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Robert Frost : A Poet Both Provincial and Universal

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ROBERT FROST:
A POET BOTH PROVINCIAL AND UNIVERSAL

being

A thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the Fort Hays Kansas State College in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Master of Science

by

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To my sister,

Margaret.

PREFACE

Because I have been interested in the poems of Robert Frost since I first came in contact with them, I have been glad to have an opportunity to investigate some phases of them rather carefully.

There is disagreement among the critics as to the classification under which Frost is to be placed. Some say that he is strictly a local poet because he deals so much with New England material. Others say that he is a universal poet; for, although he does write extensively of his own region, its climate, its characters, and its culture, he is, nevertheless, a universal poet who vests these local or provincial elements with meaning as broad in scope as the experience and thought of man.

The purpose of this thesis, then, is to produce evidence presented by critics of each school and to interpret other poems which fit into the suggested categories, to show that Robert Frost is a poet both provincial and universal.

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"But what about your flora of the valley?"

"You have me there. But that--you don't think
That was worth money to me? Still I own
It goes against me not to finish it
For the friends it might bring me. By the way,
I had a letter from Burroughs--did I tell you?--
About my Cyrtopodium reginae;
He says it's not reported so far north.

The lawyer enters and with the lawyer, a little girl, Anne, who has been a companion of the Broken One before he became broken. He has taught her the ways and names of flowers; and he has trained her to pick no bouquets, for the flowers need to stay for seed. But she has modified his decree because he, a special person is sick, and has brought him two Ram's Horn Orchids, having left four or five for seed. The lawyer becomes impatient, and the man sends Anne on her way. After she is gone, he explains,

"Get out your documents! You see
I have to keep on the good side of Anne.
I'm a great boy to think of number one.
And you can't blame me in the place I'm in.
Who will take care of my necessities
Unless I do?"

This passage not only gives the key to the title of the poem, but it also illustrates Frost's apt use of understatement to attain his purposes.

One of the most charming characters Frost presents is the old fisherman who has made his dory into a flower box now that he can no longer go to sea. The poem is only a dozen lines long, yet the man is well drawn. One experiences more than the word pictures present in the poem; he sees the squinted eyes and leathered skin sea people have, he smells the tang of ocean air, and he hears the not so distant pounding of the surf.

The Flower Boat

The fisherman's swapping a yarn for a yarn
 Under the hand of the village barber,
 And here in the angle of house and barn
 His deep-sea dory has found a harbor.

An anchor she rides the sunny sod
 As full to the gunnel of flowers growing
 As ever she turned her home with cod
 From Gerøe's bank when winds were blowing.

And I judge from that Elysian freight
 That all they ask is rougher weather,
 And dory and master will sail by fate
 To see for the Happy Isles together.²³

"Christmas Trees"²⁴ is a poem Frost subtitles "A Christmas Circular Letter" which, apparently, he sent to his friends in lieu of Christmas cards. In it he tells of an offer he had for his trees. One snowy day not too long before Christmas, a city stranger drove into the Frost yard, and asked if he might buy the Christmas trees. Frost had not thought of his young fir balsams as Christmas trees; he had no notion of selling them, but he did dally with the notion. He finally showed the trees to the would-be buyer. Many were growing too close together to have kept their lovely shape, but some were well proportioned; the buyer thought they would do.

I thought so too, but wasn't there to say so.
 We climbed the pasture on the south, crossed over,
 And came down on the north.

He said, "A thousand."

"A thousand Christmas trees!--at what apiece?"

He felt some need of softening that to me:
 "A thousand trees would come to thirty dollars."

23. Ibid., p. 335.

24. Ibid., pp. 132-134.

Then I was certain I had never meant
 To let him have them. Never show surprise!
 But thirty dollars seemed so small beside
 The extent of pasture I should strip, three cents
 (For that was all they figured out apiece),
 Three cents so small beside the dollar friends
 I should be writing to within the hour
 Would pay in cities for good trees like those,
 Regular vestry--trees whole Sunday Schools
 Could hang enough on to pick off enough.
 A thousand Christmas trees I didn't know I had!
 Worth three cents more to give away than sell,
 As may be shown by a simple calculation.
 Too bad I couldn't lay one in a letter.
 I can't help wishing I could send you one,
 In wishing you herewith a Merry Christmas.

This poem displays again the feeling of Frost as a typical rural
 New Englander that money is a paltry pay for the priceless growth of the
 gifts of nature.

Frost has managed to portray the people of his rural New England with-
 out turning either emotional or sentimental, but showing a keenness of
 insight found only in one who both loves and understands the people of
 the region, in one who is, himself, at heart one of those people.

CHAPTER IV

POEMS WITH DEFINITELY UNIVERSAL ELEMENTS

A. POEMS DEALING WITH COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCES

I may as well confess myself the author
 Of several books against the world in general.
 To take them as against a special state
 Or even nation's to restrict my meaning.¹

There is a group of critics and fellow poets who consider Robert Frost a good poet, but a local one: he is New England; he is unconscious of any geographical point outside that region and of any experience in his life that occurred any place else; it is surely not too broad a statement to say that a poet with a purely local appeal will not be widely read and admired outside the region with which he is concerned.

But Robert Frost has been both widely read and greatly admired outside his beloved New England. When he leftt the United States for England in 1912, he was an unknown poet, not because he had not tried to find publishers for his poems, but because the editors had not accepted his poems for publication. It was in England in 1913 that his first volume was accepted and published. In spite of the fact that the poems which constitute A Boy's Will were poems written in New England and concerned with New England, the book found prompt and hearty reception in England. In the Review of Reviews of April, 1915, Barter tells of that reception.

The book (A Boy's Will) brought quick recognition as the work of a rare nature, and Frost was promptly drawn out from his rural . . .

1. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 206.

retirement to be heartily welcomed in those choice circles of London's best intellectual life where caste distinctions count for nothing and the sole test is merit. Nowhere is recognition more genuine; in few places does it count so fully as a measure of worth.

Early last year North of Boston was brought out. . . . Here the author came fully into his own. The book brought instant acclaim, and without reserve, Frost was honored as a poet of high distinction. . . . The reviews and the weeklies gave the book exceptional space; the London Nation, for instance, devoted three columns to it.²

Nor has the English acclaim been limited to the short period after the "discovery" of the poet. Had that been true, her enthusiastic acceptance might be attributed to a spontaneous burst of applause accorded to any of the numerous poets during a period when new schools were not uncommon. Sixteen years later C. Henry Warren commented upon the manner in which Frost's poetry found a broad appeal.

Save that the landscape of his poetry is as likely to disclose a maple as an elm, a bear as a fox, or an oven-bird as a lark, it might be of England that he is singing.³

In further evidence that those who would limit the scope of Frost's poetry so that he becomes a provincial or a local poet and that only, there follows a discussion of a group of poems which deal with common human experiences and with such universal themes as the basic emotion of fear and love, of man's struggle to overcome nature and nature's irresistibility, and of the impersonality and infinity of time; then there are poems which show the impact the first World War made upon the poet, and there are narrative poems whose basis is in no way in New England.

Any one life has within its bounds many experiences which are common

2. Wm. Baxter, "New England's New Poet," Review of Reviews, v. 51, (April, 1915), pp. 432, 433.

3. C. Henry Warren, "An American Poet," The Fortnightly Review, (Chapman and Hall Limited, London), v. 135, (February, 1931), p. 382.

among other beings, but not every being has the ability, the desire, and the skill to create about these experiences poems of such beauty and simplicity as Robert Frost has done. An illustrative group of these poems will be presented in this section.

"Good Hours" tells of a lonely walk taken in the winter when the cottages of the villages were buried "up to their shining eyes in snow"; the hiker did not feel the loneliness, however, because of the sense of life about him within the houses.

I had such company outward bound
I went till there were no cottages found.
I turned and repented, but coming back
I saw no window but that was black.

Over the snow my creaking feet
Disturbed the slumbering village street
Like profanation, by your leave,
At ten o'clock of a winter eve.

Surely it is not an uncommon experience to find so much pleasure in the "outward bound" part of some event that the turn about is not made until so late that repentance must come with it.

It is strange how those who work with the soil and with planting become so engrossed with the phenomenon of growth that they take advantage of every daylight hour for their gardens. They come to have a passion for growing things. Frost tells of this miracle in "Putting in the Seed."⁵

You come to fetch me from my work to-night
When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
(Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;)

.....

4. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 128.

5. Ibid., p. 155.

How love burns through the Putting in the Seed
 On through the watching for that early birth
 When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

Who has not felt the urge to hurry spring after a winter spent indoors? With the coming of balmy weather, man wants to forget, for a time at least, his work and go out to feel to the utmost the pleasures of new spring. Frost's "Prayer in Spring"⁶ sends a request to the southwest winds to hasten spring for him, to

Burst into my narrow stall;
 Swing the picture on the wall;
 Run the rattling pages o'er;
 Scatter poems on the floor;
 Turn the poet out of door.

Sparks from a fire and burning embers that float into the night sky to tangle with the trees or compete with the stars have an appeal to man's imagination. In his "Evening in a Sugar Orchard"⁷ Frost tells of lingering outside the sugar house one March night and calling to the fireman to give the fire another stoke to send up more sparks with the smoke.

I thought a few might tangle, as they did,
 Among the bare maple boughs, and in the rare
 Hill atmosphere not cease to glow,
 And so be added to the moon up there.

.....

The sparks made no attempt to be the moon.
 They were content to figure in the trees
 As Leo, Orion, and the Pleiades.
 And that was what the boughs were full of soon.

"Rose Pogonias"⁸ is among the most beautiful of the poems in Frost's

6. Ibid., p. 17.

7. Ibid., p. 289.

8. Ibid., p. 19.

volumes. In it he tells of having come upon a small, lovely spot set in seclusion from the rest of the world. Not Frost alone has had the experience of coming unexpectedly upon such beauty that his heart has offered up a little prayer for the security and safety of such a spot.

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

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

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

Although it is a rather child-like thing to do, there is a certain fascination in watching the movements of the moon as one walks; now it rests in a tree top, now it peeks jauntily over the ridge pole of a house; and soon it is someplace else--all because one changes his position or moves his head. Frost tells of this experience in "The Freedom of the Moon."⁹

I've tried the new moon tilted in the air
 Above a hazy tree-and-farmhouse cluster
 As you might try a jewel in your hair.
 I've tried it fine with little breadth of lustre,

9. Ibid., p. 304.

Alone, or in one ornament combining
With one first-water star almost as shining.

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

A number of Frost's poems deal with the basic human emotions, fear and love. That these emotions are universal, no one can deny. To be sure, Frost, because he is Frost and because he is a New Englander, writes with restraint, but that very restraint gives a greater force to his poems. No group of poems better illustrates his belief in the use of understatement to attain his ends than this group dealing with fear and love.

"Fire and Ice"¹⁰ deals with the emotions of desire and hate in the abstract.

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

"The Fear"¹¹ is a narrative poem. A woman has left her husband to elope with Joel.

A lantern light from deeper in the barn
Shone on a man and woman in the door
And threw their lurching shadows on a house
Near by, all dark in every glossy window.
A horse's hoof pawed once the hollow floor,
And the back of the gig they stood beside

10. Ibid., p. 268.

11. Ibid., pp. 112-116.

Moved in a little. The man grasped a wheel,
 The woman spoke out sharply, "Whoa, stand still!
 I saw it just as plain as a white plate,"
 She said, "as the light on the dashboard ran
 Along the bushes at the roadside--a man's face."

So the poem begins with the fear in the lurching shadows, the creaking gig, the pawing hoof, and the edged voice of the woman. And throughout the poem, using this same reserve, Frost maintains the emotion of fear until the nerves of the reader are drawn as taut as the nerves of the woman. She must investigate before she will go in; she pleads with Joel to go ahead, for she must face this alone. Against his demurring, she pushes past him, gets the lantern, and advances toward the dark. Still insisting that no one is there, Joel goes with her. She calls into the dark and is startled when her question "What do you want?" is answered by "Nothing." The sense of fear is heightened by the secrecy Frost leaves with the reader who is never certain just what is happening; yet, for that very reason, he feels more intensely what the woman is experiencing. The man comes forward; he has with him a child who, he suggests, should prove that he is no robber--or worse. She asks him,

"What's a child doing at this time of night?"

"Out walking. Every child should have the memory
 Of at least one long-after-bed time walk.
 What, son?"

"Then I should think you'd try to find
 Somewhere to walk--"

"The highway, as it happens--
 We're stopping for the fortnight down at Dean's."

"But if that's all--Joel--you realize--
 You won't think anything. You understand?
 You understand that we have to be careful.
 This is a very, very lonely place.
 Joel! She spoke as if she couldn't turn.

The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground,
It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out.

And still the reader remains in doubt as to whether the walking man was her husband or not, and whether one of the men or the other murdered her, or whether she merely fainted, so great was the emotional reaction when she found that the situation was not one that she had expected to confront.

Be that as it may, the emotion fear is here so excellently portrayed that there is no doubt about the poem's universality.

"The Lockless Door"¹² also deals with the emotion fear. The man in this, as many men in real life, fled from fear before he faced reality and, because he did so, must alter his life and, perhaps, forsake his chosen goal.

It went many years
But at last came a knock,
And I thought of the door
With no lock to lock.

I blew out the light
I tip-toed the floor,
And raised both hands
In prayer to the door.

But the knock came again
My window was wide;
I climbed on the sill
And descended outside.

Back over the sill
I gave a "Come in"
To whatever the knock
At the door may have been.

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

12. Ibid., p. 299.

"Bereft"¹³ brings a theme of loneliness and the fear of loneliness. In this poem, as in the two preceding, the cause of the fear is something vague, for Frost seems to have found that the thing men fear most is something intangible, for were it reality, they would face it and battle it through; but it is the fear of the vague, the unformulated that makes man a coward.

Where had I heard this wind before
 Change like this to a deeper roar?
 What would it take my standing there for,
 Holding open a restive door,
 Looking down hill to a frothy shore?
 Summer was past and day was past.
 Sombre 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 knees and missed.
 Something sinister in the tone
 Told me my secret must be known:
 Word I was in the house alone
 Somehow must have gotten abroad,
 Word I was in my life alone,
 Word I had no one left but God.

Another of the poems which deals with a fear of the elements is "Storm Fear."¹⁴ Wherever man may live, there are certain seasons when the weather makes shelter seem more than comforting.

When the wind works against us in the dark,
 And pelts with snow
 The lower chamber window on the east,
 And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
 The beast,
 "Come out! Come out!--
 It costs no inward struggle not to go.
 Ah, no!

.....

Not of fear, but of loneliness does "An Old Man's Winter Night"¹⁵ speak; and in that portrayal of ancient solitude, Frost pulls upon the

13. Ibid., p. 317.

14. Ibid., p. 13.

heart strings of the reader. The man is so old and lonely that he is not frightened, but he does frighten the very darkness and the hollow cellar.

All out of doors looked darkly in at him
 Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
 That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
 What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
 Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
 That brought him to that creaking room was age.
 He stood with barrels round him--at a loss.
 And having scared the cellar under him
 In clomping there, he scared it once again
 In clomping off:--and scared the outer night,
 Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
 Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
 But nothing so like beating on a box.

. The log that shifted with a jolt
 Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
 And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
 One aged man--one man--can't keep a house,
 A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
 It's thus he does it of a winter night.

Another poem which deals with fear, but not with loneliness is "The Most of it."¹⁶ Every man longs for companionship with his own kind, for one who will answer, who will understand. Often when man is so lonely he can find none of his own in the universe, he will call and then, when the reply does come, it is different from what he expected and for that reason disappointing. Frost puts this into the words of a poem in "The Most of It."

He thought he kept the universe alone;
 For all the voice in answer he could wake
 Was but the mocking echo of his own
 From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
 Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
 He would cry out on life, what it wants
 Is not its own love back in copy speech,
 But counter-love, original response.
 And nothing ever came of what he cried
 Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
 In the cliff's talus on the other side,

16. Frost, A Witness Tree. p. 23.

And then in the far distant water splashed,
 But after a time allowed for it to swim,
 Instead of proving human when it neared
 And someone else additional to him
 As a great buck it powerfully appeared
 Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
 And landed pouring like a waterfall,
 And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
 And forced the underbrush--and that was all.

Man is a social creature; every one wants to have friends, to be happy. The expression of this hunger is found in the short poem "Revelation."¹⁷

We make ourselves a place apart
 Behind light words that tease and flout,
 But oh, the agitated heart
 Till someone find us really out.

'Tis pity if the case required
 (Or so we say) that in the end
 We speak the literal to inspire
 The understanding of a friend.

But so with all, from babes that play
 At hide-and-peek to God afar,
 So all who hide too well away
 Must speak and tell us where they are.

When Frost writes love poems, he uses the same restraint and the same device of understatement that he uses in depicting other emotion. "Devotion"¹⁸ illustrates this point:

The heart can think of no devotion
 Greater than being shore to the ocean--
 Holding the curve of one position
 Counting an endless repetition.

"Moon Compasses"¹⁹ is a metaphor of exquisite beauty in which Frost gives another definition of love. The emotional intensity of this

17. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 27.

18. Ibid., p. 308.

19. Ibid., p. 393.

poem is made more powerful by the restraint.

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

It is, however, a poem slightly longer which is the greatest of Frost's love poems. In "Two Look at Two"²⁰ a pair of lovers have been walking up the mountain and, though it is late, have gone further than they intended. Finding their way blocked by a tumbled wall, they stood for a moment looking reluctantly, "spending what onward impulse they still had in one last look the way they must not go," for mountain climbing after dark was dangerous when a single loosened rock might start a landslide. "This is all," they sighed, but it was not all, for on the other side of the wall a doe appeared and looked at them, not with fear, but with surprise.

"This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?"
 But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
 A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them
 Across the wall as near as they.
 This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,
 Not the same doe come back into her place.
 He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,
 As if to ask, "Why don't you make some motion?
 Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.
 I doubt if you're as living as you look."
 Thus till he had them almost feeling dared
 To stretch a proffering hand--and a spell-breaking.
 Then he too passed unscared along the wall.
 Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
 "All this must be all." It was all. Still they stood,
 A great wave from it going over them,
 As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
 Had made them certain earth returned their love.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 282, 283.

"The Telephone"²¹ deals, in a whimsical, yet tender, way, with lovers' talk. He had taken a long walk during the afternoon and, while he was resting, he leaned his head against a flower and heard his love talk. She mustn't deny it, for she spoke from the flower on her window sill. He asks her if she remembers what she said and she, not wanting to chance contradicting him, suggests that he tell first what he thought she said.

Having, found the flower and driven a bee away,
 I leaned my head,
 And holding by the stalk,
 I listened and I thought I caught the word--
 What was it? Did you call me by my name?
 Or did you say--
Someone said 'Come'--I heard it as I bowed."

"I may have thought as much, not aloud."

"Well, so I came."

Lovers have a way of enjoying reminiscence about the first time they met and either how they recognized the moment as an important one or how they now wonder that such a moment should have passed with no especial significance attached to it. In "Meeting and Passing"²² he addresses her to remind her of their meeting.

Another narrative love poem is "In the Home Stretch,"²³ in which an older couple are making a new start. They have moved from the town just fifteen miles into the country, but the change is great. There is plaintiveness in the poem. The two love one another; but neither is quite sure whose idea it was that they turn into "good farmers." In

21. Ibid., p. 147.

22. Ibid., p. 148.

23. Ibid., pp. 139-146.

spite of himself, he fears that he may have brought her here contrary to her true desires, and she will not commit herself upon the subject. He finds her looking out the window by the kitchen sink while the noisy men are banging furniture into place upstairs. He asks what she sees more than the weeds growing, and she replies that it is the years.

