is stressed in "The Exposed Nest," and in "A Roadside Stand," those who want to help the distressed farmers are called "greedy good-doers, beneficent beasts of prey." In "New Hampshire," Frost scoffs at the reformers "who would change the world."

Although expressing either skepticism or contempt at trying to help one's fellow-man or improving the world, Frost does show a love of country in "The Gift Outright," as well as in "Not of School Age," in which a little boy shows reverence for the flag, and "A Soldier," which reveals ideals of patriotism. In addition to his love of his country, Frost displays a love of life in "The Armful," in which he does not want to give up anything (none of his burdens); in "I Could Give All to Time," in which he wants to hold on to what he has stolen from time; and in "Putting in the Seed," which discloses his love of watching things sprout from the earth.

ART AND LITERATURE

Poetry, Frost asserts in "New Hampshire," should not be used for political purposes. Although in "Build Soil" he toys with the idea of using poetry for political purposes

because of the difficulty of the times (1932), he decides to remain with the proper subject matter of poetry: "joy and grief and life and death." In "The Lost Follower," he once more states that poetry should not be used to try to improve the world. Moreover, in "New Hampshire," he rejects the new "pseudo-phallic" literature; he will be neither a "prude" nor a "puke" but will deal with "nature" in a forthright manner. "The Pasture," which appears as an introduction to the Complete Poems, and which is apparently an invitation to the reader, seems to state that his poetry will be concerned with the fundamentals of life (water representing the life-giving substance and the new-born calf representing birth). By stating that he will stay to watch the water of the spring clear, he appears to imply that his poetry will not be obscure.

There are several other poetical themes in Frost. "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind" shows what the poetic imagination can do with a scene glimpsed from a train window in the middle of the night--it colors reality. In "Pan with Us," he laments the fact that no one appreciates "pagan mirth" any longer because the old values have changed. He questions, in "To an Ancient," whether his poetry will endure as long as his bones. And in "A Fountain, a Bottle, a Donkey's Ears and Some Books," Frost shows how delighted a poet is to find a sympathetic audience. "In a Poem" claims that poetry writes itself, and this, of course, is Frost's theory. As he says, "it finds its own name as it goes and

discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad" ¹ The isolation of the artist from society appears to be the theme of "Ghost House," "The Vantage Point," and "The Lockless Door." While he expresses his feeling of companionship with the past in "Ghost House," Frost reveals in "The Vantage Point" that he participates in the lives of men as an observer. However, in "The Lockless Door" (which is reminiscent of Tennyson's "The Palace of Art"), he states:

So at a knock
I emptied my cage
To hide in the world
And alter with age.

Frost rejects the accusation that he is a regionalist in "New Hampshire," stating:

I may as well confess myself the author
Of several books against the world in general.

And in "A Record Stride," he points out that his feet have been in both oceans, stressing the fact that he was born in California. Although ambiguous, the theme of "A Minor Bird" seems to say that all expression should be welcomed, even if it is in a minor key. However, he prefers some evidence of intelligence in literature, Frost comments in "A Considerable Speck"--not only in the literature of others, but in his own as well, he adds in "Dust in the Eyes."

THE LIMITATIONS OF SCIENCE

The topic of science interested Frost enough to use it as the basis for several of his themes. Some of the poems

¹Selected Prose of Robert Frost, p. 19.

reveal his skepticism towards science's ability to attain positive knowledge. "In the Middleness of the Road," for instance, he points out that he can go so far in his automobile, but it will not take him to knowledge of absolutes. In "Skeptic," he proclaims that the "universe may or may not be very immense," and in "A Wish to Comply," he is not quite sure if he saw a cosmic particle or not, but he likes to be accommodating, he comments. Whether or not a plum is a rose, he is not certain, he notes in "A Rose Family," but he does know his sweetheart is one. His most caustic comment about science appears in "Too Anxious for Rivers":

And how much longer a story has science
 Before she must put out the light on the children
 And tell them the rest of the story is dreaming?