"What kind of years?"

"Why, latter years--
Different from early years."

"I see them too.
You didn't count them?"

"No, the further off
So ran together that I didn't try to.
It can scarce be that they would be in number
We'd care to know, for we are not young now.
. . . ."

The moving men are preparing to leave; they are climbing into the wagon when she suddenly remembers that the stove is not up, and they must have that. The stillness of the house is again broken with the trampings of heavy feet and the loud voices of strong men. Then they are gone again, and one realizes for the first time that the woman did not really want to move, but in her love for Joe she is keeping it from him, for he is as enthusiastic as a boy about the new venture.

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

They find food, and the lantern, which has not been lost; there is bread and butter. They continue to visit as they eat. Again one sees the devotion of these two. She says,

"Dumped down in paradise we are and happy."

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

"Shouldn't you like to know?"

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

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

"I don't want to find out what can't be known.
But who first said the words to come?

"My dear,
It's who first thought the thought. You're searching, Joe,
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.
Ends and beginnings--there are no such things.
There are only middles."

In his enthusiasm, he wishes to take her outside for a good night tour,
but decides they are too tired and that morning will be soon enough to
"go the round of apple, cherry, peach, pine, alder, pasture, mowing,
well, and brook--of the whole farm.

The last four lines sum up the mood of the whole poem:

When there was no more lantern in the kitchen,
The fire got out through crannies in the stove
And danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling,
As much at home as if they'd always danced there.

There is only the poems in his recent volume which deals with love,
and those in a figurative way. In the first one, Frost seems to be
saying that one who is held by the many ties of love is so contented in
being thus held that she is not conscious of them unless one of the ties
makes undue demand of her. The poem he calls "The Silken Tent."²⁴

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signified the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is looely bound.

24. Frost, Witness Tree, p. 13.

By countless silken ties of love and thought
 To everything on earth the compass round,
 And only by one's going slightly taut
 In the capriciousness of summer air
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

There are influences strong enough once lives are crossed by them, the lives are never again the same. Love is one of those forces. In his poem "Never Again Would Birds' Song be the Same"²⁵ Frost suggests that the birds songs are more beautiful because they knew Eve and felt love for her.

Her would declare and could himself believe
 That the birds there in all the garden round
 From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
 Had added to their own an oversound,
 Her tone of meaning but without the words.
 Admittedly an eloquence so soft
 Could only have had an influence on birds
 When call or laughter carried it aloft.
 Be that as may be, she was in their song.
 Moreover her voice upon the voices crossed
 Had now persisted in the woods so long
 That probably it never would be lost.
 Never again would birds's song be the same.
 And to do that to birds was why she came.

One of the characteristics of the nature of man is that he views with reluctance the passing of a season of beauty, or a moment of perfection, of an experience of delight. Frost expresses this thought in two poems. In "October"²⁶ he addresses that month, reminding her that he realizes the leaves have all ripened to fall if the morrow's wind be wild, and with the leaves goes a period of beauty; so Frost asks October to let the fall of leaves be slow, and to let the still lovely days be less brief.

25. Ibid., p. 24.

26. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 40.

Release one leaf at break of day;
 At noon release another leaf;
 One from our trees, one far away.
 Retard the sun with gentle mist;
 Enchant the land with amethyst.
 Slow, slow!
 For the grapes' sake, if they were all,
 Whose leaves already are burnt with frost,
 Whose clustered fruit must else be lost--
 For the grapes' sake along the wall.

The other poem which deals with the same subject, though in a slightly different light is "Reluctance."²⁷ Man is always a questioning creature; not only does he see the beauty of a phase pass, but he questions the passing even though he knows that his questioning will not change matters one jot. In sequence of time, this poem might easily follow "October."

Out through the fields and the woods
 And over the walls I have wended;
 I have climbed the hills of view
 And looked at the world, and descended;
 I have come by the highway home,
 And low it is ended.

For the world is bared, the leaves are gone except for a few last ones hanging on but even they will be dropped onto the crusted snow soon; the leaves that have fallen lie in dead heaps, not in scurrying swirls; the asters are gone and the flowers of the witch-hazel are withered. "The heart is still aching to seek, but the feet question, 'Whither?'"

Ah, when to the heart of man
 Was it ever less than a treason
 To go with the drift of things,
 To yield with a grace to reason,
 And to bow and accept the end
 Of a love or a season?

27. Ibid., p. 43.

B. POEMS DEALING WITH MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE

Another of the universal themes which Frost discusses deals with the infinity of time and time's indifference to man. Occasionally Frost uses the term "time" in dealing with this matter, and occasionally he uses the term "nature" and man's struggle to overcome the elements of nature." He shows that the elements always seem to win out in the end; yet, strangely enough, even in the face of such overwhelming odds, man progresses; when he is frustrated in one direction, he turns his efforts toward another point. On the other hand, when man has forged ahead far enough so that he can view with a degree of satisfaction what he has done, nature, takes things in hand and shows her ultimate superiority.

The poem "New Hampshire" has been discussed in this work on page 35. There is no necessity of quoting here, but in connection with this discussion it will be well to notice what Monroe says concerning this poem.

It's a reasonable human attitude. Anyone with an ounce of humor must accept his own infinite unimportance in the universal scheme; but he also has a right to set up his own importance as an element in that scheme... Both the state and the poet face the half-glance of the world, and the huge laughter of destiny with pride and grit, and without egotism."¹

In "The Woodpile"² Frost tells of going for a walk in the frozen swamp. A small bird caught his eye, and he caught the eye of the bird, for it flew silently ahead, always keeping a tree between them for safety as if he thought the poet might be after the white feather in

1. Monroe, op. cit., p. 62.

2. Thornton, op. cit., reprinted from Yale Review, Dabbs. p. 122.

his tail "like one who takes everything said as personal to himself."
 But he forgot the bird when he noticed a cord of maple, all cut and neatly stacked; obviously it was older even than the cutting of the year before last.

The wood was grey and the bark was warping off it
 And the pile was somewhat sunken. Clematis
 Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
 What held it though on one side was a tree
 Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
 These later about to fall. I thought that only
 Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
 Could so forget his handiwork on which
 He spent himself, the labour of his axe,
 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

To find the relationship of this poem to the resistless forces of nature, one may note the words of McBride Dabbs: "Among the poems which are, in their entirety, symbolic, "The Wood-Pile" is notable. . . Nature holds man. . . . In a shadow. In its passive mood, it is solid, unyielding; in its active, almost resistless."³

"On Taking from the Top to Broaden the Base"⁴ has in it an unusually vivid illustration of the struggle of man against nature, for, just when he thinks that he has conquered her and that he is safe enough to shake a defiant fist at her, she indulges in some minor tantrum which is a major tragedy to him; and in spite of his boasting he is laid low.

Roll stones down on our head.
 You squat old pyramid,
 Your last good avalanche
 Was long since slid.

3. McBride Dabbs, "Robert Frost and the Dark Woods," Yale Review vol. 23, (March 1934) p. 516.

4. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 389.

Your top has sunk too low,
 Your base has spread too wide,
 For you to roll one stone
 Down if you tried.

But even at the word
 A pebble hit the roof,
 Another shot through glass
 Demanding proof.
 Before their panic hands
 Were fighting for the latch,
 The mud came in one cold
 Unleavened batch.

And none was left to prate
 Of an old mountain's case
 That still took from its top
 To broaden its base.

Although Frost is fully aware of the futility of struggle against some of the elements of nature, he has not become embittered, for he can still speak of her caprices with a wry humor. In "In Time of Cloudburst"⁵ he has this to say:

Let the down pour roil and toil!
 The worst it can do to me
 Is carry some garden soil
 A little nearer to the sea.

But he is not vastly concerned, for some day his entire garden will be washed away; and when it is, it is not at all impossible that some force of nature will cause a shift in the surface of the earth so that the low places shall be high, and the high low.

Then all I need do is run
 To the other end of the slope,
 And on tracts laid new to the sun,
 Begin all over to hope.

Some worn old tool of my own
 Will be turned up by the plow,
 The wood of it changed to stone,
 But as ready to wield as now

5. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 369.

May my application so close
 To so endless a repetition
 Not make me tired and morose
 And resentful of man's condition.

The very title of the poem "On Going Unnoticed"⁶ gives the key to the thought developed therein. Again the theme is that nature is unperturbed by the small ways of man. You go into the forest and find a bed of lovely flowers, coral-root. You want one, but almost fear that for taking such beauty, you will have to atone.

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

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

Another poem which develops this theme is "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things."⁷ The farm house had burned long ago, and all that was left standing was the chimney. The barn across the way still stood though it was no longer used except by the birds which flew in and out the broken windows,

Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
 From too much dwelling on what has been.

Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf,
 And the aged elm though touched with fire;
 And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;
 And the fencepost carried a strand of wire.
 For them there was really nothing sad.
 But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
 One had to be versed in country things
 Not to believe that the phoebes wept.

6. Ibid., p. 309.

7. Ibid., p. 300.

Nor are the larger forces of nature anymore disturbed by man than are the trees and flowers. "On looking by Chance at the Constellations,"⁸ indicates that the plan on which nature regulates her constellations makes one aware of her infinite impersonality. She is unconcerned about the conditions existing on earth.

You'll wait a long, long time for anything much
 To happen in heaven beyond the floats of cloud
 And the Northern Lights that run like tingling nerves.
 The sun and moon get crossed, but they never touch,
 Nor strike out fire from each other, nor crash out loud.
 The planets seem to interfere in their curves,
 But nothing ever happens, no harm is done.
 We may as well go patiently on with our life,
 And look elsewhere than to stars and moon and sun
 For the shocks and changes we need to keep us sane.
 It is true the longest drought will end in rain,
 The longest peace in China will end in strife.
 Still it wouldn't reward the watcher to stay awake
 In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break
 On his particular time and personal sight.
 That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight.

Then there are several poems which, instead of speaking of the resistlessness and impersonality of nature, speak of time. The plaintively beautiful poem "They Were Welcome to their Belief"⁹ tells that man grows old whether he experiences grief or pain, or neither, for as the seasons pass his head whitens.

Grief may have thought it was grief.
 Care may have thought it was care.
 They were welcome to their belief,
 The over important pair.

But it took every year that came, beginning when the man was young, to make his head white, but it did whiten, becoming a "shade more the color of snow" every year.

8. Ibid., p. 346.

9. Ibid., p. 390.

Grief may have thought it was grief.
 Care may have thought it was care.
 But neither one was the thief
 Of his raven color of hair.

The infinity and changlessness of time, the brevity and insignificance of man is the theme of "I Will Sing You One-0."¹⁰ The poet lay wakeful in bed, wishing for time to pass when the town clock struck one. This started a trend of thought which was not to stop short of the constellations of the universe. For that one symbolized much more than the time of the night. With it the winds came to tell of the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the constellations, beyond which is God. The winds spoke for the clock.

In that grave word
 Uttered alone
 The utmost star
 Trembled and stirred,
 Though set so far
 Its whirling frenzies
 Appear like standing
 In one self station.
 It has not ranged,
 And save for the wonder
 Of once expanding
 To be a nova,
 It has not changed
 To the eye of man
 One planets over
 Around and under
 It in creation
 Since man began
 To drag down man
 And nation nation.

Time is everlasting even beyond the forces of nature, for given enough time, the forces of nature through erosion change the contours of the earth. The first two stanzas of "I Could Give All To Time"¹¹ deal with the impersonality of time in regard to these changes.

10. Ibid., pp. 264-266.

11. Frost, Witness Tree, p. 17.

To Time it never seems that he is brave
 To set himself against the peaks of snow
 To lay them level with the running wave,
 Nor is he overjoyed when they lie low
 But only grave, contemplative and grave.

What now is inland shall be ocean isle,
 Then eddies playing round a sunken reef
 Like the curl at the corner of a smile;
 And I could share Time's lack of joy or grief
 At such a planetary change of style.

That man may temporarily overcome the forces of nature Frost shows in another group of poems. These deal with the struggle that man makes to establish a habitation or a home and the swiftness and certainty with which nature takes over the area as soon as man has turned his back. "The Census Taker"¹² takes this repossession by nature further than the local places indicated. The poet assuming the role of census-taker, has come to a "slab-built, black-paper-covered house of one room, one window, and one door, the only dwelling in a waste cut over a hundred square miles round it in the mountains." Though there had at one time been dwellers here, there was now only the severest desolation.

The time was autumn, but how anyone
 Could tell the time of year when every tree
 That could have dropped a leaf was down itself
 And nothing but the stump of it was left
 Now bringing out its rings in sugar of pitch;
 And every tree up stood a rotting trunk
 Without a single leaf to spend on autumn,
 Or branch to whistle after what was spent.

As the census-taker stood under the spell of this desolation, he imagined he saw the men who lived there. His meditations led him to think what he could do about the house, about the people who were not there.

12. Frost, Collected Poems, pp. 216, 217.

This house in one year fallen to decay
 Filled me with no less sorrow than the houses
 Fallen to ruin in ten thousand years
 Where Asia wedges Africa from Europe.

Absorbed in thought of the places where souls "grow fewer and fewer every year," he reached this conclusion: "It must be I want life to go on living."

But houses of strange, imaginary people are not the only ones which nature reclaims if she is given the opportunity. In a poem which gains the reader's sympathy Frost speaks of his own birthplace--at least his own for the duration of the poem--and its return toward its native state. He calls it "The Birthplace."¹³

Here further up the mountain slope
 Than there was ever any hope,
 My father built, enclosed a spring.
 Strung chains of wall round everything,
 Subdued the growth of earth to grass,
 And brought our various lives to pass.
 A dozen girls and boys we were.
 The mountain seemed to like the stir
 And made of us a little while--
 With always something in her smile.
 Today she wouldn't know our name.
 (No girl's of course, has stayed the same.)
 The mountain pushed us off her knees.
 And now her lap is full of trees.

Man seems to have subdued nature in "A Brook in the City"¹⁴ for a new city street has taken the path that the brook once followed. Turned into a sewer, it would seem to be safely cemented down to the control of man. But Frost cannot believe that the subjugation is so complete as it appears on the new maps which no longer indicate the course of the brook.

But I wonder
 If from its being kept forever under

13. Ibid., p. 339.

14. Ibid., p. 284.

The thoughts may not have risen that so keep
This new-built city from work and sleep.

The picture of man in his struggle against nature is not completely dark, not even for Frost. McBride Dabbs offers an explanation of the poet's attitude on the question of man and nature:

Yet, though nature threatens man with destruction, its very challenge creates courage, and so life, within him. Nature exists—so far as man is concerned—to be fought against; but not to be destroyed, even were that possible, for that would be the destruction of man himself.¹⁵

Lewishohn points out this philosophy as illustrated in "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road." He says, "Mankind has a way of striving; there is, at the least, a fundamental moral energy in human life; 'The Tree Fallen Across the Road' cannot really halt us."¹⁶ The incident in the poem is this: travelers on a journey know that a tree fallen across the road does not permanently bar the way to the goal; it only makes them stop to think what to do.

And yet she [the tree] knows obstruction is in vain;
We will not be put off the final goal
We have it hidden in us to attain,
Not though we have to seize earth by the pole
And, tired of aimless circling in one place,
Steer straight off after something into space.¹⁷

The theme in "Sand Dunes"¹⁸ indicates that man will strive, and get ahead in one way or another through the power of his mind; for, though nature may overcome man in the more material sense and may seem to cut him off from his goal at every turn through the power of his mind he finds a new way out.

15. Dabbs, op. cit., p. 123.

16. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 296.

17. Frost, op. cit., p. 296.

18. Ibid., p. 330.

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

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

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

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

In Frost's recent book, A Witness Tree, he seems to have a more optimistic outlook concerning the relationship of man and nature; nature must be a fraction more benignant than she is malicious else by this time man would have been annihilated.

It is "Our Hold on the Planet"¹⁹ which gives expression to this idea of a more lenient nature than has been pictured in the earlier publications. Although Frost usually presents only the bleaker side of nature when representing her as the elements in their relation to the human race, in this poems he devotes the first eleven lines to showing her more maternal side.

We asked for rain. It didn't flash and roar.
 It didn't lose its temper at our demand
 And blow a gale. It didn't misunderstand
 And give us more than our spokesman bargained for;
 And just because we owned to a wish for rain,
 Send us a flood and bid us be damned and drown.
 It gently threw us a glittering shower down.

19. Frost, A Witness Tree, p. 43.

And when we had taken that into the roots of grain,
 It threw us another and then another still
 Till the spongy soil again was natal wet.
 We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill.
 There is so much in nature against us.

The rest of the poem gives adequate justification for the conclusion
 that has gone before.

But we forget:

Take nature altogether since time began,
 Including human nature, in peace and war,
 And it must be a little more in favor of man,
 Say a fraction of one percent at the very least,
 Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,
 Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.

C. POEMS DEALING WITH MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO MAN

War is an unfortunately universal theme. Robert Frost was in England when she entered World War I. One of his most intimate English acquaintances, Edward Thomas, lost his life on Vimy Ridge. The impact of that war, and fear of war in general left upon Robert Frost a mark that is shown in a number of his poems. "Range-Finding"¹ shows the fierceness of war even more vividly because it tells how the influence is felt beyond man and cuts into the lives of the small creatures which are found in his environment.

The battle rent a cobweb diamond-strung
 And cut a flower beside a ground bird's nest
 Before it staired a single human breast.
 The stricken flower bent double and so hung.

And still the bird revisited her young.
 A butterfly its fall had dispossessed
 A moment sought in air his flower of rest,
 Then lightly stooped to it and fluttering clung.

On the bare upland pasture there had spread
 O'ernight 'twixt mullein stalks a wheel of thread
 A sudden passing bullet shook it dry.
 The indwelling spider ran to greet the fly,
 But finding nothing, suddenly withdrew.

A poem which shows the bitterness Frost feels toward war is "The Bonfire."² The father in the poem suggests to the children that they go up the hill with him this particular evening to set fire to all the brush that they had piled up for winter. The flame will shoot so high the people will come to the windows of their houses to see what is causing such a light. When he suggests that they might scare themselves, the children ask if it would scare him, too. Yes, he tells them, for once he built a small fire which got out of hand for

1. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 159.

2. Ibid., pp. 163-166.

a time; it burned withered grass and flowers. In fear he knelt to rub--"fight such a fire b' rubbing not b' beating"--the fire out with his coat, the only weapon he had available. The smother of smoke was almost past abiding, but he kept on, the thought of the woods and town set on fire by him goading him to fight on the road side while he trusted the brook to stop it on the other. He won; and in spite of his weariness he felt he was walking on air, even when the neighbors who had passed a green field on the way saw it suddenly turned black on their return. No wonder, he comments, he would be scared. Then the children have a question:

"If it scares you, what will it do to us?"

"Scare you. But if you shrink from being scared, What would you say to war if it should come? That's what for reasons I should like to know-- If you can comfort me by any answer."

"Oh, but war's not for children--it's for man."

"Now we are digging almost down to China.
My dear, my dear, you thought that--we all thought it.
So your mistake was ours. Haven't you heard, though,
About the ships where war has found them out
At sea, about the towns where war has come
Through opening clouds at night with ironing speed
Further o'erhead than all but stars and angels,--
And children in ships and in the towns?
Haven't you heard what we have lived to learn?
Nothing so new--something we had forgotten:
War is for everyone, for children too.
I wasn't going to tell you and I mustn't.
The best way is to come uphill with me
And have our fire and laugh and be afraid."

The bitterness of disillusionment is found the sonnet entitled "The Flood."³ It is both a bitterness and a disillusionment that

3. Ibid., p. 323.

might apply today when the men of the world have learned of the seeming inevitability of man's need to struggle one against the other even as he must struggle against nature. Herein Frost speaks of the many times that man has thought the human greed which stirs up wars has been smothered, only to see it break through again.

Blood has been harder to dam back than water.
 Just when we think we have it impounded safe
 Behind new barrier walls (and let it chafe!).
 It breaks away in some new kind of slaughter.
 We choose to say it is let loose by the devil;
 But power of blood itself releases blood.
 It goes by might of being such a flood
 Held high at so unnatural a level.
 It will have outlet, brave and not so brave.
 Weapons of war and implements of peace
 Are but the points at which it finds release.
 And now it is once more the tidal wave
 That when it has swept by leaves summits stained.
 Oh, blood will out. It cannot be contained.

"The Peaceful Shepherd"⁴ is another of the poems which reveals the bitterness at the stupidity of man which has caused him to become involved in war. It is the only time reference is found so directly to Christianity.

If heaven were to do again,
 And on the pasture bars,
 I leaned to line the figures in
 Between the dotted stars,

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 now men have warred.
 The Cross, The Crown, the Scales may all
 As well have been the Sword.

One of his war poems "Not to Keep"⁵ deals with the tragedy of

4. Ibid., p. 319.

5. Ibid., p. 284.

the personal element. A wife received word first that her husband was being sent back to her from the war. Because the army returns only the living, not the dead, she was glad; but when she saw him she looked for some disfigurement, some maimed limb; she could see nothing wrong; so she asked,

"What is it, dear?" And he had given all
 And still he had all--they had--they the lucky!
 Wasn't she glad now? Everything seemed won,
 And all the rest for them permissible ease.
 She had to ask, "What was it, dear?"

He had to tell her, it was only a bullet high in the chest; he had come home for nursing at her hands so that he could return to the lines in a week.

The same
 grim giving to do over for them both
 She dared no more than ask him with her eyes
 How was it with him for a second trial.
 And with his eyes he asked her not to ask
 They had given him back to her, but not to keep.

"The Trial by Existence" treats of a theme which has often been developed in the hands of the writers of the ages. It expresses the idea that human kind chooses its own fate in some way or another. The poem tells of a scene in heaven; the angels are gathered together on a cliff-top where "the trial by existence named, the obscuration upon earth." Though they see the sacrifice that birth upon earth will necessitate, they are more than willing to go, for they see the opportunity of doing some good, and the tale of earth's unhonored things sounds nobler there than 'neath the sun and

The State of earth's unhonored things
 Sounds nobler there than 'neath the sun;
 And the mind whirls and the heart sings,
 And a shout greets the daring one.

But always God speaks at the end;
 "One thought in agony of strife
 The bravest would have by for friend,
 The memory that he chose the life;
 But the pure fate to which you go
 Admits no memory of choice,
 Or the woe were not earthly woe
 To which you give the assenting voice."

And so the choice must be again,
 But the last choice still the same,
 And the awe passes wonder then,
 And a hush falls for all acclaim.
 And God has taken a flower of gold
 And broken it, and used therefrom
 The mystic link to bind and hold
 Spirit to matter till death come.

'Tis of the essence of life here,
 Though we choose greatly, still to lack
 The lasting memory at all clearer,
 That life has for us on the wrack
 Nothing but what we somehow chose;
 Thus are we wholly stripped of pride
 In the pain that has but one close,
 Bearing it crushed and mystified.

In discussing this poem, Gorham B. Munson quotes another critic:

"As Llewellyn Jones has stated it, it is 'A recognition that suffering is always in terms of what we are, not an alien something hitting us by chance from without but somehow or other implicit in our very constitution.'"⁶

Frost, with unusual optimism, sets out to prove, in spite of the things he hears the sages say, that this age of man is no darker than any age which has gone before. His method of proof is an imaginary conversation with some poet who lived generations ago. He entitles this poem "The Lesson for Today."⁷ The whole point of the conversation

6. Munson, op. cit., p. 113.

7. Frost, A Witness Tree, pp. 46-52.

is to see which can produce evidence to prove that his age will go down in history as the darker. This is the only time that Frost specifically says that he is dealing in universals.

Both must admit that it is difficult to appraise a time in which one is living; but they can pretend they know enough of what the long view will say to select the worst points of their respective ages.

They find a common ground to begin upon:

There's always something to be sorry for,
 A sordid peace or an outrageous war.
 Yes, yes, of course, we have the same convention.
 The groundwork of all faith is human woe.
 It was well worth the preliminary mention.
 There's nothing but injustice to be had.

.....
 But let's get on to where our cases part,
 If they do part. Let me propose a start.

.....
 Space ails us moderns: we are stuck with space.
 Its contemplation makes us out as small
 As a brief epidemic of microbes
 That in a good glass may be seen to crawl
 The patina of this the least of globes.
 But have we there the advantage after all?
 You were belittled into vilest worms
 God hardly tolerated with his feet;
 Which comes to the same thing in different terms.
 We both are the belittled human race,
 One as compared with God and one with space.
 I had thought ours the more profound disgrace.

.....
 So science and religion really meet.

.....
 But these are universals, not confined
 To anyone time, place, or human kind.
 We're either nothing or a God's regret.
 As ever when philosophers are met,
 No matter where they stoutly mean to get,

Nor what particulars they reason from,
They are philosophers, and from old habit
They end up in the universal Whole
As unoriginal as any rabbit.

Then Frost reaches the conclusion that "one age is like another for the soul, for all ages shine with equal darkness." He points out that he has gone to the grave yard to read the epitaphs and has noticed that life varies in length from a few hours to over a hundred years. Then it is made universal, not only mankind, but the race, the nation, and possibly the earth "are doomed to broken-off careers." So after all, one age is not in reality darker than another one, for the same universals apply to all.

D. POEMS WITH SETTINGS DEFINITELY OUTSIDE NEW ENGLAND

In further evidence of the fact that Frost's scope is broader than the provincial setting of his New England home, there are a number of poems which are definitely set outside that region. The poet spent the first ten years of his life in California in a period shortly following the gold rush days. There is nothing to indicate that the lad took all the intensity of such living very closely to heart, but there is evidence that he did not tear it from his memory so completely as some would have his readers believe. One of the poems of his boyhood is "A Peck of Gold."¹ Although the refrain is not a common device in the works of this poet, it is used here in a modified form.

Dust always blowing about the town
 Except when sea-fog laid it down,
 And I was one of the children told
 Some of the blowing dust was gold.

All the dust the wind blew high
 Appeared like gold in the sunset sky,
 But I was one of the children told
 Some of the dust was really gold.

Such was life in the Golden Gate:
 Gold dusted all we drank and ate,
 And I was one of the children told
 "We all must eat our peck of gold."

Though Frost left California when he was ten years old and, to this time, has not returned to that state, at least one of his experiences with the ocean left a profound impression on him. The name of the poem in which he reveals the thoughts---which must have come to him much later--induced by one ocean view is simply "Once by the Pacific."

1. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 312.

The shattered water made a misty din.
 Great waves looked over others coming in,
 And thought of doing something to the shore
 That water never did to land before.
 The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
 Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
 You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
 The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
 The cliff in being backed by continent;
 It looked as if a night of dark intent
 Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
 Someone had better be prepared for rage.
 There would be more than ocean-water broken
 Before God's last Put out the Light was spoken.²

There is a second part of "The Wind and the Rain" discussed on page thirty seven of this work. Because the setting is an arid region-- probably a desert area of the Southwest, this poem also may be classed with those placed outside of New England.

In one of the poems which expressed Frost's philosophy of letting what will be, be, there is another outside reference, though the reader must decide for himself whether the location is California or England; however, he can be sure, since the sun sets in a gulf, that it is not Frost's home state. The poem is called "Acceptance."³

When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud
 And goes down burning into the gulf below,
 No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud
 At what has happened.

One of the sections of his book of Collected Poems, Frost entitles "The Outland" perhaps some of the earlier critical jibes at his complete disregard of any part of the world or his experience other than New England led him to believe that he must of necessity write something more obviously of the outside world, and so label it.

2. Ibid., p. 314.

3. Ibid., p. 313.

Be that as it may, two of the three "Outlands" poems are historical narratives. The first one is "The Vindictives," which deals with a phase of the fall of the Inca kingdom. It was the great store of gold which the conquerors first sought. They took the king prisoner, then demanded all the gold his subjects could gather for his ransom,

But when there seemed no more to bring
His captors convicted the king
Of once having started a war,
And strangled the wretch with a string.

Whereupon the subjugated people determined that, since gold was the thing the conquerors wanted, no more gold should they have. The Incas in their hate began hiding the gold.

That self-sack and self-overthrow.
That was the splendoriest sack
Since the forest Germans sacked Rome.
And took the gold candlesticks home.

Even the rack could not tear from them the secrets of their treasures.

But the conquered grew meek and still
They slowly and silently aged.
They kept their secrets and died,
Maliciously satisfied.

The most coveted treasure of all was a thousand-linked chain of gold, each link of which weighed a hundred weight; it had served as the palace gate by being looped ten times from pole to pole. It was hidden in an old burial hole in a tribal cave, where its splendor shone among the decaying bones of human and beast, and every Inca asked concerning that treasure had a different story to tell in his hate: it had gone to the coast; it had been sent over the mountains to the east; a sun-priest had led a single file expedition into the north with it. But the gold lay in the filth, bright and untarnished, while the secret of its disposal and the slow seething of hate died with the people;

for they had a philosophy which backed them up in their non-violent resistance.

"The best way to hate is the worst.
 'Tis to find what the hated need,
 Never mind of actual worth,
 And wipe that out of the earth.
 Let them die of unsatisfied greed,
 Of unsatisfied love of display,
 Of unsatisfied love of the high,
 Unvulgar, unsoiled, and ideal.
 Let their trappings be taken away.
 Let them suffer starvation and die
 Of being brought down to the real."

"The Bearer of Evil Tidings," the second poem of this group, is a reminder that in the olden days the messenger who was so unfortunate as to be selected to carry bad tidings to his emperor was put to death in reward for his efforts. This particular bearer was half way to his destination when he remembered how dangerous to himself his news was, so he took the fork of the road that turned into the unknown. His running led him into the land of Pamir, where he met a girl of his own age, a member of an isolated tribe, who told him the story of her tribe's origin and religion. A Chinese princess had been enroute to wed a Persian prince when she was found to be with child. She and her army came to a troubled halt. "And though a god was the father and nobody else at fault, it had seemed discreet to remain there and neither go on nor back. Because this child was of divine parentage, he was given the rule of this tribe which grew from the halted people. The Bearer was so pleased with the situation that he decided to take up their religion and become a member of this Himalayan tribe.

At least he had this in common
 With the race he chose to adopt;
 They had both of them had their reasons
 For stopping where they had stopped.

As for his evil tiding,
 Belshazzar's overthrow,
 Why hurry to tell Belshazzar
 What soon enough he would know.

The third "Outlands" poem, "Iris by Night,"⁴ has been discussed among those which deal with the personal elements in Frost's poetry, but in the section now under discussion it will be well to point out that the setting of this poem is England:

One misty evening, one another's guide,
 We two were groping down a Malvern side
 The last wet fields and dripping hedges home.

In his recent book there is another of the narrative poems based upon legend, "The Discovery of the Madeiras."⁵ That the basic story is in good repute is evinced by its being mentioned in the Encyclopedia Britannica:

There is a romantic story to the effect that two lovers, Robert Mashim, a Machin or Macham, and Ann D'Arfet, fleeing from England to France (c1370) were driven out of their course by a violent storm and cast on the coast of Madeira at a place subsequently named Machica in memory of one of them.⁶

A stolen lady was coming on board,
 But whether stolen from her wedded lord
 Or from her own self against her will
 Was not set forth in the lading bill.

However she came, her courage was weak when the irrevocable moment of departure came, for "her lover to make the ordeal swift had to give her the final lift." The first days of the journey were so rough that the lady had to stay below deck; but when the weather turned fair

4. Ibid., p. 418.

5. Frost, Witness Tree. pp. 32-37.

6. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, London, (1937), Fourteenth Edition, v. 15, p. 609.

"she was carried out beside the mast," where she and her lover sat and conversed with one another more in looks and head shakings than in words. Occasionally the lover, to keep the captain's favor, would go to talk with him. The ship had formerly been a slaver and the captain liked to tell stories of those days. One he told the lover concerned a couple of captive lovers on board a slaver who, in their love for one another, were oblivious of surrounding conditions. Unfortunately the fever struck the boat, and the "nigger" man was among the first who took it. The crew decided to throw him overboard alive to prevent the spread of the disease, but the girl made such a savage scene in her fighting to prevent this step that the crew were angered. Some one had an idea,

Apparently these two ought to marry.
 We get plenty funerals at sea
 How for a change would a wedding be?--
 Or a combination of the two,
 How would a funeral-wedding do?
 It's gone so far she's probably caught
 Whatever it is the nigger's got."
 They bound them naked so they faced
 With a length of cordage about the waist,

.....
 They added clasps about the neck
 And went embraced to the cold and dark
 To be their own marriage feast for the shark.

When the lover returned to the woman he had left by the mast, he repeated some of the conversation, but she sensed there was more. Upon her demand, he told her the tale. She sought denial of its truth, but no denial was forthcoming. The story seemed to break her spirit; she could not flee physically, so she withdrew to herself. She daily faded more until the lover finally asked the captain to put them off

at the nearest land, hoping that an "untossed place" would effect a cure. The ship lay in the bay for awhile waiting for her recovery, but she grew worse rather than better.

Her lover saw them sail away,
 But dared not tell her all one day.
 For slowly even her sense of him
 And love itself were growing dim.
 He no more drew the smile he sought.
 The story is she died of thought.

And when her lover was left alone
 He stayed long enough to carve on stone
 The name of the lady with his own
 To be her only marriage line.
 And carved them round with a scroll of vines.
 Then he gouged a clumsy sailing trough
 From a fallen tree and pushing off
 Safely made the African shore,
 Where he fell a prisoner to the Moor.
 But the Moor strangely enough believed
 The tale of the voyage he had achieved,
 And sent him to the king to admire.
 He came at last to his native shore.
 The island he found was verified.
 And the bay where his stolen lady died
 Was named for him instead of her.
 But so is history like to err.
 And soon it is neither here nor there
 Whether time's rewards are fair or unfair.

It is not at all a dangerous generalization to say that any poet who writes with a consciousness of so many universal themes as have been illustrated in this chapter is not to be characterized as being local or provincial, and only that. His themes are not only those which have an appeal to the understanding and sympathy of mankind, but also those which find a common keynote in the emotions and interests of the men of the world and of the ages.

CHAPTER V

POEMS WITH UNIVERSAL MEANING FOUND IN PROVINCIAL SETTING

A. OPINIONS OF THE CRITICS

How anyone can fail to see
 Where perfectly in form and tint
 The metaphor, the symbol lies!
 Why will I not analogize?
 (I do too much in some men's eyes.)¹

Previous chapter have dealt with poems of Robert Frost which show elements that are purely local and elements that are distinctly universal; there is still another group of poems characteristic of this author. This third division of poetry has received more attention from the critics than the other two, perhaps because it constitutes a larger body of his work and possibly because of the rare skill with which he accomplishes his aim. Not upon his universal poems alone has Frost won his reputation as a universal poet, but upon those which clothe the universal in the garments of a local setting. Since there are critics who analyze both his style and ability in this matter, further explanation of the term "the universal in the local" is quoted from them.

Blankenship has this to say:

In the history of American literature it has usually been accounted something to transmute into literary form the peculiar flavor, the atmosphere, the speech of a particular locality. For more than a century men have labored to describe the chill of New England winters, the pine woods under a deep snow, the beauty of the spring, the riot of autumn colors, and, above all, the taciturn inhabitants, rooted to the soil, and distinguished from all other Americans by their canny ways and clipped speech. Local colorists would have thought themselves successful if they had been able to depict only these

1. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 436.

things. But it remained for Robert Frost to describe lovingly and accurately the particularizing qualities of the New England land and people, and then to achieve a unique distinction in our letters by penetrating far enough below local peculiarities to reveal universal aspects of life and human nature.

Frost is certainly not the last person in the world to sense that he is more than a poet of New England, for in his "New Hampshire" he mildly objects to a local classification. The objection is rather noteworthy, for he is generally the most reticent of men about his own work.

And when I asked to know what ailed the people.
 She said, Go read your own books and find out.
 I may as well confess myself the author
 Of several books against the world in general.
 To make them as against a special state
 Or even the nation's to restrict my meaning.

.
 Because I wrote my novels in New Hampshire
 Is no proof that I aimed them at New Hampshire. ²

In speaking of the same subject, Monroe says of Frost:

This poet, however loyally local, is bigger than his environment: and his art, plunging beneath surfaces and accidents, seizes upon the essential, the typical, in the relation of men and women with each other, and all that lives and moves between them. Such art passes local boundaries as lightly as an airplane, and swings out into wider circles of time and space.

Lamberth credits Frost with unusual skill in revealing universal truth.

He has caught in his net of words the whole of a living experience clothed in its mere accidentals of time and place. And at the heart of such an experience is that universal truth which resides at the center of every particular truth, but which is visible only to those who have learned to see.³

Schwartz expresses his admiration for Frost's art in these words:

He is one of the great poets of our day; his work treats of his country and its people, being, like no other, bound to them by destiny and intention. Above all else, however, drawing his strength from

2. Blankenship, op. cit., p. 588.

3. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 142.

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this source, he reaches out into the range of that which concerns us all. For he is a poet of his country, and at the same time, one of the natural sages of mankind.⁴

Blankenship also has something to say concerning the way Frost deals with truth:

With the touch of a creative artist and the swift insight of a born poet, he has transmuted rustic provincialism into something of universal truth and spiritual significance.⁵

A. C. Ward speaks a little more conservatively:

A great deal of the essential America is in his poetry, but it is always interpreted in universal terms. A foreign reader of Frost's work cannot fail to know the American spirit better afterwards than before, though at no time is its interest solely American.⁶

Van Doren uses a much more sweeping statement to cover the same thought:

If he is not all things to all men he is something to almost anybody--to posterity, one supposes, as well as to us.⁷

James Southall Wilson elaborates a little more upon the subject.

Frost's philosophy always derives from personal experience and his poems in detail are personal and objective. They are, as has been indicated, human, conversational, humorous, quietly dramatic (sometimes in an almost commonplace way)--and very local. Yet he is the most American poet and he universalizes everything that he touches. Truth is often hidden in a paradox. So with Frost. He seems interested only in the particular but the particular is for him the universal. He finds the center of the universe in every grain of sand that blows by his Vermont farm gate: the center of the universe is the focus from which the poet, who is also the philosopher, looks out in all directions upon the universe.⁸

Van Doren also speaks of the world appeal found in Frost:

He is a New England poet, perhaps the New England poet, and reaps all the advantage there is in being true to a particular piece of

4. Ibid., p. 283.

5. Blankenship, op. cit., pp. 593.

6. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 264.