While many of Frost's poems evidence his interest in evolution, the only poem which actually has this as a theme is in "At Woodward's Gardens," in which he asserts that man is superior to monkeys. Frost also shows a rather anti-scientific attitude in "Etherealizing," in which he ridicules the intention of scientist to make man all brain; in "The White-Tailed Hornet," in which he derides science for comparing man to animals; and in "The Bear," wherein he pokes fun at scientists staring through microscopes and telescopes looking for answers. "Any Size We Please" notes man's fear of the vast, impersonal universe discovered by science, and "Why Wait for Science" calls attention to the dilemma created by science with its Atomic-bomb. In addition to "Why Wait for Science," "The Case for Jefferson," "The Planners," "Bursting Rapture," and "U.S. 1948 King's X" all contribute to Frost's fierce comments on the atomic bomb.

MODERN LIFE AND SOCIETY

A few of Frost's verses show his attitude towards modern life. Although he is not antagonistic towards progress and industry in "An Encounter" and "A Lone Striker," he says if he has his choice he prefers ambling in the woods, "half looking for the orchid Calypso." In "The Bear," "The Egg and the Machine," and "A Trial Run," Frost humorously treats the frustrations of modern man in the machine age. And "Departmental" satirizes the modern trend to specialization.

In a "Drumlin Woodchuck," Frost suggests finding a retreat when things go wrong with the world, while "The Figure in the Doorway" shows an apparently contented man living in the wilderness. According to Frost in "A Girl's Garden," a village is just a miscellany, not able to accomplish anything, and in "Not Quite Social," he states that although he likes the city, he prefers living in the country. These themes on society should also be considered along with the themes about women living solitary lives, such as "A Servant to Servants" and "The Hill Wife."

"The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," "The Courage to be New," "Etherealizing," "The Lost Follower," "The Lesson for Today," and "It Is Almost the Year Two Thousand" reveal Frost's skepticism towards the improvement of mankind either by science or by literature or by any other method.

POLITICS

In "To a Thinker," Frost ridicules a politician for trying to use reason, and in "On our Sympathy with the Underdog,"

he satirizes the dilemma of congressmen. "Build Soil," "A Roadside Stand," "New Hampshire," "A Semi-Revolution," and "An Equalizer" reveal Frost's anti-socialistic, laissez-faire, and isolationist attitudes. In speaking of socialism, for example, in "Build Soil," Frost proclaims he does not know for sure what it would be in its pure form:

No one knows.
I have no doubt like all the loves when
Philosophized together into one--
One sickness of the body and the soul.

Furthermore, he says in the same poem, if he were dictator,

I'd let things take their course
And then I'd claim the credit for the outcome.

THE PAST

Although several of Frost's poems have the past as settings, only a few of the poems have the past as their subject. Regarding the truths of the past, he states in "The Black Cottage":

For, dear me, why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes.
Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favor.

And talking about the past in "The Generations of Men," Frost makes the comment:

'But don't you think we sometimes make too much
Of the old stock? What counts is the ideals,
And those will bear some keeping still about.'

Furthermore, "Directive" implies that the ideals of the past may be best, since Frost recommends that in order to receive regeneration, man should get out of the "confusion" of the

present. This need to get out of the present in order to attain a proper perspective is also expressed in "Carpe Diem" and "The Lesson for Today," for, Frost says, one can not judge the time in which he lives because he is too close to it. He also adds, in "Closed for Good," that man should acknowledge his debt to the past.

SUSPICION OF SET PLANS

Frost suggests his laissez-faire attitude in "Build Soil" and "The Investment," and he states it explicitly in "Something for Hope":

Then cut down the trees when lumber grown,
And there's your pristine earth all freed
From lovely blooming but wasteful weed
And ready again for the grass to own.

A cycle we'll say of a hundred years.
Thus foresight does it and laissez faire,
A virtue in which we all may share
Unless a government interferes.

Patience and looking away ahead,
And leaving some things to take their course.

Moreover, he shows his liking for acting on impulse in "A Serious Step Lightly Taken," when he buys a house on first sight, and his preference for leaving some things undone, as in "Unharvested," so others might benefit from a crop that was not sent to market. "Lost in Heaven" expresses the joy of just being lost on a wet and foggy night.

MAKING CHOICES

The theme in several of Frost's poems is making choices.¹

¹ Winters concludes that Frost is not a major poet because he deals whimsically with choices which should reveal some form of the human experience, he says in Sewanee Review, LVI (October, 1948), pp. 564-69.

In "The Road Not Taken," Frost says one will probably regret the choice he has made, but "The Bearer of Evil Tidings" apparently made the right decision and saved his life, for, as Frost says in the poem:

Why hurry to tell Belshazzar
What soon enough he would know?