7. Ibid., p. 5.

8. Ibid., p. 241.

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earth--true to its landscape, its climate, its history, its morality, its tongue. But he is in the same breath a poet of and for the world. One needs not have lived in New England to understand him. . . his voice is immediately recognizable anywhere as a human voice, and recognizable for the much that it has to say. He has his roots, as literature must always have them; but he grows at the top into the wide air that flows around the world where men and women listen.⁹

Sergeant, borrowing Frost's own term, "World in general," to refer to the poets field, by saying that he gives clarity to

. . . human lives in this thin northern atmosphere of his, shut in by moral and physical solitude, yet escaping through their barriers to grapple together in situations of love and hate and suffering typical and inevitable of New England but also of 'the world in general'.¹⁰

One more quotation will suffice in this presentation of the evidence from the pens of the critics that Frost is an artist in presenting the universal by portraying its elements found in the local. Lewisjohn specifies several poems which he feels illustrate this characteristic which has been under discussion.

He is at best when from phenomena in life and nature, seen with the highest sobriety and poeticalness at once, he wrings a meaning which is both personal and universal, concrete and therefore general. He does that again and again in the 'Grace Notes' of the New Hampshire volume, in 'Fragmentary Blue,' in 'The Runaway,' 'Blue Butterfly Day' 'Good-Bye and Keep Cold,' 'A Brook in the City,' 'Gathering Leaves,' 'The Kitchen Chimney,' 'The Lockless Door.' These are extraordinarily satisfactory poems, profound and lucid.¹¹

9. Ibid, pp. 12, 13.

10. Sergeant, op. cit., p. 294.

11. Ludwig Lewisjohn, quoted by Thornton, op. cit., pp. 216, 217.

B. ANALYSES OF POEMS CITED BY THE CRITICS
AS PRESENTING THE UNIVERSAL IN THE LOCAL.

The critics have not stopped at saying that Frost is a universal poet who uses the techniques of the localist; they have used some of his poems to illustrate their points.

Perhaps only one other of Frost's poems has been quoted in whole or in part more than "Mending a Wall";¹ its epigrammatic line "Good fences make good neighbors" is one of the touchstones of Frost's poetry, even though he warns against too general an application of its philosophy. He begins by saying, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that sends the frozen-ground-swell under it. . . ." Hunters make gaps, too, but theirs are different, for they practically tear the stone wall down to get the prey out of hiding; but this force of nature which does not love a wall takes a stone off here or there or makes a gap large enough for two to pass abreast at different places along the whole length of the wall. The poet finds his neighbor in the spring at mending-time, and they walk the line.

We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.

The work is arduous, for some of the boulders are so round the men must say a charm to make them stay in place.

There where it is we do not need the wall;
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good Fences make good neighbors."

Spring is the mischief in men, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head;

1. Frost, Collected Poems, pp. 47, 48.

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 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 offence.
 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That wants it down," I could say "Elves" to him,
 But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
 He said it for himself. I see him there
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
 In each hand, like an old stone savage armed.
 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
 He will not go behind his father's saying,
 And he likes having thought of it so well
 He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Although the universal elements in this poem dealing with both local character and local circumstance, not to mention local tradition, are obvious enough that they need not be pointed out, it is interesting to note what Louis Untermeyer says of it. In his American Poetry Since 1900, published in 1919 he writes:

It is after one has finished the poem that its power persists and grows. It takes on the quality of symbolism of two elemental and opposed forces. In its dispute about border lines, we have the essence of nationalism vs the internationalist. Beneath the whim and social anarchy of the one and the blind, literal insistence of the other, one senses the endless struggle between a pagan irresponsibility and a strict accountability. It is not just a conflict between the old and the New England; it is an echo of nature as primitive as Law and Revolution.²

Although it is startling to find Frost called a social anarchist and an irresponsible pagan, the comment does show Untermeyer's early interest in the poem. This critic's works offer an unusual opportunity to observe the degree to which Frost has held his position over a decade and a half; for seventeen years later, Untermeyer compiled another

2. Untermeyer, American Poetry Since 1900, p. 23.

collection of American poetry in which he again placed a comment on Frost. He has somewhat modified his opinion of "Mending Wall."

In "Mending Wall," we see two elemental and opposed forces. . . . Here we have the essence of nationalism versus the internationalist, the struggle, though the poet would be the last to prod the point, between blind obedience to custom and questioning inconciliams.³

The poem of Frost's quoted equally with "Mending Wall" is "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."⁴ The element of the universal in this is no less present than in the one just discussed; but that element is a little more difficult to define, as a reading of the poem will show.

Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

McBride Dabbs has found the words which well express the depths of the poem.

I know of no other symbol in Frost's poetry that, partly because of the appropriate music, says so much as this. . . . In 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' we hear the more than human music of a typical human situation, the insistent whisper of death at the heart of life. For we are all travellers, travelling alone through haunted country. Strange voices allure us away to nature, friendly voices call us back to men. Whichever call we heed, we sleep at last. And often today, in tragic indecision confused by the conflicting voices,

3. Untermeyer, Modern American Poetry, pp. 209.

4. Frost, op. cit., p. 275.

we fall asleep murmuring of the miles we have to go.⁵

"The Runaway"⁶ is a poem of too perfect balance and perfection to permit distortion or mutilation by quoting less than all of it.

Once when the snow of the year was beginning to fall,
 We stopped by a mountain pasture to say, "Whose colt?"
 A little Morgan had one forefoot on the wall,
 The other curled at his breast. He dipped his head
 And snorted at us. And then he had to bolt.
 We heard the miniature thunder where he fled,
 And we saw him, or thought we saw him, dim and grey,
 Like a shadow against the curtain of falling flakes.
 I think the little fellow's afraid of the snow
 He isn't winter-broken. It isn't play

With the little fellow at all. He's running away.
 I doubt if even his mother could tell him, "Sakes,
 It's only weather." He'd think she didn't know!
 And now he comes again with clatter of stone,
 And mounts the wall again with whited eyes
 And all his tail that isn't hair up straight,
 He shudders his coat as if to throw off flies,
 Whoever it is that leaves him out so late
 When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,
 Ought to be told to come and take him in.

Van Doren points out the universal truth illustrated in this poem.

The poem called 'The Runaway' is a perfect picture of a young colt escaped from its mother in a snowstorm. It is also, though there are no words in which it says this, a complete reminder of a universe full of young, lost things, of a universe in which every creature, indeed, lives touchingly and amusingly alone. And there is no human being alive who would miss this poem.⁷

"The Black Cottage"⁸ is different in type from the three gone before. Its interest lies chiefly in the character of an old New England woman who is typical of many old women the world over. One day when

5. McBride Dabbs, "Frost and the Dark Woods," Yale Review, v. 23, (March 1934), p. 50.

6. Frost, op. cit., p. 273.

7. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 10.

8. Frost, op. cit., pp. 74-77.

Frost and the minister were out walking, they passed a little cottage set back among the cherry trees. The minister invited the poet in; then, in a Browning-like monologue, related the story of the house. The place was just as the old woman had left it when she died, for her sons refused to have it disturbed. This attitude was a token of their affection for their mother, whose apparent simplicity and naivete were backed by a wisdom profound enough to retain that affection untarnished. The boys lived in California, but, the minister told the poet parenthetically,

(Nothing could draw her after those two sons.
She valued the considerate neglect
She had at some cost taught them after years.)

The two went into the house as the minister talked. On a wall of the living room was a crayon portrait of her husband who had been killed in the Civil War. This picture seemed to represent something of the life of that old woman.

She had her own ideal of things, the old lady.
And she liked talk. She had seen Garrison
And Whittier, and had her story of them.
One wasn't long in learning that she thought
Whatever else the Civil War was for,
It wasn't just to keep the States together,
Nor just to free the slaves, though it did both.
She wouldn't have believed those ends enough
To have given outright for them all she gave.
Her giving somehow touched the principle
That all men are created free and equal.

For she believed that the Civil War produced racial equality, and that thence it was thoroughly established. She was such a naively innocent and trusting soul that, the minister confesses,

Do you know but for her there was a time
When to please younger members of the church,
Or rather say non-members in the church,
Whom we all have to think of nowadays,
I would have changed the Creed a very little?
Not that she ever had to ask me not to;
It never got so as that; but the bare thought
Of her old tremulous bonnet in the pew,
And of her half asleep was too much for me.

Why, I might wake her up and startle her
 It was the words "descended into Hades"
 That seemed too pagan to our liberal youth.

It is at this point that Kreymborg takes up the theme to show the universal-in-the-local interpretation.

An observation follows whose application is universal to men swinging back and forth between conservatism and romanticism. It applies even to poetry movements:

I'm just as glad she made me keep hands off
 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 truth being in and out of favor.⁹

The poem does not continue far from there, except that as the minister continues with his little conclusion he expresses another universal desire: that of finding unquestioned truth so that one's outlook and philosophy might have a degree of stability and certainty.

As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish
 I could be monarch of a desert land
 I could devote and dedicate forever
 To the truths we keep coming back and back to.

Another narrative poem in which the critics find universal meaning is "Blueberries."¹⁰ Two are discussing a patch of ripe blueberries they have seen in a spot that only two years ago was burned over; they would like to go pick them, but "Loren" will probably beat them to it since he saw them looking at the berries. The saying of the community has it that he has brought "all those young Lorens" up on wild berries, "like birds." What they don't eat, they sell in the stores. The two almost envy the family the knowledge of wild berries and of the names

9. Kreymborg, op. cit., p. 325.

10. Frost, op. cit., pp. 80, 81.

of flowers and their habits. One of the men recalls an earlier incident.

I've told you how once not long after we came,
 I almost provoked poor Loren to Mirth
 By going to him of all people, on earth
 To ask if he knew of any fruit to be had
 For the picking. The rascal, he said he'd be glad
 To tell if he knew. But the year had been bad.
 There had been some berries--but those were all gone.
 He didn't say where they had been. He went on:
 I'm sure--I'm sure--as polite as could be.
 He spoke to his wife in the door, 'Let me see,
 Mame, we don't know any good berrying place?
 It was all he could do to keep a straight face."

The two decide to pick the patch in the morning to show Loren that the fruit doesn't grow wild just for him.

We shan't have the place to ourselves to enjoy--
 Not likely, when all the young Lorens deploy.
 They'll be there to-morrow, or even to-night.
 They won't be too friendly--they may be polite--
 To people they look on as having no right
 To pick where they're picking. But we won't complain.

Alfred Kreyndorg mentions this poem as one which especially illustrates the power of Robert Frost to depict a universal incident in a purely local setting.

The landscape is never described for its own sake; nor are the human records, coloring the landscape, merely of interest because of their country character. The natural order of things and comments and delicious connotations, the essential humanness and seemingly careless music contribute to a concentrated intensity.

Then he turns specifically to "Blue Berries," of which he says this: "Though the idiom is personal, the experience is so universal as to make the reader wonder why he missed telling it himself, and telling it just so. . ."11

This demonstration of the universal is not limited to poems which deal with New England geography or character; there are also those local in the sense that they are concerned with the personal life or

11. Kreyndorg, op. cit., p. 324.

experiences of the author. One of these is "Canis Major."¹²

The great Overdog,
That heavenly beast
With a star in one eye,
Gives a leap in the east.

He dances upright
All the way to the west
And never once drops
On his forefeet to rest.
I'm a poor underdog,
But tonight I will bark
With the great Overdog
That romps through the dark.

When one is weary, he may find rest in an escape from reality, and this escape may come through the identification with something larger and freer than oneself; in this poem, the poet identifies himself with the starry Overdog.

Wegandt points out the universal elements found in "Canis Major."

There are none of us who feel at all that have not had our spirits lift and soar as we watched the march of the stars on a winter's night. There are none of us with vigor who have not felt even in later years the urge to run wild in the dark as children and all other animals run wild at nightfall.¹³

Another of the personal experiences of Frost which has a significance for every one is "After-flakes."¹⁴ De Selincourt says of Frost, "Frost is a poet of delicatest degrees, but universal in the sense that he sees in these degrees the very secret of truth."¹⁵ Specifically of "After-flakes" he says, "If all is wrong, each one of us can at any rate deal with our own blacknesses and see how they can

12. Frost, op. cit., p. 331.

13. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 75, 76.

14. Frost, op. cit., p. 398.

15. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 251.

be put right."¹⁶

Another of the personal experience poems with a wider significance is "Locked Out, as Told to a Child;"¹⁷ in this one, McBride Dabbs sees that "this is childhood; with its wonder; its peace; its brevity."¹⁸

16. Ibid., p. 253.

17. Frost, op. cit., p. 169.

18. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 169.

C. ANALYSES OF ADDITIONAL POEMS SELECTED BY THE AUTHOR OF THIS THESIS

Perhaps Frost has written no narrative poem which has attracted wider attention than "The Death of a Hired Man,"¹ for its content, its diction, and its character development are unsurpassed. Also, it is one of Mr. Frost's favorites, one which he especially enjoys quoting when the occasion arises. The most important character, the hired man, does not appear directly in the poem, but it is his story and his character upon which the interest of the reader is centered. Both the characters and the setting are New England, yet they are representative of characters any one might know.

Mary was waiting for Warren, and when he came she tiptoed to meet him at the doorway and pushed him back onto the porch, closing the door behind her. "Silas is back; be kind," she said to him as they sat upon the wooden steps of the porch. Warren replied that he had always been kind to him, but that he would not take Silas back again as the hired man because it was customary with him to stay with Warren during the dull season when he hardly earned the little tobacco money he must have besides his keep, then, in haying time, when some neighbor offered him more in wages, to leave. Mary warned him to speak more quietly, lest he awaken Silas. He had been so tired out when he came back that she had hardly known him. He would not tell where he had been, only that he had come back to ditch the meadow for Warren--that was, they easily saw, to save his self-respect--and to do other odd jobs he had left unfinished. His mind had wandered, too, for he kept recalling

1. Frost, op. cit., pp. 49-55.

incidents which had occurred years earlier during the time he had worked on the farm. By then, Mary had Warren cajoled into a more kindly mood, so that even he must admit the excellency of Silas' one accomplishment, haying:

I know that's Silas' one accomplishment.
 He bundles every forkful in its place,
 And tags and numbers it for future reference,
 So he can find and easily dislodge it
 In the unloading. Silas does that well.
 He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
 You never see him standing on the hay
 He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.

One summer a college boy had worked with Silas for Warren, and during his recent wanderings Silas had seen the boy, now teaching in his own college. That, Mary said, kept coming into his conversation; he wanted Warren to get the boy again this summer so that he might teach him proper haying.

He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
 Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
 He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
 Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
 And nothing to look backward to with pride,
 And nothing to look forward to with hope,
 So now and never any different.

Mary sat silently in the moonlight.

She put out her hand
 Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
 Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
 As if she played unheard some tenderness
 That wrought on him beside her in the night.
 "Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:
 You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?
 It all depends on what you mean by home.
 Of course he's nothing to us, any more
 Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
 Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in."

"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Those definitions of home it is which prove the theme, the universality of the poem; for if one culls the poem down to its most meager meaning, the story of the hired man and of his relationship to Mary and Warren is but the illustration of the definition at which the two arrive.

But to continue with Frost's story: The two remember that Silas had a brother thirteen miles down the road; Silas had never told them, but they knew it. Warren wondered what was between them. Mary thought she knew.

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

It is obvious to the reader that Mary has hit upon another of the universal characteristics of the human race.

Then Mary went the softened, but still a trifle skeptical, Warren to see Silas.

"I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon."

It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned --too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

"Warren?" she questioned.

"Dead," was all he answered.

Another of the poems dealing with death is "Out, Out."² If the setting were not given as Vermont, there would be no excuse for classifying this as local, for everywhere death comes unexpectedly, and the living must go on. The men had been sawing wood on the buzz-saw all day, and the day was nearly done. They might well have quit half an hour earlier, but they continued until the boy's sister came to tell them supper was ready.

At the word, the saw,
 As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
 Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap--
 He must have given the hand; however it was,
 Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
 The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
 As he swung toward them holding up the hand
 Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
 The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all--
 Since he was old enough to know, big boy
 Doing a man's work, though a child at heart--
 He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off--
 The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister."
 So. But the hand was gone already.
 The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
 He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
 And then--the watcher at his pulse took fright.
 No one believed. They listened at his heart.
 Little--less--nothing!--and that ended it.
 No more to build on there. And they since they
 Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

This swift unexpectedness of death is to be noticed also in "The Impulse," one of the poems of "The Hill Wife" sequence. Since this poem has been discussed on page eighty six of this work, here only the last stanza, which is sufficient to show the similarity of thought in it and "Out, Out--," will be quoted.

2. Ibid., pp. 171, 172.

Sudden and swift and light as that
 The ties gave,
 And he learned of finalities
 Beside the grave.

"Home Burial " (see page of eighty-eight) suggests in the character of the man that the living must go on with their affairs, since "they are not the one dead"; the manner in which he has alienated his wife is by turning to commonplace conversation with other men immediately after digging the grave for their child's body.

Frost strikes another universal note in "Hyla Brook"³ when he says "We love the things we love for what they are." Once that truth is pointed out to the reader, its application to many of the things with which he comes in contact is so obvious that no further elaboration is necessary.

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

"The Strong Are Saying Nothing"⁴ tells of the simple farm process of planting in the spring, but from the method of planting and the size of the plots, one knows the setting must be New England. The first

3. Ibid., p. 49.

4. Ibid., p. 391.

three stanzas are entirely local; it is in the fourth, in a typically Robert Frost manner, which adds the universal.

Wind goes from farm to farm in wave on wave,
 But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.
 There may be little or much beyond the grave,
 But the strong are saying nothing until they see.

In this particular case the "little or much beyond the grave" may refer to the unpredictable fate of the seeds, for their growth depends upon the weather; but even the wind which probably knows if anything does, has no message of the future. Or the grave may be taken literally, and the poem have that universal reference concerning the uncertainty man has about the fate he meets after death.

Paul was a lumberman; he was a big burly fellow afraid of nothing, but let anyone ask him "How is the wife?" and he would leave that camp to find a new job. The story of this is told in "Paul's Wife."⁵ There were current numerous stories about her, and Murphy's was the one most nearly accepted, for "To match a hero, she would have had to be a heroine." The tale of her supernatural origin was not much more unlikely than the baser tales which might concern the woman who was Paul's wife. Once Paul and a sawer had been working hard and fast when an unusual log came through the carriage, for a hollow pine was very much out of the ordinary. They all treated it as Paul's and suggested that he take it home, spread the opening, and use the log for a dug-out to go fishing in. Even Paul could not imagine what had caused such a clean opening. He decided to investigate carefully by

5. Ibid., pp. 235-239.

using his jackknife, to cut into it to see if it was empty.

He made out in there
 A slender length of pith, or was it pith?
 It might have been the skin a snake had cast
 And left stood up on end inside the tree
 The hundred years the tree must have been growing.
 More cutting and he had this in both hands,
 And, looking from it to the pond near by,
 Paul wondered how it would respond to water.
 Not a breeze stirred, but just the breath of air
 He made in walking slowly to the beach
 Blew it once off his hands and almost broke it.
 He laid it at the edge where it could drink.
 At the first drink it rustled and grew limp.
 At the next drink it grew invisible.
 Paul dragged the shallows for it with his fingers,
 And thought it must have melted. It was gone.
 And then beyond the open water, dim with midges,
 Where the log drive lay pressed against the boom,
 It slowly rose a person, rose a girl,
 Then she climbed slowly to her feet,
 And walked off talking to herself or Paul
 Across the logs like backs of alligators,
 Paul taking after her around the pond.

Murphy has been watching them from the shore, but they were oblivious of anyone else. The next evening, Murphy and some of his drunken companions saw the couple on a bare cliff up Catamount.

They sat together half-way up a cliff
 In a small niche let into it, the girl
 Brightly, as if a star played on the place,
 Paul darkly, like her shadow. All the light
 Was from the girl herself, though, not from a star,
 As was apparent from what happened next.
 All those great ruffians put their throats together,
 And let out a loud yell and threw a bottle,
 As a brute tribute of respect to beauty.
 Of course the bottle fell short by a mile,
 But the shout reached the girl and put her light out.
 She went out like a firefly, and that was all.

It is Untermyer who points out the universal element in this poem.

Possibly there is a "grim" commentary on the way in which the world usually receives magic in the passage Murphy and his pals see the two young lovers honeymoon on the cliff and, with instinctive

unanimity, they put their throats together, "And let out a loud yell. . . as a brute tribute of respect to beauty."⁶

Another universal element is expressed by the old mountain character in "The Mountain"⁷ who says,

"It doesn't seem too much to climb a mountain
You've worked around the foot of all your life,"

It is characteristic of men in general that what he has at his own back door does not prove an adventure though that very scene or act may be one which others come miles to see or to experience. It is man's placid acceptance of what is near at hand though it constitutes the wonders of the earth.

The poet had spent the night in the town, and, at dawn, had gone toward the mountain which, with the usual deception of distance found in mountainous regions, was much farther than it looked. Nearer, he met a man moving unbelievably slowly with his ox-cart. From him Frost learned that the village was Lunenburg, but that it was not a village at all, only scattered farms.

"We were but sixty voters last election.
We can't in nature grow too many more:
That thing takes all the room!"

Frost asked the fellow the way up.

"I don't advise your trying from this side.
There is no proper path, but those that have
Been up, I understand, have climbed from Ladd's.

.....

"You've never climbed it?"

6. Untermeyer, American Poetry Since 1900, p. 37.

7. Frost, op. cit., pp. 56-60.

"I've been on the sides,
Deer-hunting and trout-fishing. There's a brook
That starts up on it somewhere--I've heard say
Right on the top, tip-top--a curious thing
But what could interest you about the brook,
It's cold in summer, warm in winter"

.....

"There ought to be a view around the world
From such a mountain--it isn't wooded
Clear to the top.".....

"As to that I can't say. But there's the spring,
Right on the summit, almost like a fountain.
That ought to be worth seeing."

"If it's there.

You never saw it?"

"I guess there's no doubt
About its being there. I never saw it.
It may not be right on the very top:
It wouldn't have to be a long way down
To have some head of water from above,
And a good distance down might not be noticed
By anyone who'd come a long way up.

.....

"I've always meant to go
And look myself, but you know how it is:
It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain
You've worked around the foot of all your life.
What would I do? Go in my overalls,
With a big stick, the same as when the cows
Haven't come down to the bars at milking time,
Or with a shotgun for a stray black bear?
'Twouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it."

"I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to--
Not for the sake of climbing. What's its name?"

"We call it Hor: I don't know if that's right."

.....

"Warm in December, cold in June, you say?"

"I don't suppose the water's changed at all.
You and I know enough to know its warm
Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm.
But all the fun's in how you say a thing."

"You've lived here all your life?"

"Ever since Hor
Was no bigger than a--what, I did not hear.

For the typical old character of the region had touched his oxen with his goad, and the strange fellow was on his way.

"The Bear"⁸ shows its New England setting in the first lines of the poem:

The bear puts both arms around the tree above her
And draws it down as if it were a lover
And its choke cherries lips to kiss good-bye,
Then lets it snap back upright in the sky.
Her next step rocks a boulder on the wall
(She's making her cross-country in the fall).
Her great weight creaks the barbed-wire in its staples
As she flings over and off down through the maples.

Frost points out that this bear is uncaged; that boundaries mean nothing to her, for she goes where she wishes; "The world has room to make a bear feel free." But even the world is not enough for man; he has broadened his boundaries by the telescope at one end and the microscope at the other, yet he acts more like the poor bear in the cage, "his mood rejecting all his mind suggests" until he becomes a pathetic creature.

Frost seems to have said here that man is never content with the boundaries that he has succeeded in establishing for himself; for even in space, he is not satisfied with what his mind suggests, he wants a wider range.

Some of the personal poems of Frost deal with experiences truly his own and no one else's; some deal with his philosophy; and still others cloak the universal, for they present experiences or thoughts common to

8. Ibid., pp. 347-348.

mankind. "The Road Not Taken"⁹ is one of the latter group; probably no man or woman has ever reached the period of middle age without having said to himself, "What if I had chosen differently when I started on my career? What if I had taken that chance with its possibility of a better position? What if---?" Frost, too, considers the difference his choice in roads had made; he does not regret or rejoice, he merely recognizes that the choice was a determining factor.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear.

.....

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

A poem which might be considered to follow "The Road Not Taken" in thought is "An Empty Threat,"¹⁰ for in it the poet makes the threat that he may some day take the other road, or escape to another choice. There is within the nature of every one the desire for an escape from "life's victories of doubt that need endless talk to make them out." It is this type of mental escape through which many men obtain release though they have neither the courage nor the conviction of the advisability that would lead them to turn such a step into reality.

9. Ibid., p. 131.

10. Ibid., pp. 256, 257.

I stay;
 But it isn't as if
 There wasn't always Hudson's Bay
 And the fur trade,
 A small skiff
 And a paddle blade.

Then the poet paints a mental picture of what this Hudson Bay
 escape region would hold for him. There would be only he and his
 French Indian Esquimaux, John-Joe, a fur trader, and the seals yelping
 on the ice cakes. The expanse of bleak territory is great.

There's not a soul
 For a wind-break
 Between me and the North Pole—

Give a head shake
 Over so much bay
 Thrown away
 In snow and mist
 That doesn't exist,
 I was going to say,
 For God, man or beast's,
 Yet does perhaps for all three.

The philosophy to sustain such a person is this:

"Better defeat almost,
 If seen clear,
 Than life's victories of doubt
 That need endless talk talk
 To make them out."

But the threat never becomes a reality; it remains empty.

An experience common to everyone is the positive after image which
 follows a task toward which one has long bent his efforts. One who has
 washed dishes for hours on end finds images of the dishes passing before
 his eyes when he would sleep; one who has worked with figures all day
 sees figures when the work is no longer before him; and Robert Frost
 tells all of this in one local experience in the poem "After Apple-
 picking."¹¹ All the apples except a stray one or two in the top of the

11. Ibid., pp. 256, 257.

tree have been picked; the season is over, for the frost has left a thin glass of ice on the water trough the night before. He is trying to drowse to sleep.

Magnified apples appear and disappear,
 Stem end and blossom end,
 And every fleck of russet showing clear.
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder round.
 I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
 And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
 The rumbling sound
 Of load on load of apples coming in.
 For I have had too much
 Of apple-picking: I am overtired
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.

The storms that occur within the personality and character of an individual are paralleled by storms that occur in nature; the individual who is storm tossed is aware of this similarity and often gains some comfort from it. In "Tree at My Window"¹² Frost tells of one of his experiences in which his storm mood and nature's met at once.

Tree at my window, window tree,
 My sash is lowered when night comes on;
 But let there never be curtain drawn
 Between you and me.

Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground,
 And thing next most diffuse to cloud,
 Not all your light tongues talking aloud
 Could be profound.

But tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
 And if you have seen me when I slept,
 You have seen me when I was taken and swept
 And all but lost.

That day she put our heads together,
 Fate had her imagination about her,

12. Ibid., p. 318.

Fate had her imagination about her,
 Your head so much concerned with outer,
 Mine with inner, weather.

Perhaps one of the reasons that man has come to look with melancholy upon the last of the falling leaves in the autumn is that poets have been so fond of comparing these leaves to death that they have influenced the thought of man. Be that as it may, the theme has come to be a universal one; Robert Frost touches upon it in "A Leaf Treader,"¹³ yet he realizes that man need not die with the leaves, for he is not of so seasonal a nature.

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired.
 God knows all the color and form of leaves I have trodden on and mired.
 Perhaps I have put forth too much strength and been too fierce from fear.
 I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of another year.

All summer long they were overhead, more lifted up than I.
 To come to their final place in earth they had to pass me by.
 All summer long I thought I heard them threatening under their breath.
 And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death.

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.
 They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to
 grief.

But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go.
 Now up to my knee to keep on top of another year of snow.

There can be no doubt that one of Frost's greatest skills is to be found in his ability to portray universal themes through his presentation of local setting and character. It was this ability that awakened the English to the quality of his work even before the Americans recognized him; it was this same ability which soon endeared him to the hearts of the people of his homeland. He has become the universal neighbor.

13. Ibid., p. 388.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

After one has surveyed the poems of Robert Frost, he must admit that the poet is New England; the region is found in the writer's characters, in his settings, in his philosophy. One cannot read a score of Frost's poems without coming to the realization that here is a man who is presenting New England with a skill and an understanding that only an artist and a native son can have. There is the tang and brusqueness of the region; it is inescapable.

Besides picturing the region itself, Frost has portrayed the character of the people. Perhaps no other author has more vividly put on paper that characteristic New England reserve and emotional restraint which may pass among outsiders as rudeness and bluntness. The habit of using only one word if one word will suffice, of calmly accepting obstacles, then just as calmly planning to surmount them is a well-known New England trait; it is the personality of these people which Frost has given an understanding and sympathetic treatment.

Had Frost done no more than depict his own New England so well, he would be an outstanding poet; but he has done more. He has written poetry which deals with basic human emotions: with love and fear; with loneliness and war; with man's struggle against nature and with the faith that he somehow retains in the ultimate magnanimity of nature in spite of his own susceptibility to her whims.

Nor has he been unconscious of his own time, for with a keen stroke born of intelligent insight Frost uncovers weaknesses of contemporary society: the tendency to exalt the machine above the man who makes it; the extreme interpretations that man is inclined to give to the theories of such people as Freud and Darwin; the inequality in the distribution of wealth; the "suitcase" farmer who would wring all from the soil instead of putting all into it; and, in his philosophy of neighborliness, international relations.

Neither in his ability as a local poet, as a universal poet, nor as a poet of the times is Frost's greatest and most nearly unique ability to be found: it is his skill in presenting the universal in the provincial that has won for him the greatest fame. Even though he may name birds and flowers characteristic of New England, the reader feels that the thought or incident of many of the poems is, only by chance, not set within the reader's own environment. This universality is so apparent that the poet never adds a line, or even a word, to indicate that he is not restricting his meaning to New England. To be sure, some of the critics, as has been pointed out in earlier chapters, would not see beyond the written words of the poems until Frost dropped the suggestion that, just because he was writing in and about New England and especially New Hampshire, his works were not necessarily meant just for her. The only reason the critics had been so long blind was that Frost has broken a tradition: he was not a provincial or a universal poet; he was a provincial and a universal poet. And now, later in his career, a third term has been added to describe his abilities; he is also a universal-in-the-provincial poet.

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Especially helpful for the discussion of Frost's style.

Frost mentions characters in this poem, too, but since they are dealt with so much more adequately in other places, it will be well to turn to those. His volume North of Boston has been called "A Book of People," for, of the sixteen poems therein, all but three deal directly with characters, but not all of them will be treated in this chapter since, in spite of their local settings, some of them have universal elements. There are poems in the other volumes dealing with character of definitely New England types; these, too, will be included in the present discussion.

No poems are more thoroughly steeped in what the world has come to accept as New England tradition than "Two Witches" with its division into "The Witch of Coos"⁹ and "The Pauper Witch of Grafton." In the first, Frost has stopped overnight for shelter at a farm where he learns from the conversation, carried on by the mother and son without any aid or encouragement from the poet, that the mother is a witch. After the mother introduces the subject by saying that some people think it is as easy to call up spirits as to say "button, button," the son leads her on to tell about the skeleton in the attic. The son, however, reassures Frost that the skeleton will stay there, for

. . . the headboard of mother's bed is pushed
Against the attic door: the door is nailed.
It's harmless. Mother hears it in the night
Halting perplexed behind the barrier
Of door and headboard. Where it wants to get
Is back into the cellar where it came from.

.
It left the cellar forty years ago
And carried itself like a pile of dishes

9. Frost, Collected Poems, pp. 247-252.

Up one flight from the cellar to the kitchen,
 Another from the kitchen to the bedroom,
 Another from the bedroom to the attic,
 Right past both father and mother, and neither stopped it.
 I was a baby: I don't know where I was.

Then the mother takes up the tale and explains. One cold winter night, her husband had gone on to bed, leaving the door to the room open so that the chill would hurry his wife along. She had been dozing in her chair and, just as she roused, she heard some one in the cellar; at first she thought it was Toffile, her husband, but she heard him upstairs. Then someone began to mount the cellar stairs; all the outside entrances were too thoroughly snowed under for it to be a stranger. She knew it was the bones.

My first impulse was to get to the knob
 And hold the door. But the bones didn't try
 The door; they halted helpless on the landing,
 Waiting for things to happen in their favor.
 The faintest restless rustling ran all through them.
 I never could have done the thing I did
 If the wish hadn't been too strong in me
 To see how they were mounted for this walk.
 I had a vision of them put together
 Not like a man, but like a chandelier.
 So suddenly I flung the door wide on him.

Then he came at me with one hand outstretched,
 The way he did in life once; but this time
 I struck the hand off brittle on the floor,
 And fell back from him on the floor myself.
 The finger-pieces slid in all directions.

She looked in her button box for a finger bone by which to verify her story, but could not find it. Then she returned to her story. She heard the bones mounting the stairs toward Toffile's room. She pulled herself weakly after the bones into the lighted room. Toffile would not listen to her complaint until she told him it was the bones. Then, frantically, they opened the door to the attic, and heard the bones go up the steps; for in the light of the room, the skeleton was not

visible and Toffile, in spite of his wife's pleadings, would not put out the light to see it. They nailed the door shut and pushed the headboard of the bed against it, and there it still was. Even yet the bones come down to the foot of the attic stairs and wait perplexedly at the door, but the wife says that she promised Toffile before he died that she would not release them.

The son enters the conversation again to say, "We never could find out whose bones they were." But the old woman is tired of pretending:

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

.
 But tonight I don't care enough to lie--
 I don't remember why I ever cared.
 Toffile, if he were here, I don't believe
 Could tell you why he ever cared himself.

I verified the name the next morning: Toffile.
 The rural letter-box said Toffile Lajway.

The witch of Grafton ¹⁰ is less dramatic, less one to win any sympathy from the reader. She is old, now, and destitute, but she finds some balm for her soul in the remembrance that her witching once made her the center of attention and in the realization that if she changes her story some, the whole argument as to which community she belongs will recommence; for neither one wants her, because she will be a financial burden. The affair has been under discussion

for a year; records have been studied in an attempt to settle the responsibility. Now it is settled, and the witch is ready to tell them that they are wrong.

So now they've dragged it through the law courts once
 I guess they'd better drag it through again.
 Wentworth and Warren's both good towns to live in,
 Only I happen to prefer to live
 In Wentworth from now on; and when all's said,
 Right's right, and the temptation to do right
 When I can hurt someone by doing it
 Has always been too much for me, it has.

There is something of tired scorn in the attitude of the witch. Perhaps it is because she cannot become accustomed to doing without the rather awed attention she had been given in her younger days, or perhaps she is just old and weary of having her name and her affairs dragged through the courts.

I know of some folks that'd be set up
 At having in their town a noted witch:
 But most would have to think of the expense
 That even I would be. They ought to know
 That as a witch I'd often milk a bat
 And that'd be enough to last for days.
 It'd make my position stronger, think,
 If I was to consent to give some sign
 To make it surer that I was a witch?

But all of her younger days she had done things, she says, that should have been signs; however, one feels that her reputation was made chiefly by the banter of a couple of young men. She married one of them later, and he continued to build her reputation. She enjoyed the pretense and entered into the game by making him perform certain deeds for her.

Up where the trees grow short, the mosses tall,
 I made him gather me wet snow berries
 On slippery rock beside a water fall.
 I made him do it for me in the dark.
 And he liked everything I made him do.

Then, from this pleasant memory of her younger days, she once more returns to her unhappy condition at present.

I hope if he is where he sees me now
 He's so far off he can't see what I've come to.
 You can come down from everything to nothing.
 All is, if I'd known when I was young
 And full of it, that this would be the end,
 It doesn't seem as if I'd had the courage
 To make so free and kick up in folks' faces.
 I might have, but it doesn't seem as if.

"Brown's Descent"¹¹ shows a side of character far removed from the supernatural illustrated in the witch poems. It illustrates the New England acceptance of fact, the "let what must be, be" and the making the most of whatever circumstances one finds without any show of heroics.

Brown was a farmer who lived on a high hill; it was his custom to do the chores at half past three in the morning. One night, when the earth was encrusted in ice and the wind was blowing a gale, the wind caught him just right as he was going from the house to the barn, and down the hill he sailed. The earth was so buried beneath snow that there was nothing by which he might catch himself. He tried to stove a hole in somewhere, but that, too was impossible.

Sometimes he came with arms outspread
 Like wings, revolving in the scene
 Upon his longer axis, and
 With no small dignity of mien.

Faster or slower as he chanced,
 Sitting or standing as he chose
 According as he feared to risk
 His neck, or thought to spare his clothes.

All the while he managed to keep his lantern alight, and that wild-

11. Ibid., pp. 173-175.

ly gyrating light caught the attention of the neighbors, but they did not investigate. Half way down, he kept up the struggle; then gave in to it and came on down like a coasting child. At last he reached the river road, and stopped; two miles he had come down.

After he tells the story it is that Frost makes an unusually direct comment, for as a general rule, any comment the poet would make comes by indirection; but here he points out the qualities that make the New England character the sturdy one it is.

Sometimes as an authority
 On motor-cars, I'm asked if I
 Should say our stock was petered out,
 And this is my sincere reply:

Yankees are what they always were,
 Don't think Brown ever gave up hope
 Of getting home again because
 He couldn't climb that slippery slope;

Or even thought of standing there
 Until the January thaw
 Should take the polish off the crust.
 He bowed with grace to natural law,

And then went round it on his feet,
 After the manner of our stock;

.....

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

In his recent book, Frost has a poem called "Wilful Homing"¹² in which the man might be the Brown of the earlier poem, so well is the New England character delineated in both of them. This poem, however, is written in a more serious tone which leads one to

12. Frost, A Witness Tree, p. 28.

attribute to Brown the quality which accepts fate calmly, and to the other a more stern determination to reach his goal.

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

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

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

In "New Hampshire" Frost gives over half a dozen lines¹³ in reference to a farmer, eccentric in his way. The same incident he uses for an entire poem called "The Star Splitter."¹⁴

I knew a man who failing as a farmer
 Burned down his farmhouse for the fire insurance,
 And spent the proceeds on a telescope
 To satisfy a life-long curiosity
 About our place among the infinities.
 And how was that for other-worldiness?

In the same poem he adds more of character development.

Out of a house and so out of a farm
 At one stroke (of a match), Brad had to turn
 To earn a living on the Concord Railroad,
 As under-ticket-agent at a station
 Where his job, when he wasn't selling tickets,
 Was setting out up track and down, not plants
 As on a farm, but planets, evening stars
 That varied in their hue from red to green.

One of the types of New England character which Frost treats is the woman who cannot bear the loneliness of the region, who cannot find sympathy or understanding among those near her, not even from her husband, whose more sturdy acceptance of "what will be" seems to

13. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 208.