In "The Trial by Existence" man is given a choice to live on earth, making this an heroic decision; however, in "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," man (or woman) does not have free choice--her life is planned in advance by the Fates. A very important poem along this line is "The Discovery of the Madeiras," in which the one woman is never able to reach a decision and ultimately dies because of it.

Throughout all of these poems, which reveal Frost's areas of concentration, one can perceive this important truth: Frost is a complex person, deeply concerned about particular issues at particular moments. He is willing to display elements of ambiguity and contradiction. He does not feel compelled to offer a neat and orderly system of thought.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows that Frost is very deeply interested in man's relation to nature, and equally concerned with metaphysical topics and the grimness of human existence. The themes that have nature as a basis reveal that Frost views nature from three different aspects: nature as a friend to man; nature in a separate zone from man; and nature as hostile to man. The first view is the one occurring most frequently in the poems, not only in the nature lyrics themselves, but also in other verses. In the poems in which man and nature are seen on friendly terms, the natural objects referred to in the majority of them are flowers, butterflies, birds, hay, and apple and birch trees. Most of these lyrical verses show man (Frost) appreciating the beauties of nature. In addition to the nature lyrics (the largest single category of nature poems), other verses show man taking care of nature ("The Exposed Nest"), cooperating with it ("Blueberries"), or lamenting its transient beauty ("Nothing Gold Can Stay"). Related to this last idea is Frost's concern with the life and death cycle in nature. These two concepts, which are explicit themes in only a few of the poems, are implied in many of the nature poems, particularly in the more melancholy ones ("My November Guest"),

and must be included when considering Frost's other themes involving death.

In his use of the theme of nature and man operating in separate zones, Frost recognizes a similarity between "wild" nature and the "animal" side of man, yet he believes they should be separate. For example, in "Two Look at Two," the wall separating the human lovers from the animal lovers is obvious, as is the affinity between the couples. This idea is also pointed out in "The Most of It," in which both man and buck are searching for love, but in their own separate worlds. Moreover, in "New Hampshire" (in which Frost calls attention to the line between man and nature) Frost links phallicism to nature (in this instance represented by trees). It seems then that nature at times represents the "baser" side of man. Another instance is the dark woods of the "Demiurge's Laugh" and "Come In," which Frost rejects because he is "out for stars." Readers of Frost should understand, though, that the exact meaning of those dark woods which play such a large part in the poetry is difficult to determine. As Frost says in "New Hampshire," he prefers his nature "wild," which accounts for some of the ambiguity in his attitude towards nature. He both endorses and warns against man's lower side. Frost's logic seems to be reasonable and not confused, having the virtue of common sense.

Frost also depicts another aspect of nature: a force violently opposed to man. In this view nature is sinister, as in "On Taking from the Top to Broaden the Base," and even

more so in "A Loose Mountain," in which "someone" in the Outer Black is pictured as holding the moon in a sling aimed at man; or in "Bravado," in which "someone" is believed to be shooting stars at man. In poems such as "Once by the Pacific," the implication is made that the force opposed to man has just so much patience, which is wearing thin. This personification of nature, of course, gives it a strongly metaphysical overtone, and it seems that nature at times becomes a supernatural force to Frost. As he says in "Lucretius versus the Lake Poets," nature is the "Whole Goddam Machinery."

Apparently, then, nature, to Frost, is in some ways to be enjoyed and lived with; in another way it represents the "animal" side of man; and in another it becomes a malevolent force against man. On the whole, it also seems that objects such as birds and butterflies and haystacks and apple trees convey the more amicable aspects of nature, whereas trees and dark woods, mountains, stars, and oceans, in general, represent nature's more sinister aspects. This ambiguous attitude towards nature has been commented on by several critics. Nitchie says that to Frost "Nature" is a "fairly protean term; its meaning changes from poem to poem, and that changeableness may partially account for the absence of a clear prescription to follow nature."¹ Lynen argues that "nature evokes paradoxical attitudes"--in one way it is a "realm of ideals" and in another it is "an inferior plane

¹Nitchie, p. 11.

where life is crude, insensate, mechanical."¹ Nitchie concludes that for Frost there are "three orders of being" in the universe: man, nature, and God, operating in different areas.² Frost, Marion Montgomery insists, has always shown an awareness that nature "not only will, but sometimes seems intended to, hurt those who love it";³ however, she adds, man learns from nature--he learns to love and respect himself and others and learns to understand God.⁴ Both Nitchie and Lynen appear to understand Frost's ambiguous attitude towards nature and offer perceptive explanations of it. Although Miss Montgomery sees the role of nature as a threat to man, her contention that Frost views nature as a teacher is not borne out by this study. Frost is not that similar to Wordsworth.