14. Ibid., p. 220.

save him from such a fate. This insanity brought on from loneliness and fear is characteristic of rural New England; but there must be a few parallels to it to be found in other lonely regions.

"The Hill Wife"¹⁵ is one of the women who are driven to insanity by the region. When she and her husband came to their lonely house late at night, they rattled the lock to give whatever might chance to be inside a warning and time to be off in flight; they never closed the door until the lamp was lit. With that background, it is no wonder that the poor woman vested even in the beggar who came to the door sinister possibilities, if not evil intentions. Another of the things which bothered her was the dark pine just outside their bedroom window.

The tireless but ineffectual hands
That with every futile pass
Made the great tree seem as a little bird
Before the mystery of glass!

It never had been inside the room
And only one of the two
Was afraid in that oft-repeated dream
Of what the tree might do.

Because she was so lonely, and because there was little to do in the house, she often followed her husband to where he worked. Usually she sat idly by, humming to herself or tossing the wood chips, but once she wandered too far; when he called her, she became frightened, and went to hide in the fern. Although he looked for her, he never found her.

Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave,
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.

15. Ibid., pp. 160-162.

The poem "A Servant to Seryants"¹⁶ is a sadder one than that just discussed; perhaps because it is presented in the form of a dramatic monologue, and perhaps because the insanity that is creeping upon the woman is less insidious: she knows it is coming and would fight it if she could, but the only thing she sees to do is to accept it as her fate.

Some strangers who have camped near the lake on her husband's land have come to the house for a few moments. The wife is so glad to see them she chatters on about the thing that is worrying her. She is tired, tired. She knows she shouldn't feel so with the beautiful lake and scenery to look at. She and Len had moved to the present location hoping that a change would help her, for certainly she wasn't as well as she should be. Len thinks medicine will cure her.

But it's not medicine--
Dow is the only doctor's dared to say so--
It's rest I want--there, I have said it out--
From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them--from doing
Things over and over that just won't stay done.
By good rights I ought not to have so much
Put on me, but there seems no other way.
Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.
He says the best way out is always through.
And I agree to that, or in so far
As that I can see no way out but through--
Leastways for me--and then they'll be convinced.

There are too many men around to be cooked for. They sprawl about the kitchen, but they are no company whatsoever for her, for they pay no more heed to her presence than if she weren't in the room at all. She doesn't even bother to learn their names, but she does have her fancies. And with that statement she comes even more nearly

16. Ibid., pp. 82-87.

to the heart of her trouble. Her uncle had had fancies, too, and they had kept him locked up in the barn for years; she has been to the asylum once. That is much better, for her uncle's presence during the years he was kept locked up in a cage made of hickory poles had preyed upon her mind so that she often felt she must be the next one to live in the cage. That uncle had even been caged in the house when her father had brought her mother there a bride. Though she had never seen the man herself, she had seen the cage with its bars worn smooth by his hands, and she had heard the stories of him until her mind became colored. She and Len had lived there awhile and, after they moved, she seemed to get better, but after the newness wore off, she was back to where she had been before.

And there's more to it than just window-views
 And living by a lake. I'm past such help--
 Unless Len took the notion, which he won't,
 And I won't ask him--it's not sure enough.
 I suppose I've got to go the road I'm going:
 Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?

.
 Bless you, of course, your're keeping me from work,
 But the thing of it is, I need to be kept.
 There's work enough to do--there's always that;
 But behind's behind. The worst that you can do
 Is set me back a little more behind.
 I shan't catch up in the world, anyway.
 I'd rather you'd not go unless you must.

"Home Burial"¹⁷ is another of the poems which relates the fear and grief and loneliness that the women of this New England region can know; however, in this case, grief and the failure to find a common ground of understanding with her husband over that grief are the elements that drive the wife to distraction. The husband is a clumsy fellow in this

17. Ibid., pp. 69-73.

situation; his facing the grief the two have known in the loss of their only child helps him remain rational about what has happened. It is not that he does not feel so deeply as his wife; it is just that he is silent on the subject and finds relief in the common chores and talk of normal life.

The grave of the child is on their home burial lot and is located on a plot which may be seen from the landing half way up the stairs. The last straw comes to the woman when her husband asks her at what she is looking and she realizes that he hasn't until now noticed that the window panes of that small window encompass the family graveyard of his people. He mentions the stone he sees there, and tries to comfort her by saying,

"We haven't to mind those.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child's mound--"

"Don't, don't, don't, don't," she cried.

.
He said twice over before he knew himself:
"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"

"Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.
I don't know rightly whether any man can."

"Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs."
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
"There's something I should like to ask you, dear."

"You don't know how to ask it."

"Help me, then."

Her finger moved the latch for all reply

So it is she goads him into impatience with her. No matter what he says,

nor how he tries to close the breach, she will have nothing of it. Finally she tells him that what drove her to this hatred of him in the first place was that just after he and the neighbors had come in from digging the child's grave, they sat in the kitchen, and he talked of such commonplace things as birch fences. In the kindest sympathy, he feels that now she has said what has been festering; the truth is out; she will feel better.

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

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

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

As in so many of Frost's poems, the true ending is left with what the reader will think is the natural outcome of the situation he has presented; but there is no doubt at all that the grief and the inability to find a common ground of understanding have driven the woman, and possibly the man, to distraction if not to complete insanity.

In "The Housekeeper"¹⁸ another phase of the New England character is illustrated: the reluctance to show emotion before any who might be intimately concerned, or to cover up sympathy by a bluff exterior. In this story of an unmarried triangle is shown the uncomplaining acceptance of what has come to be. The old lady is protectively understanding and sympathetic toward John--as long as he is not in the house, but as soon as he comes, she raises her voice to yell at him. John will never

18. Ibid., pp. 103-111.

know that she holds him in honest affection.

The visitor, presumably the poet, calls to see John, but he finds only the heavy old woman beading pumps. She answers his unspoken question about Estelle, her daughter. She has run off two weeks previously; even she, her mother, does not know where she is.

Estelle had come to do the housekeeping for John years before to earn a home for herself and her mother, but the relationship had soon come to be much more than that; now Estelle has run away. True, she had thought a lot of John, but her mother explains it the best she knows how.

"The strain's been too much for her all these years:
I can't explain it any other way.
It's different with a man, at least with John:
He knows he's kinder than the run of men.
Better than married ought to be as good
As married--that's what he has always said.
I know the way he's felt--but all the same!"

The visitor suggests that John will be dangerous when he learns what has really happened as he is sure to do while he is in town; he thinks the gun had better be put out of sight. The old woman, forced by age and weight to sit in her chair, assures him that there is no danger, for, though John is a slothful farmer, he is one of the most gentle of souls. His hobby is raising pedigreed chickens which are displayed at fairs. Before fair season, the kitchen is full of half-drowned birds in separate coops, having their feather burnished. John always insists that the hens have the tenderest of care; never more than two are to be carried at once, and those right side up. The visitor easily sees into what sort of condition both John and the

already untidy house will deteriorate with both of the women gone. He begs the woman to request her daughter to come back; she agrees that the home is very satisfactory to her and that she would rather that Estelle had stayed on since they had become accustomed to living in this strange manner, but Estelle has married.

"Nonsense! See what she's done! But who, but who--"

"Who'd marry her straight out of such a mess?
Say it right out--no matter for her mother.
The man was found. I'd better name no names.
John himself won't imagine who he is."

The visitor would leave when he sees John coming, for fear he will find himself in an embarrassing situation, but he is too late and faces John at the door. John greets him:

"How are you neighbor? Just the man I'm after.
Isn't it Hell," he said, "I want to know.
Come out here if you want to hear me talk.
I'll talk to you, old woman, afterward.
I've got some news that maybe isn't news.
What are they trying to do to me, these two?"

And the old woman has only words to yell at him words in which lurk no shadow of the sympathy she feels for him.

"Do go along with him and stop his shouting."
She raised her voice against the closing door.
"Who wants to hear your news, you --dreadful fool?"

From this closing speech no one would gather the sympathy the old woman feels for John as he faces his lonely future.

Frost is especially skillful at drawing character through conversation. No poem shows this better than does "Snow,"¹⁹ in which, after the introduction, the entire story is told through the speeches of the three characters. Of this, Frost says that he was not satisfied

19. Ibid., pp. 180-194.

with it until each character spoke so completely in his own person that there could be no chance of confusion in determining to whom the speech belonged. Meserve, though one does not like him as a person, typifies the New England philosophy of accepting fate or weather as it is and assuming that one may as well continue in the course he has set for himself, for if he is meant to reach his goal, he will reach it in spite of wind or weather.

Meserve is on the way home from town in a severe snow storm. He stops at the home of Fred and Helen Cole, arousing them from their night's sleep, to telephone his wife, Letty, that he is on his way and should arrive in an hour. From the one side of the conversation it is obvious that she is protesting, but Meserve insists he will be coming as soon as the horses have a rest. They have been on the road for three hours, but that has been uphill. Fred and Helen try to persuade him not to go on, but he ignores their suggestions that he stay, carrying on a one-sided conversation about a book on the table, about earlier snow storms, and all the while the couple tires to remind him that the snow is dangerously bad; he remains imperturbably calm and, just as they have become convinced that he is going to stay, he announces, "Well, now I leave you, people." More words avail nothing. He has his answer ready. He is a preacher for some minor sect, which Helen hates, and it has been to fill a pulpit for them that he has been out on such a night.

"Our snow-storms as a rule
Aren't looked on as man-killers, and although
I'd rather be the beast that sleeps the sleep
Under it all, his door sealed up and lost,
Than the man fighting it to keep above it,
Yet think of the small birds at roost and not

In nests. Shall I be counted less than they are?
 Their bulk in water would be frozen rock
 In no time out to-night. And yet tomorrow
 They will come budding boughs from tree to tree
 Flirting their wings and saying Chickadee,
 As if not knowing what you meant by the word storm."

"But why when no one wants you to go on?
 Your wife--she doesn't want you to. We don't,
 And you yourself don't want to. Who else is there?"

"Save us from being cornered by a woman.
 Well, there's"--She told Fred afterward that in
 The pause right there, she thought the dreaded word
 Was coming, "God," But no, he only said,
 "Well, there's--the storm. That says I must go on.
 That wants me as a war might if it came.
 Ask any man."

The Coles go back to bed since they can expect no word for some time. The next thing they know, Meserve's wife is calling, two hours later. When she verifies the fact that her husband has left, her voice comes like a threat. "Oh, you, why did you let him go?" Helen would blame herself, but Fred reminds her that they tried to dissuade the man. Helen wants to talk to the woman at the other end of the line, but finds that she cannot get through since that woman has left her receiver off the hood. The Coles take turns listening and trying to make their shouted "Hello" get attention, but for reply they hear only the clock, the windows rattling in the wind, and finally, Helen says:

"Fred, see if you can hear what I hear."

"A clock maybe."

"Don't you hear something else?"

"Not talking."

"No."

"Why, yes, I hear--what is it?"

"What do you say it is?"

"A baby's crying!
Frantic it sound, though muffled and far off.
Its mother wouldn't let it cry like that,
Not if she's there."

"What do you make of it?"

"There's only one thing possible to make,
That is, assuming--that she has gone out.
Of course she hasn't thought." They both sat down
Helpless. "There's nothing we can do till morning."

"Fred, I shan't let you think of going out."

"Hold on." The double bell began to chirp.
They started up. Fred took the telephone.
"Hello, Meserve. You're there, then!--And your wife?
Good! Why I asked--she didn't seem to answer.
He says she went to let him in the barn.--
We're glad. Oh, say no more about it man.
Drop in and see us when you're passing."

Perhaps Meserve's New England way is right after all, for, in spite of the nervous tension the Coles felt, there was a matter of fact ending.

The rural New Englander is well known for his deliberateness of thought. Typical of these farmers is the one in "Build Soil" who has been engaged in a political discussion with his poet friend. After the poet has made certain recommendations which he has asked the farmer to commit himself to support, the farmer asks for a month in which to think the matter over:

You're far too fast and strong
For my mind to keep working in your presence.
I can tell better after I get home,
Better a month from now when cutting posts
Or mending fence it all comes back to me,
What I was thinking when you interrupted
My life and train of thought.²⁰

20. Ibid., p. 430.

The same characteristic determination to think things through is found in "The Code,"²¹ in which is included the tale of the hired hand who continued working half an hour after the thing at which he took offense had been said before he left the field in anger.

There were three in the meadow by the brook
 Gathering up windrows, piling cocks of hay,
 With an eye always lifted toward the west
 Where an irregular sun-bordered cloud
 Darkly advanced with a perpetual dagger
 Flickering across its bosom. Suddenly
 One helper, thrusting pitchfork in the ground,
 Marched himself off the field and home. One stayed.
 The town-bred farmer failed to understand.

The remaining hand explained to the perplexed farmer: it was that the farmer had said that they had better take pains because it was going to rain. The hand had "chewed it over" for half an hour, decided that the farmer was finding fault with his work, and had left. The farmer was rather resentful.

Don't let it bother you. You've found out something.
 The hand that knows his business won't be told
 To do work better or faster--those are two things.
 I'm as particular as anyone:
 Most likely I'd have served you just the same.
 But I know you didn't understand our ways.
 You were just talking what was in your mind,
 What was in all our minds, and you weren't hinting.

Then this hand tells the farmer the story of what he had done once when he was working for a driving boss. The man had no mercy either for himself or for his hands. He was guilty of what the hand called "bulling" tricks, or keeping at the worker's heels in mowing so that if he didn't move fast enough he would lose his legs in the machine. On one occasion, the boss paired himself off with this hand, who built

21. Ibid., pp. 90-93.

the load and topped it off. All went well until the pair reached the barn with the loaded wagon. The man on top had the easy job, for it was he who would throw the hay down; surely no man in such a position would need urging to do his job well, but Sanders, the boss, shouted, "Let her come!" The be sure he had heard aright, the hand had him repeat the call.

"He said it over, but he said it softer.
 Never you say a thing like that to a man,
 Not if he values what he is. God, I'd as soon
 Murdered him as left out his middle name.
 I'd built the lead and knew right where to find it.
 Two or three forkfuls I picked lightly round for
 Like meditating, and then I just dug in
 And dumped the rackful on him in tenlots."

The hand left the barn thinking he had Sanders buried under all that hay. When the rest of the crew divined what had happened, they rushed to the barn to uncover Sanders before he smothered to death. They forked and forked, frantically, but they could not find him; then they sent someone to the house to keep his wife from coming out to learn of the tragedy; the messenger looked in the kitchen window, and there Sanders was.

"He looked so clean disgusted from behind
 There was no one that dared to stir him up,
 Or let him know he was being looked at.
 Apparently I hadn't buried him
 (I may have knocked him down): but my just trying
 to bury him had hurt his dignity."

"Weren't you relieved to find he wasn't dead?"

"No! and yet I don't know--its hard to say.
 I went about to kill him fair enough."

"You took an awkward way. Did he discharge you?"

"Discharge me? No! He knew I did just right."

Thus the poem ends on a note of self-administered democracy.

Again in "The Self-Seeker"²² one finds the philosophy in which the New Englander calmly accepts what is because it is, and the reluctance to put a monetary value on personal items whose value is far above what could be paid by mere coin.

The Broken One is in the hospital, his feet and legs having been mangled in an accident in the saw mill. The lawyer is coming this day to pay him five hundred dollars. Willis, who calls on the Broken One, is indignant with the invalid for accepting so small a sum, not so much for his injury as for the hobby which is ruined for him, for the man has been collecting flowers, and has set his goal at finding forty orchids native to the region. None of Willis's persuading avails; the Broken One ignores his pleadings as effectually as Meserve had ignored that of the Coles. Willis is more unhappy about the flowers than anything else.

"But your flowers, man, you're selling out your flowers,"

"Yes, that's one way to put it--all the flowers
Of every kind everywhere in this region
For the next forty summers--call it forty.
But I'm not selling those, I'm giving them,
They never earned me so much as one cent:
Money can't pay me for the loss of them.
No, the five hundred was the sum they named
To pay the doctor's bill and tide me over.
It's that or fight, and I don't want to fight--
I just want to get settled in my life,
Such as it's going to be, and know the worst,
Or best--it may not be so bad. The firm
Promise me all the shooks I want to nail."

22. Ibid., pp. 117-125.

"But what about your flora of the valley?"

"You have me there. But that--you don't think
That was worth money to me? Still I own
It goes against me not to finish it
For the friends it might bring me. By the way,
I had a letter from Burroughs--did I tell you?--
About my Cyrtopodium reginae;
He says it's not reported so far north.

The lawyer enters and with the lawyer, a little girl, Anne, who has been a companion of the Broken One before he became broken. He has taught her the ways and names of flowers; and he has trained her to pick no bouquets, for the flowers need to stay for seed. But she has modified his decree because he, a special person is sick, and has brought him two Ram's Horn Orchids, having left four or five for seed. The lawyer becomes impatient, and the man sends Anne on her way. After she is gone, he explains,

"Get out your documents! You see
I have to keep on the good side of Anne.
I'm a great boy to think of number one.
And you can't blame me in the place I'm in.
Who will take care of my necessities
Unless I do?"

This passage not only gives the key to the title of the poem, but it also illustrates Frost's apt use of understatement to attain his purposes.

One of the most charming characters Frost presents is the old fisherman who has made his dory into a flower box now that he can no longer go to sea. The poem is only a dozen lines long, yet the man is well drawn. One experiences more than the word pictures present in the poem; he sees the squinted eyes and leathered skin sea people have, he smells the tang of ocean air, and he hears the not so distant pounding of the surf.

The Flower Boat

The fisherman's swapping a yarn for a yarn
 Under the hand of the village barber,
 And here in the angle of house and barn
 His deep-sea dory has found a harbor.

An anchor she rides the sunny sod
 As full to the gunnel of flowers growing
 As ever she turned her home with cod
 From Gerøe's bank when winds were blowing.

And I judge from that Elysian freight
 That all they ask is rougher weather,
 And dory and master will sail by fate
 To see for the Happy Isles together.²³

"Christmas Trees"²⁴ is a poem Frost subtitles "A Christmas Circular Letter" which, apparently, he sent to his friends in lieu of Christmas cards. In it he tells of an offer he had for his trees. One snowy day not too long before Christmas, a city stranger drove into the Frost yard, and asked if he might buy the Christmas trees. Frost had not thought of his young fir balsams as Christmas trees; he had no notion of selling them, but he did dally with the notion. He finally showed the trees to the would-be buyer. Many were growing too close together to have kept their lovely shape, but some were well proportioned; the buyer thought they would do.

I thought so too, but wasn't there to say so.
 We climbed the pasture on the south, crossed over,
 And came down on the north.

He said, "A thousand."

"A thousand Christmas trees!--at what apiece?"

He felt some need of softening that to me:
 "A thousand trees would come to thirty dollars."

23. Ibid., p. 335.

24. Ibid., pp. 132-134.

Then I was certain I had never meant
 To let him have them. Never show surprise!
 But thirty dollars seemed so small beside
 The extent of pasture I should strip, three cents
 (For that was all they figured out apiece),
 Three cents so small beside the dollar friends
 I should be writing to within the hour
 Would pay in cities for good trees like those,
 Regular vestry--trees whole Sunday Schools
 Could hang enough on to pick off enough.
 A thousand Christmas trees I didn't know I had!
 Worth three cents more to give away than sell,
 As may be shown by a simple calculation.
 Too bad I couldn't lay one in a letter.
 I can't help wishing I could send you one,
 In wishing you herewith a Merry Christmas.

This poem displays again the feeling of Frost as a typical rural
 New Englander that money is a paltry pay for the priceless growth of the
 gifts of nature.

Frost has managed to portray the people of his rural New England with-
 out turning either emotional or sentimental, but showing a keenness of
 insight found only in one who both loves and understands the people of
 the region, in one who is, himself, at heart one of those people.

CHAPTER IV

POEMS WITH DEFINITELY UNIVERSAL ELEMENTS

A. POEMS DEALING WITH COMMON HUMAN EXPERIENCES

I may as well confess myself the author
 Of several books against the world in general.
 To take them as against a special state
 Or even nation's to restrict my meaning.¹

There is a group of critics and fellow poets who consider Robert Frost a good poet, but a local one: he is New England; he is unconscious of any geographical point outside that region and of any experience in his life that occurred any place else; it is surely not too broad a statement to say that a poet with a purely local appeal will not be widely read and admired outside the region with which he is concerned.

But Robert Frost has been both widely read and greatly admired outside his beloved New England. When he leftt the United States for England in 1912, he was an unknown poet, not because he had not tried to find publishers for his poems, but because the editors had not accepted his poems for publication. It was in England in 1913 that his first volume was accepted and published. In spite of the fact that the poems which constitute A Boy's Will were poems written in New England and concerned with New England, the book found prompt and hearty reception in England. In the Review of Reviews of April, 1915, Barter tells of that reception.

The book (A Boy's Will) brought quick recognition as the work of a rare nature, and Frost was promptly drawn out from his rural . . .

1. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 206.

retirement to be heartily welcomed in those choice circles of London's best intellectual life where caste distinctions count for nothing and the sole test is merit. Nowhere is recognition more genuine; in few places does it count so fully as a measure of worth.

Early last year North of Boston was brought out. . . . Here the author came fully into his own. The book brought instant acclaim, and without reserve, Frost was honored as a poet of high distinction. . . . The reviews and the weeklies gave the book exceptional space; the London Nation, for instance, devoted three columns to it.²

Nor has the English acclaim been limited to the short period after the "discovery" of the poet. Had that been true, her enthusiastic acceptance might be attributed to a spontaneous burst of applause accorded to any of the numerous poets during a period when new schools were not uncommon. Sixteen years later C. Henry Warren commented upon the manner in which Frost's poetry found a broad appeal.

Save that the landscape of his poetry is as likely to disclose a maple as an elm, a bear as a fox, or an oven-bird as a lark, it might be of England that he is singing.³

In further evidence that those who would limit the scope of Frost's poetry so that he becomes a provincial or a local poet and that only, there follows a discussion of a group of poems which deal with common human experiences and with such universal themes as the basic emotion of fear and love, of man's struggle to overcome nature and nature's irresistibility, and of the impersonality and infinity of time; then there are poems which show the impact the first World War made upon the poet, and there are narrative poems whose basis is in no way in New England.

Any one life has within its bounds many experiences which are common

2. Wm. Baxter, "New England's New Poet," Review of Reviews, v. 51, (April, 1915), pp. 432, 433.

3. C. Henry Warren, "An American Poet," The Fortnightly Review, (Chapman and Hall Limited, London), v. 135, (February, 1931), p. 382.

among other beings, but not every being has the ability, the desire, and the skill to create about these experiences poems of such beauty and simplicity as Robert Frost has done. An illustrative group of these poems will be presented in this section.

"Good Hours" tells of a lonely walk taken in the winter when the cottages of the villages were buried "up to their shining eyes in snow"; the hiker did not feel the loneliness, however, because of the sense of life about him within the houses.

I had such company outward bound
I went till there were no cottages found.
I turned and repented, but coming back
I saw no window but that was black.

Over the snow my creaking feet
Disturbed the slumbering village street
Like profanation, by your leave,
At ten o'clock of a winter eve.

Surely it is not an uncommon experience to find so much pleasure in the "outward bound" part of some event that the turn about is not made until so late that repentance must come with it.

It is strange how those who work with the soil and with planting become so engrossed with the phenomenon of growth that they take advantage of every daylight hour for their gardens. They come to have a passion for growing things. Frost tells of this miracle in "Putting in the Seed."⁵

You come to fetch me from my work to-night
When supper's on the table, and we'll see
If I can leave off burying the white
Soft petals fallen from the apple tree
(Soft petals, yes, but not so barren quite,
Mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea;)

.....

4. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 128.

5. Ibid., p. 155.

How love burns through the Putting in the Seed
 On through the watching for that early birth
 When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

Who has not felt the urge to hurry spring after a winter spent indoors? With the coming of balmy weather, man wants to forget, for a time at least, his work and go out to feel to the utmost the pleasures of new spring. Frost's "Prayer in Spring"⁶ sends a request to the southwest winds to hasten spring for him, to

Burst into my narrow stall;
 Swing the picture on the wall;
 Run the rattling pages o'er;
 Scatter poems on the floor;
 Turn the poet out of door.

Sparks from a fire and burning embers that float into the night sky to tangle with the trees or compete with the stars have an appeal to man's imagination. In his "Evening in a Sugar Orchard"⁷ Frost tells of lingering outside the sugar house one March night and calling to the fireman to give the fire another stoke to send up more sparks with the smoke.

I thought a few might tangle, as they did,
 Among the bare maple boughs, and in the rare
 Hill atmosphere not cease to glow,
 And so be added to the moon up there.

.....

The sparks made no attempt to be the moon.
 They were content to figure in the trees
 As Leo, Orion, and the Pleiades.
 And that was what the boughs were full of soon.

"Rose Pogonias"⁸ is among the most beautiful of the poems in Frost's

6. Ibid., p. 17.

7. Ibid., p. 289.

8. Ibid., p. 19.

volumes. In it he tells of having come upon a small, lovely spot set in seclusion from the rest of the world. Not Frost alone has had the experience of coming unexpectedly upon such beauty that his heart has offered up a little prayer for the security and safety of such a spot.

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

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

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

Although it is a rather child-like thing to do, there is a certain fascination in watching the movements of the moon as one walks; now it rests in a tree top, now it peeks jauntily over the ridge pole of a house; and soon it is someplace else--all because one changes his position or moves his head. Frost tells of this experience in "The Freedom of the Moon."⁹

I've tried the new moon tilted in the air
 Above a hazy tree-and-farmhouse cluster
 As you might try a jewel in your hair.
 I've tried it fine with little breadth of lustre,

9. Ibid., p. 304.

Alone, or in one ornament combining
With one first-water star almost as shining.

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

A number of Frost's poems deal with the basic human emotions, fear and love. That these emotions are universal, no one can deny. To be sure, Frost, because he is Frost and because he is a New Englander, writes with restraint, but that very restraint gives a greater force to his poems. No group of poems better illustrates his belief in the use of understatement to attain his ends than this group dealing with fear and love.

"Fire and Ice"¹⁰ deals with the emotions of desire and hate in the abstract.

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

"The Fear"¹¹ is a narrative poem. A woman has left her husband to elope with Joel.

A lantern light from deeper in the barn
Shone on a man and woman in the door
And threw their lurching shadows on a house
Near by, all dark in every glossy window.
A horse's hoof pawed once the hollow floor,
And the back of the gig they stood beside

10. Ibid., p. 268.

11. Ibid., pp. 112-116.

Moved in a little. The man grasped a wheel,
 The woman spoke out sharply, "Whoa, stand still!
 I saw it just as plain as a white plate,"
 She said, "as the light on the dashboard ran
 Along the bushes at the roadside—a man's face."

So the poem begins with the fear in the lurching shadows, the creaking gig, the pawing hoof, and the edged voice of the woman. And throughout the poem, using this same reserve, Frost maintains the emotion of fear until the nerves of the reader are drawn as taut as the nerves of the woman. She must investigate before she will go in; she pleads with Joel to go ahead, for she must face this alone. Against his demurring, she pushes past him, gets the lantern, and advances toward the dark. Still insisting that no one is there, Joel goes with her. She calls into the dark and is startled when her question "What do you want?" is answered by "Nothing." The sense of fear is heightened by the secrecy Frost leaves with the reader who is never certain just what is happening; yet, for that very reason, he feels more intensely what the woman is experiencing. The man comes forward; he has with him a child who, he suggests, should prove that he is no robber—or worse. She asks him,

"What's a child doing at this time of night?"

"Out walking. Every child should have the memory
 Of at least one long-after-bed time walk.
 What, son?"

"Then I should think you'd try to find
 Somewhere to walk--"

"The highway, as it happens--
 We're stopping for the fortnight down at Dean's."

"But if that's all--Joel--you realize--
 You won't think anything. You understand?
 You understand that we have to be careful.
 This is a very, very lonely place.
 Joel! She spoke as if she couldn't turn.

The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground,
It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out.

And still the reader remains in doubt as to whether the walking man was her husband or not, and whether one of the men or the other murdered her, or whether she merely fainted, so great was the emotional reaction when she found that the situation was not one that she had expected to confront.

Be that as it may, the emotion fear is here so excellently portrayed that there is no doubt about the poem's universality.

"The Lockless Door"¹² also deals with the emotion fear. The man in this, as many men in real life, fled from fear before he faced reality and, because he did so, must alter his life and, perhaps, forsake his chosen goal.

It went many years
But at last came a knock,
And I thought of the door
With no lock to lock.

I blew out the light
I tip-toed the floor,
And raised both hands
In prayer to the door.

But the knock came again
My window was wide;
I climbed on the sill
And descended outside.

Back over the sill
I gave a "Come in"
To whatever the knock
At the door may have been.

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

12. Ibid., p. 299.

"Bereft"¹³ brings a theme of loneliness and the fear of loneliness. In this poem, as in the two preceding, the cause of the fear is something vague, for Frost seems to have found that the thing men fear most is something intangible, for were it reality, they would face it and battle it through; but it is the fear of the vague, the unformulated that makes man a coward.

Where had I heard this wind before
 Change like this to a deeper roar?
 What would it take my standing there for,
 Holding open a restive door,
 Looking down hill to a frothy shore?
 Summer was past and day was past.
 Sombre 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 knees and missed.
 Something sinister in the tone
 Told me my secret must be known:
 Word I was in the house alone
 Somehow must have gotten abroad,
 Word I was in my life alone,
 Word I had no one left but God.

Another of the poems which deals with a fear of the elements is "Storm Fear."¹⁴ Wherever man may live, there are certain seasons when the weather makes shelter seem more than comforting.

When the wind works against us in the dark,
 And pelts with snow
 The lower chamber window on the east,
 And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
 The beast,
 "Come out! Come out!--
 It costs no inward struggle not to go.
 Ah, no!

.....

Not of fear, but of loneliness does "An Old Man's Winter Night"¹⁵ speak; and in that portrayal of ancient solitude, Frost pulls upon the

13. Ibid., p. 317.

14. Ibid., p. 13.

heart strings of the reader. The man is so old and lonely that he is not frightened, but he does frighten the very darkness and the hollow cellar.

All out of doors looked darkly in at him
 Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,
 That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
 What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
 Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
 That brought him to that creaking room was age.
 He stood with barrels round him--at a loss.
 And having scared the cellar under him
 In clomping there, he scared it once again
 In clomping off:--and scared the outer night,
 Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
 Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
 But nothing so like beating on a box.

. The log that shifted with a jolt
 Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
 And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
 One aged man--one man--can't keep a house,
 A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
 It's thus he does it of a winter night.

Another poem which deals with fear, but not with loneliness is "The Most of it."¹⁶ Every man longs for companionship with his own kind, for one who will answer, who will understand. Often when man is so lonely he can find none of his own in the universe, he will call and then, when the reply does come, it is different from what he expected and for that reason disappointing. Frost puts this into the words of a poem in "The Most of It."

He thought he kept the universe alone;
 For all the voice in answer he could wake
 Was but the mocking echo of his own
 From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake.
 Some morning from the boulder-broken beach
 He would cry out on life, what it wants
 Is not its own love back in copy speech,
 But counter-love, original response.
 And nothing ever came of what he cried
 Unless it was the embodiment that crashed
 In the cliff's talus on the other side,

16. Frost, A Witness Tree. p. 23.

And then in the far distant water splashed,
 But after a time allowed for it to swim,
 Instead of proving human when it neared
 And someone else additional to him
 As a great buck it powerfully appeared
 Pushing the crumpled water up ahead,
 And landed pouring like a waterfall,
 And stumbled through the rocks with horny tread,
 And forced the underbrush--and that was all.

Man is a social creature; every one wants to have friends, to be happy. The expression of this hunger is found in the short poem "Revelation."¹⁷

We make ourselves a place apart
 Behind light words that tease and flout,
 But oh, the agitated heart
 Till someone find us really out.

'Tis pity if the case required
 (Or so we say) that in the end
 We speak the literal to inspire
 The understanding of a friend.

But so with all, from babes that play
 At hide-and-peek to God afar,
 So all who hide too well away
 Must speak and tell us where they are.

When Frost writes love poems, he uses the same restraint and the same device of understatement that he uses in depicting other emotion. "Devotion"¹⁸ illustrates this point:

The heart can think of no devotion
 Greater than being shore to the ocean--
 Holding the curve of one position
 Counting an endless repetition.

"Moon Compasses"¹⁹ is a metaphor of exquisite beauty in which Frost gives another definition of love. The emotional intensity of this

17. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 27.

18. Ibid., p. 308.

19. Ibid., p. 393.

poem is made more powerful by the restraint.

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

It is, however, a poem slightly longer which is the greatest of Frost's love poems. In "Two Look at Two"²⁰ a pair of lovers have been walking up the mountain and, though it is late, have gone further than they intended. Finding their way blocked by a tumbled wall, they stood for a moment looking reluctantly, "spending what onward impulse they still had in one last look the way they must not go," for mountain climbing after dark was dangerous when a single loosened rock might start a landslide. "This is all," they sighed, but it was not all, for on the other side of the wall a doe appeared and looked at them, not with fear, but with surprise.

"This, then, is all. What more is there to ask?"
 But no, not yet. A snort to bid them wait.
 A buck from round the spruce stood looking at them
 Across the wall as near as they.
 This was an antlered buck of lusty nostril,
 Not the same doe come back into her place.
 He viewed them quizzically with jerks of head,
 As if to ask, "Why don't you make some motion?
 Or give some sign of life? Because you can't.
 I doubt if you're as living as you look."
 Thus till he had them almost feeling dared
 To stretch a proffering hand--and a spell-breaking.
 Then he too passed unscared along the wall.
 Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
 "All this must be all." It was all. Still they stood,
 A great wave from it going over them,
 As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
 Had made them certain earth returned their love.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 282, 283.

"The Telephone"²¹ deals, in a whimsical, yet tender, way, with lovers' talk. He had taken a long walk during the afternoon and, while he was resting, he leaned his head against a flower and heard his love talk. She mustn't deny it, for she spoke from the flower on her window sill. He asks her if she remembers what she said and she, not wanting to chance contradicting him, suggests that he tell first what he thought she said.

Having, found the flower and driven a bee away,
 I leaned my head,
 And holding by the stalk,
 I listened and I thought I caught the word--
 What was it? Did you call me by my name?
 Or did you say--
Someone said 'Come'--I heard it as I bowed."

"I may have thought as much, not aloud."

"Well, so I came."

Lovers have a way of enjoying reminiscence about the first time they met and either how they recognized the moment as an important one or how they now wonder that such a moment should have passed with no especial significance attached to it. In "Meeting and Passing"²² he addresses her to remind her of their meeting.

Another narrative love poem is "In the Home Stretch,"²³ in which an older couple are making a new start. They have moved from the town just fifteen miles into the country, but the change is great. There is plaintiveness in the poem. The two love one another; but neither is quite sure whose idea it was that they turn into "good farmers." In

21. Ibid., p. 147.

22. Ibid., p. 148.

23. Ibid., pp. 139-146.

spite of himself, he fears that he may have brought her here contrary to her true desires, and she will not commit herself upon the subject. He finds her looking out the window by the kitchen sink while the noisy men are banging furniture into place upstairs. He asks what she sees more than the weeds growing, and she replies that it is the years.

"What kind of years?"

"Why, latter years--
Different from early years."

"I see them too.
You didn't count them?"

"No, the further off
So ran together that I didn't try to.
It can scarce be that they would be in number
We'd care to know, for we are not young now.
. . . ."

The moving men are preparing to leave; they are climbing into the wagon when she suddenly remembers that the stove is not up, and they must have that. The stillness of the house is again broken with the trampings of heavy feet and the loud voices of strong men. Then they are gone again, and one realizes for the first time that the woman did not really want to move, but in her love for Joe she is keeping it from him, for he is as enthusiastic as a boy about the new venture.

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

They find food, and the lantern, which has not been lost; there is bread and butter. They continue to visit as they eat. Again one sees the devotion of these two. She says,

"Dumped down in paradise we are and happy."

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

"Shouldn't you like to know?"

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

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

"I don't want to find out what can't be known.
But who first said the words to come?

"My dear,
It's who first thought the thought. You're searching, Joe,
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.
Ends and beginnings--there are no such things.
There are only middles."

In his enthusiasm, he wishes to take her outside for a good night tour,
but decides they are too tired and that morning will be soon enough to
"go the round of apple, cherry, peach, pine, alder, pasture, mowing,
well, and brook--of the whole farm.

The last four lines sum up the mood of the whole poem:

When there was no more lantern in the kitchen,
The fire got out through crannies in the stove
And danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling,
As much at home as if they'd always danced there.

There is only the poems in his recent volume which deals with love,
and those in a figurative way. In the first one, Frost seems to be
saying that one who is held by the many ties of love is so contented in
being thus held that she is not conscious of them unless one of the ties
makes undue demand of her. The poem he calls "The Silken Tent."²⁴

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signified the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is looely bound.

24. Frost, Witness Tree, p. 13.

By countless silken ties of love and thought
 To everything on earth the compass round,
 And only by one's going slightly taut
 In the capriciousness of summer air
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

There are influences strong enough once lives are crossed by them, the lives are never again the same. Love is one of those forces. In his poem "Never Again Would Birds' Song be the Same"²⁵ Frost suggests that the birds songs are more beautiful because they knew Eve and felt love for her.

Her would declare and could himself believe
 That the birds there in all the garden round
 From having heard the daylong voice of Eve
 Had added to their own an oversound,
 Her tone of meaning but without the words.
 Admittedly an eloquence so soft
 Could only have had an influence on birds
 When call or laughter carried it aloft.
 Be that as may be, she was in their song.
 Moreover her voice upon the voices crossed
 Had now persisted in the woods so long
 That probably it never would be lost.
 Never again would birds's song be the same.
 And to do that to birds was why she came.

One of the characteristics of the nature of man is that he views with reluctance the passing of a season of beauty, or a moment of perfection, of an experience of delight. Frost expresses this thought in two poems. In "October"²⁶ he addresses that month, reminding her that he realizes the leaves have all ripened to fall if the morrow's wind be wild, and with the leaves goes a period of beauty; so Frost asks October to let the fall of leaves be slow, and to let the still lovely days be less brief.

25. Ibid., p. 24.

26. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 40.

Release one leaf at break of day;
 At noon release another leaf;
 One from our trees, one far away.
 Retard the sun with gentle mist;
 Enchant the land with amethyst.
 Slow, slow!
 For the grapes' sake, if they were all,
 Whose leaves already are burnt with frost,
 Whose clustered fruit must else be lost--
 For the grapes' sake along the wall.