One can only conclude that Frost reveals varying attitudes towards nature. Most often he shows nature on amiable terms with man; however, the two moods in which nature is seen operating either separately or malevolently are about evenly divided and together total almost as much as the treatment of nature as a friend to man. The verses which reveal a difference between human and animal natures are perhaps associated with his view of man and love. Because of their metaphysical

¹Lynen, p. 153.

²Nitchie, p. 49.

³Montgomery, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox, p. 139.

⁴Ibid., pp. 148-50.

overtones, those poems in which nature appears hostile to man are related to Frost's metaphysical concerns. Frost has probably been wiser than most poets. He shows nature in various poses, good and evil, which is closer to the truth than any single view of nature.

Next to nature, the topic which interests Frost the most is apparently metaphysics, and his most frequently-used theme throughout all the poems is the uncertainty of ever attaining final answers regarding metaphysical truth. Related to this position are those poems which reveal skepticism towards the ability of science to ever furnish the answers. Frost's view seems to be that man will never know for certain about the Absolute ("A Secret Sits"), although he will continue searching for answers ("Neither Out Far nor in Deep"). On Occasion he may be given glimpses of the Truth or the Absolute ("For Once, Then, Something"), but he is never certain what he has seen. In connection with this idea is the frequently expressed desire to escape, often associated with the dark woods and falling leaves and trees. But because of the ambiguity of the meaning of these symbols (as discussed previously), it cannot be said with certainty that they represent the death wish. However, as revealed in "Misgiving," the falling leaves do signify death, and Frost admits that by going with them one can attain "knowledge beyond the bounds of life." If these elements do symbolize death, as they apparently do in some poems, perhaps that is why he rejects them and that is why his threat to go to

Hudson Bay to learn final answers is only "An Empty Threat."

A few of the poems on metaphysics reveal Frost's belief that God and man operate in separate zones--verses such as "I Will Sing You One-O," which states that God is beyond man's furthest speculation. But Frost refers to a Judeo-Christian God only infrequently in the poems and very seldom uses a theme concerning faith or orthodox religion. As Brower points out, although Frost implies a "super-order" in his poems, he does not really commit himself. And even in his conventionally Christian poems, such as "A Steeple on the House," Brower says, Frost is ambiguous about Ultimate Truth.¹ In fact, in "A Steeple on the House," Frost seems a bit contemptuous of the concept of eternity. In the Complete Poems that are included in this study, Frost seems to be extremely wary of any mention of God or faith or life after death.

These, then, are the metaphysical themes which appear to interest Frost most: the uncertainty of ascertaining metaphysical truth, the desire to escape (in order to learn it), and the fact that God is in a different world from man. With the exception of the theme on the indifference of heaven (which only appears once in "Stars"), some of the other themes deal with more orthodox religious matters like faith, hope, and spiritual values, but these matters appear only once or twice, and the attitudes expressed in most of them seem to be skeptical. One theme which does appear several times is

¹Brower, pp. 142-146.

that of the insignificance of man, which could imply man's insignificance compared to God ("Iota Subscript"), or compared with the vast universe ("The Lesson for Today"). Frost does not commit himself much at this point either.

So it would appear that only occasionally does Frost even mention a God or discuss conventional Christian subjects of hope and faith, and in these the tones often disclose a degree of skepticism; the majority of the time he is concerned with the puzzle of the glimpses he has seen and with questions regarding death and life hereafter. It seems, then, that Frost hesitates to take Kierkegaard's "leap of faith." Although Frost is concerned with religious questions and seems to feel the presence of "something" that shows itself occasionally, he does not commit himself to final answers. Apparently he believes it is impossible for man to ever learn the answers to his questions, in this world anyway. In one of his later poems, he says man should stop questioning what does not concern him ("Too Anxious for Rivers"); however, the point was made in connection with inquiries by science, and should be considered in this context. As Gerber points out, the reason Frost did not give final answers is that he had no answer to the most important question. "Death," Gerber states, "remains the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns." And Frost was too honest to give an affirmative response to the question, he adds.¹ This seems to be a very logical conclusion to draw.

¹Gerber, p. 170.

Another major concern of Frost is certainly the grimness of human existence. Some of the poems are specifically based on this idea. For instance, a young life is blotted out in a moment of carelessness ("Out, Out--"); women are condemned to lives of hopelessness or insanity because of marriage and loneliness ("A Servant to Servants"); and people die and abandon a place to the woods ("The Census-Taker"). Other themes also play a part in Frost's dark view of life. Fear and death, which are both significant in his poetry, are related in many aspects. Although fear is implied in many of the poems, as in "Snow," these less obvious stresses have not been included in the poems under this theme. Fear of the night appears in several poems. However, it is difficult to determine with certainty what the night represents--if not death, then perhaps great sorrow. Probably all of the fear themes, such as fear of man, fear of an empty house, and fear of death, could be listed under one general category as fear of the unknown, which seems to bother Frost a great deal. His interest in the unknown is evidenced, of course, by his most important theme on the uncertainty of attaining metaphysical knowledge. Although only a few of the poems center around death itself, it is important in Frost's poetry because it is indirectly implied in the references to fear of the dark or unknown, as well as in many of the nature poems and those concerned with metaphysics. Despite the fact that on an individual basis these themes are used infrequently, when taken together, the various concerns about fear and death

greatly darken the Frost world and add a tragic quality to his vision.

Adding to Frost's bleak view of human existence are those poems dealing with war. Among his most poignant poems is the masterful understatement on the horror of war, "Not to Keep." Other bleak poems are concerned with the "twilight years"--what to make of a diminished life. Although "The Oven Bird" has publicized this theme, Frost deals with it more or less explicitly in only four of his poems. However, it is implied in the verses about the impermanence of beauty and the darker nature poems. In general, all of his pessimistic ideas reveal the diminishment in modern life, and this theme looms large indeed.

Man's aloneness in the universe also plays a part for Frost in the grimness of human existence, although the idea only occurs in a few poems. However, it is reinforced by the theme of the insignificance of man and the idea that man operates in a separate zone from both God and nature. Man's aloneness is part of the darkness Frost sees.

The topics of nature, metaphysics, and grim existence account for about half of the poems considered in the study. Five or six of the remaining topics are of less importance, and the others can be considered minor. Next to the three chief obsessions, Frost's favorite topic is demarcation lines. The most frequent theme here is barriers between men, while the next most frequently-used theme is the gulf between male and female. The latter, of course, must be considered under

the love themes, suggesting that mutual understanding is marred by the difference in psychology between male and female, as in "Home Burial." Regarding the walls between men, Frost shows an ambiguous attitude towards them. In "Mending Wall," he questions whether or not there should be walls, while admitting that they are there. He shows cleavages caused by differences in social position ("A Hundred Collars"), by time ("A Missive Missile"), and by indifference ("A Rogers Group"). Moreover, he states there are such things as property rights ("Trespass") and zones which divide men. However, the most frequent of the ideas is the fact of barriers between men, with the other themes ranking as subtopics. As noted, many of the critics call attention to the zones between man, nature, and God which Frost presents in his poetry. If these themes are included in one broad category as barriers, they would equal, if not surpass in number, Frost's references to the uncertainty of attaining metaphysical truth. Obviously then, Frost is quite concerned with the separations between men. However, as on many other topics, his attitude is ambiguous, and it is difficult to determine whether he advocates the building or destroying of barriers. Again, he appears to be sensible and wise by implying that some barriers help and others hurt.

Although the majority of Frost's love poems are lyrics, he does at times emphasize the physical nature of love, as in "Birches," in which he proclaims that earth is the proper place for love. He takes up the subject of lust in "The

Subverted Flower," and treats ideal love in "Paul's Wife." Real love, involving death, is contrasted with selfish love in "The Discovery of the Madeiras." In general, Frost is reticent about the subject of love, revealing in the lyrical poems (which is the largest group by far) primarily love's contentment, although two of these involve lovers' quarrels. A semblance of passion is shown in one poem, "A Line-Storm Song," but the only poem which actually discusses the pain and passion and joy of mature sexual love is "To Earthward." Related to this topic are the poems which show a gulf between men and women.

In the verses on positive human values, Frost celebrates working with one's hands in five of them. In three poems he shows his love of country and in three others his love of life. However, his attitude towards man's duty to man is ambiguous, as is his attitude towards doing good. He admits that the latter involves some risk ("The Exposed Nest"), and wonders if it is the wise thing to do ("A Roadside Stand"). Regarding bonds among men, he does not exactly commit himself. In "A Tuft of Flowers" he comments that men work together and they work apart; in "A Time to Talk" he expresses his willingness to be neighborly and go up to the wall to talk with his neighbor--but there is a wall between them. Although this topic of positive human values plays an important part in Frost's concerns, the small number of individual poems about it, and their ambiguity, makes it difficult to draw any conclusions. Frost obviously advocates

physical labor and praises patriotism, but these themes are relatively insignificant in the over-all picture.

With regard to art and literature, Frost apparently has no single favorite theme; his poems deal with various aspects of poetry. To some extent he does stress that poetry has spontaneity and should not be used for political purposes.

Frost's attitude towards science appears to be, if not entirely anti-scientific, at least critical. Considering the number of times he writes about science, he is interested in it, but he does not seem to have much faith in the ability of science to either advance mankind ("Etherealizing") or man's knowledge ("Too Anxious for Rivers"). Closely related are the anti-atomic bomb poems, to the extent that science is here the villain.

On reading Frost, one gets the impression that he is frequently commenting on modern life, but a glance at the themes on this subject will show that this is not often so. The few poems he presents on the topic are memorable and tend to loom larger than they should. (Of course, everything a writer says, in a way, is a comment on his age.) Moreover, Frost does not seem to concern himself too much with whether he (or man) should or should not be a part of society. In this respect he is not strongly romantic, for he only offers three poems (with the exception of the three about the isolation of the artist) that suggest retreat from society. In connection with modern life and society, Frost also takes up the idea of the improvement of mankind. The poems on

this subject are revelatory of Frost's skeptical attitude about any possible millenium.

A few of the poems deal with political views, showing Frost's anti-socialistic, laissez-faire, and isolationist tendencies. The number of verses containing these ideas, however, is relatively small. Closely connected to Frost's laissez-faire political attitudes are those poems which reveal his suspicion of set plans. He likes to act on impulse ("A Serious Step Lightly Taken") and leave something to chance ("Unharvested").

Although Cowley feels that Frost is too much concerned with the past and that it weakens his poetry,¹ Frost actually devotes little attention to themes of the past. Only six of the more than three hundred poems actually have the past as their basis--treating ideals of the past or retreat to the past in order to obtain perspective. According to Frost, one cannot judge the time in which he lives because he is too closely connected with it and needs to get away. Frost takes up this point explicitly in only a few poems.

Five of the poems have as their basis the theme of making decisions; however, because of the popularity of "The Road Not Taken" many think of this as one of Frost's most important ideas. In the poems dealing with this theme, Frost is ambiguous in his meaning. "A Road Not Taken" seems to say that no matter which decision man makes, he will regret it; "The Bearer of Evil Tidings" implies that the messenger made the right decision; and "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers"

¹Cowley, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox, p. 39.

forthrightly states that man (or woman) has no choice--
life is predestined.

Frost's major concerns thus seem to be nature in its various guises; metaphysics, particularly questions about ultimate knowledge; and the grimness of human existence. Related to the latter are the walls Frost sees between men, between man and God, and between man and nature. Although many of the verses show man and nature on an amicable basis, the preponderance of the bleaker themes indicates a dark view of life. Frost points out both the good and evil aspects of nature, and warns against the "animal" side of man. He offers no solutions to the questions about God and death. And he sees man in the world, alone and fearful, facing the inevitable. Neither is love a great brightness for Frost, because real love is filled with pain. Frost's ambiguity regarding certain positive virtues further emphasizes the negative aspects of his view of life. While he does not reject modern society, his indifference towards it, his skeptical view towards the improvement of mankind, and his attitude towards the limitations of science, further project a pessimistic outlook.

As Trilling said, he is a "terrifying poet."¹ It is indeed a bleak, dark world that Frost inhabits, filled with walls and death. God and love are possible aids, but uncertainty shrouds God, and love is full of pain. Frost should be seen as a realistic poet who found small points of light and joy in a world largely dark.

¹Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox, p. 151.

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