The other poem which deals with the same subject, though in a slightly different light is "Reluctance."²⁷ Man is always a questioning creature; not only does he see the beauty of a phase pass, but he questions the passing even though he knows that his questioning will not change matters one jot. In sequence of time, this poem might easily follow "October."

Out through the fields and the woods
 And over the walls I have wended;
 I have climbed the hills of view
 And looked at the world, and descended;
 I have come by the highway home,
 And low it is ended.

For the world is bared, the leaves are gone except for a few last ones hanging on but even they will be dropped onto the crusted snow soon; the leaves that have fallen lie in dead heaps, not in scurrying swirls; the asters are gone and the flowers of the witch-hazel are withered. "The heart is still aching to seek, but the feet question, 'Whither?'"

Ah, when to the heart of man
 Was it ever less than a treason
 To go with the drift of things,
 To yield with a grace to reason,
 And to bow and accept the end
 Of a love or a season?

27. Ibid., p. 43.

B. POEMS DEALING WITH MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO NATURE

Another of the universal themes which Frost discusses deals with the infinity of time and time's indifference to man. Occasionally Frost uses the term "time" in dealing with this matter, and occasionally he uses the term "nature" and man's struggle to overcome the elements of nature." He shows that the elements always seem to win out in the end; yet, strangely enough, even in the face of such overwhelming odds, man progresses; when he is frustrated in one direction, he turns his efforts toward another point. On the other hand, when man has forged ahead far enough so that he can view with a degree of satisfaction what he has done, nature, takes things in hand and shows her ultimate superiority.

The poem "New Hampshire" has been discussed in this work on page 35. There is no necessity of quoting here, but in connection with this discussion it will be well to notice what Monroe says concerning this poem.

It's a reasonable human attitude. Anyone with an ounce of humor must accept his own infinite unimportance in the universal scheme; but he also has a right to set up his own importance as an element in that scheme... Both the state and the poet face the half-glance of the world, and the huge laughter of destiny with pride and grit, and without egotism."¹

In "The Woodpile"² Frost tells of going for a walk in the frozen swamp. A small bird caught his eye, and he caught the eye of the bird, for it flew silently ahead, always keeping a tree between them for safety as if he thought the poet might be after the white feather in

1. Monroe, op. cit., p. 62.

2. Thornton, op. cit., reprinted from Yale Review, Dabbs. p. 122.

his tail "like one who takes everything said as personal to himself."
 But he forgot the bird when he noticed a cord of maple, all cut and neatly stacked; obviously it was older even than the cutting of the year before last.

The wood was grey and the bark was warping off it
 And the pile was somewhat sunken. Clematis
 Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.
 What held it though on one side was a tree
 Still growing, and on one a stake and prop,
 These later about to fall. I thought that only
 Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
 Could so forget his handiwork on which
 He spent himself, the labour of his axe,
 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

To find the relationship of this poem to the resistless forces of nature, one may note the words of McBride Dabbs: "Among the poems which are, in their entirety, symbolic, "The Wood-Pile" is notable. . . Nature holds man. . . . In a shadow. In its passive mood, it is solid, unyielding; in its active, almost resistless."³

"On Taking from the Top to Broaden the Base"⁴ has in it an unusually vivid illustration of the struggle of man against nature, for, just when he thinks that he has conquered her and that he is safe enough to shake a defiant fist at her, she indulges in some minor tantrum which is a major tragedy to him; and in spite of his boasting he is laid low.

Roll stones down on our head.
 You squat old pyramid,
 Your last good avalanche
 Was long since slid.

3. McBride Dabbs, "Robert Frost and the Dark Woods," Yale Review vol. 23, (March 1934) p. 516.

4. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 389.

Your top has sunk too low,
 Your base has spread too wide,
 For you to roll one stone
 Down if you tried.

But even at the word
 A pebble hit the roof,
 Another shot through glass
 Demanding proof.
 Before their panic hands
 Were fighting for the latch,
 The mud came in one cold
 Unleavened batch.

And none was left to prate
 Of an old mountain's case
 That still took from its top
 To broaden its base.

Although Frost is fully aware of the futility of struggle against some of the elements of nature, he has not become embittered, for he can still speak of her caprices with a wry humor. In "In Time of Cloudburst"⁵ he has this to say:

Let the down pour roil and toil!
 The worst it can do to me
 Is carry some garden soil
 A little nearer to the sea.

But he is not vastly concerned, for some day his entire garden will be washed away; and when it is, it is not at all impossible that some force of nature will cause a shift in the surface of the earth so that the low places shall be high, and the high low.

Then all I need do is run
 To the other end of the slope,
 And on tracts laid new to the sun,
 Begin all over to hope.

Some worn old tool of my own
 Will be turned up by the plow,
 The wood of it changed to stone,
 But as ready to wield as now

5. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 369.

May my application so close
 To so endless a repetition
 Not make me tired and morose
 And resentful of man's condition.

The very title of the poem "On Going Unnoticed"⁶ gives the key to the thought developed therein. Again the theme is that nature is unperturbed by the small ways of man. You go into the forest and find a bed of lovely flowers, coral-root. You want one, but almost fear that for taking such beauty, you will have to atone.

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

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

Another poem which develops this theme is "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things."⁷ The farm house had burned long ago, and all that was left standing was the chimney. The barn across the way still stood though it was no longer used except by the birds which flew in and out the broken windows,

Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
 From too much dwelling on what has been.

Yet for them the lilac renewed its leaf,
 And the aged elm though touched with fire;
 And the dry pump flung up an awkward arm;
 And the fencepost carried a strand of wire.
 For them there was really nothing sad.
 But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,
 One had to be versed in country things
 Not to believe that the phoebes wept.

6. Ibid., p. 309.

7. Ibid., p. 300.

Nor are the larger forces of nature anymore disturbed by man than are the trees and flowers. "On looking by Chance at the Constellations,"⁸ indicates that the plan on which nature regulates her constellations makes one aware of her infinite impersonality. She is unconcerned about the conditions existing on earth.

You'll wait a long, long time for anything much
 To happen in heaven beyond the floats of cloud
 And the Northern Lights that run like tingling nerves.
 The sun and moon get crossed, but they never touch,
 Nor strike out fire from each other, nor crash out loud.
 The planets seem to interfere in their curves,
 But nothing ever happens, no harm is done.
 We may as well go patiently on with our life,
 And look elsewhere than to stars and moon and sun
 For the shocks and changes we need to keep us sane.
 It is true the longest drought will end in rain,
 The longest peace in China will end in strife.
 Still it wouldn't reward the watcher to stay awake
 In hopes of seeing the calm of heaven break
 On his particular time and personal sight.
 That calm seems certainly safe to last tonight.

Then there are several poems which, instead of speaking of the resistlessness and impersonality of nature, speak of time. The plaintively beautiful poem "They Were Welcome to their Belief"⁹ tells that man grows old whether he experiences grief or pain, or neither, for as the seasons pass his head whitens.

Grief may have thought it was grief.
 Care may have thought it was care.
 They were welcome to their belief,
 The over important pair.

But it took every year that came, beginning when the man was young, to make his head white, but it did whiten, becoming a "shade more the color of snow" every year.

8. Ibid., p. 346.

9. Ibid., p. 390.

Grief may have thought it was grief.
 Care may have thought it was care.
 But neither one was the thief
 Of his raven color of hair.

The infinity and changlessness of time, the brevity and insignificance of man is the theme of "I Will Sing You One-0."¹⁰ The poet lay wakeful in bed, wishing for time to pass when the town clock struck one. This started a trend of thought which was not to stop short of the constellations of the universe. For that one symbolized much more than the time of the night. With it the winds came to tell of the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, the constellations, beyond which is God. The winds spoke for the clock.

In that grave word
 Uttered alone
 The utmost star
 Trembled and stirred,
 Though set so far
 Its whirling frenzies
 Appear like standing
 In one self station.
 It has not ranged,
 And save for the wonder
 Of once expanding
 To be a nova,
 It has not changed
 To the eye of man
 One planets over
 Around and under
 It in creation
 Since man began
 To drag down man
 And nation nation.

Time is everlasting even beyond the forces of nature, for given enough time, the forces of nature through erosion change the contours of the earth. The first two stanzas of "I Could Give All To Time"¹¹ deal with the impersonality of time in regard to these changes.

10. Ibid., pp. 264-266.

11. Frost, Witness Tree, p. 17.

To Time it never seems that he is brave
 To set himself against the peaks of snow
 To lay them level with the running wave,
 Nor is he overjoyed when they lie low
 But only grave, contemplative and grave.

What now is inland shall be ocean isle,
 Then eddies playing round a sunken reef
 Like the curl at the corner of a smile;
 And I could share Time's lack of joy or grief
 At such a planetary change of style.

That man may temporarily overcome the forces of nature Frost shows in another group of poems. These deal with the struggle that man makes to establish a habitation or a home and the swiftness and certainty with which nature takes over the area as soon as man has turned his back. "The Census Taker"¹² takes this repossession by nature further than the local places indicated. The poet assuming the role of census-taker, has come to a "slab-built, black-paper-covered house of one room, one window, and one door, the only dwelling in a waste cut over a hundred square miles round it in the mountains." Though there had at one time been dwellers here, there was now only the severest desolation.

The time was autumn, but how anyone
 Could tell the time of year when every tree
 That could have dropped a leaf was down itself
 And nothing but the stump of it was left
 Now bringing out its rings in sugar of pitch;
 And every tree up stood a rotting trunk
 Without a single leaf to spend on autumn,
 Or branch to whistle after what was spent.

As the census-taker stood under the spell of this desolation, he imagined he saw the men who lived there. His meditations led him to think what he could do about the house, about the people who were not there.

12. Frost, Collected Poems, pp. 216, 217.

This house in one year fallen to decay
 Filled me with no less sorrow than the houses
 Fallen to ruin in ten thousand years
 Where Asia wedges Africa from Europe.

Absorbed in thought of the places where souls "grow fewer and fewer every year," he reached this conclusion: "It must be I want life to go on living."

But houses of strange, imaginary people are not the only ones which nature reclaims if she is given the opportunity. In a poem which gains the reader's sympathy Frost speaks of his own birthplace--at least his own for the duration of the poem--and its return toward its native state. He calls it "The Birthplace."¹³

Here further up the mountain slope
 Than there was ever any hope,
 My father built, enclosed a spring.
 Strung chains of wall round everything,
 Subdued the growth of earth to grass,
 And brought our various lives to pass.
 A dozen girls and boys we were.
 The mountain seemed to like the stir
 And made of us a little while--
 With always something in her smile.
 Today she wouldn't know our name.
 (No girl's of course, has stayed the same.)
 The mountain pushed us off her knees.
 And now her lap is full of trees.

Man seems to have subdued nature in "A Brook in the City"¹⁴ for a new city street has taken the path that the brook once followed. Turned into a sewer, it would seem to be safely cemented down to the control of man. But Frost cannot believe that the subjugation is so complete as it appears on the new maps which no longer indicate the course of the brook.

But I wonder
 If from its being kept forever under

13. Ibid., p. 339.

14. Ibid., p. 284.

The thoughts may not have risen that so keep
This new-built city from work and sleep.

The picture of man in his struggle against nature is not completely dark, not even for Frost. McBride Dabbs offers an explanation of the poet's attitude on the question of man and nature:

Yet, though nature threatens man with destruction, its very challenge creates courage, and so life, within him. Nature exists—so far as man is concerned—to be fought against; but not to be destroyed, even were that possible, for that would be the destruction of man himself.¹⁵

Lewishohn points out this philosophy as illustrated in "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road." He says, "Mankind has a way of striving; there is, at the least, a fundamental moral energy in human life; 'The Tree Fallen Across the Road' cannot really halt us."¹⁶ The incident in the poem is this: travelers on a journey know that a tree fallen across the road does not permanently bar the way to the goal; it only makes them stop to think what to do.

And yet she [the tree] knows obstruction is in vain;
We will not be put off the final goal
We have it hidden in us to attain,
Not though we have to seize earth by the pole
And, tired of aimless circling in one place,
Steer straight off after something into space.¹⁷

The theme in "Sand Dunes"¹⁸ indicates that man will strive, and get ahead in one way or another through the power of his mind; for, though nature may overcome man in the more material sense and may seem to cut him off from his goal at every turn through the power of his mind he finds a new way out.

15. Dabbs, op. cit., p. 123.

16. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 296.

17. Frost, op. cit., p. 296.

18. Ibid., p. 330.

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

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

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

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

In Frost's recent book, A Witness Tree, he seems to have a more optimistic outlook concerning the relationship of man and nature; nature must be a fraction more benignant than she is malicious else by this time man would have been annihilated.

It is "Our Hold on the Planet"¹⁹ which gives expression to this idea of a more lenient nature than has been pictured in the earlier publications. Although Frost usually presents only the bleaker side of nature when representing her as the elements in their relation to the human race, in this poem he devotes the first eleven lines to showing her more maternal side.

We asked for rain. It didn't flash and roar.
 It didn't lose its temper at our demand
 And blow a gale. It didn't misunderstand
 And give us more than our spokesman bargained for;
 And just because we owned to a wish for rain,
 Send us a flood and bid us be damned and drown.
 It gently threw us a glittering shower down.

19. Frost, A Witness Tree, p. 43.

And when we had taken that into the roots of grain,
 It threw us another and then another still
 Till the spongy soil again was natal wet.
 We may doubt the just proportion of good to ill.
 There is so much in nature against us.

The rest of the poem gives adequate justification for the conclusion
 that has gone before.

But we forget:
 Take nature altogether since time began,
 Including human nature, in peace and war,
 And it must be a little more in favor of man,
 Say a fraction of one percent at the very least,
 Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,
 Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased.

C. POEMS DEALING WITH MAN'S RELATIONSHIP TO MAN

War is an unfortunately universal theme. Robert Frost was in England when she entered World War I. One of his most intimate English acquaintances, Edward Thomas, lost his life on Vimy Ridge. The impact of that war and fear of war in general left upon Robert Frost a mark that is shown in a number of his poems. "Range-Finding"¹ shows the fierceness of war even more vividly because it tells how the influence is felt beyond man and cuts into the lives of the small creatures which are found in his environment.

The battle rent a cobweb diamond-strung
 And cut a flower beside a ground bird's nest
 Before it staired a single human breast.
 The stricken flower bent double and so hung.

And still the bird revisited her young.
 A butterfly its fall had dispossessed
 A moment sought in air his flower of rest,
 Then lightly stooped to it and fluttering clung.

On the bare upland pasture there had spread
 O'ernight 'twixt mullein stalks a wheel of thread
 A sudden passing bullet shook it dry.
 The indwelling spider ran to greet the fly,
 But finding nothing, suddenly withdrew.

A poem which shows the bitterness Frost feels toward war is "The Bonfire."² The father in the poem suggests to the children that they go up the hill with him this particular evening to set fire to all the brush that they had piled up for winter. The flame will shoot so high the people will come to the windows of their houses to see what is causing such a light. When he suggests that they might scare themselves, the children ask if it would scare him, too. Yes, he tells them, for once he built a small fire which got out of hand for

1. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 159.

2. Ibid., pp. 163-166.

a time; it burned withered grass and flowers. In fear he knelt to rub--"fight such a fire b' rubbing not b' beating"--the fire out with his coat, the only weapon he had available. The smother of smoke was almost past abiding, but he kept on, the thought of the woods and town set on fire by him goading him to fight on the road side while he trusted the brook to stop it on the other. He won; and in spite of his weariness he felt he was walking on air, even when the neighbors who had passed a green field on the way saw it suddenly turned black on their return. No wonder, he comments, he would be scared. Then the children have a question:

"If it scares you, what will it do to us?"

"Scare you. But if you shrink from being scared, What would you say to war if it should come? That's what for reasons I should like to know-- If you can comfort me by any answer."

"Oh, but war's not for children--it's for man."

"Now we are digging almost down to China.
My dear, my dear, you thought that--we all thought it.
So your mistake was ours. Haven't you heard, though,
About the ships where war has found them out
At sea, about the towns where war has come
Through opening clouds at night with ironing speed
Further o'erhead than all but stars and angels,--
And children in ships and in the towns?
Haven't you heard what we have lived to learn?
Nothing so new--something we had forgotten:
War is for everyone, for children too.
I wasn't going to tell you and I mustn't.
The best way is to come uphill with me
And have our fire and laugh and be afraid."

The bitterness of disillusionment is found the sonnet entitled "The Flood."³ It is both a bitterness and a disillusionment that

3. Ibid., p. 323.

might apply today when the men of the world have learned of the seeming inevitability of man's need to struggle one against the other even as he must struggle against nature. Herein Frost speaks of the many times that man has thought the human greed which stirs up wars has been smothered, only to see it break through again.

Blood has been harder to dam back than water.
 Just when we think we have it impounded safe
 Behind new barrier walls (and let it chafe!).
 It breaks away in some new kind of slaughter.
 We choose to say it is let loose by the devil;
 But power of blood itself releases blood.
 It goes by might of being such a flood
 Held high at so unnatural a level.
 It will have outlet, brave and not so brave.
 Weapons of war and implements of peace
 Are but the points at which it finds release.
 And now it is once more the tidal wave
 That when it has swept by leaves summits stained.
 Oh, blood will out. It cannot be contained.

"The Peaceful Shepherd"⁴ is another of the poems which reveals the bitterness at the stupidity of man which has caused him to become involved in war. It is the only time reference is found so directly to Christianity.

If heaven were to do again,
 And on the pasture bars,
 I leaned to line the figures in
 Between the dotted stars,

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 now men have warred.
 The Cross, The Crown, the Scales may all
 As well have been the Sword.

One of his war poems "Not to Keep"⁵ deals with the tragedy of

4. Ibid., p. 319.

5. Ibid., p. 284.

the personal element. A wife received word first that her husband was being sent back to her from the war. Because the army returns only the living, not the dead, she was glad; but when she saw him she looked for some disfigurement, some maimed limb; she could see nothing wrong; so she asked,

"What is it, dear?" And he had given all
 And still he had all--they had--they the lucky!
 Wasn't she glad now? Everything seemed won,
 And all the rest for them permissible ease.
 She had to ask, "What was it, dear?"

He had to tell her, it was only a bullet high in the chest; he had come home for nursing at her hands so that he could return to the lines in a week.

The same
 grim giving to do over for them both
 She dared no more than ask him with her eyes
 How was it with him for a second trial.
 And with his eyes he asked her not to ask
 They had given him back to her, but not to keep.

"The Trial by Existence" treats of a theme which has often been developed in the hands of the writers of the ages. It expresses the idea that human kind chooses its own fate in some way or another. The poem tells of a scene in heaven; the angels are gathered together on a cliff-top where "the trial by existence named, the obscuration upon earth." Though they see the sacrifice that birth upon earth will necessitate, they are more than willing to go, for they see the opportunity of doing some good, and the tale of earth's unhonored things sounds nobler there than 'neath the sun and

The State of earth's unhonored things
 Sounds nobler there than 'neath the sun;
 And the mind whirls and the heart sings,
 And a shout greets the daring one.

But always God speaks at the end;
 "One thought in agony of strife
 The bravest would have by for friend,
 The memory that he chose the life;
 But the pure fate to which you go
 Admits no memory of choice,
 Or the woe were not earthly woe
 To which you give the assenting voice."

And so the choice must be again,
 But the last choice still the same,
 And the awe passes wonder then,
 And a hush falls for all acclaim.
 And God has taken a flower of gold
 And broken it, and used therefrom
 The mystic link to bind and hold
 Spirit to matter till death come.

'Tis of the essence of life here,
 Though we choose greatly, still to lack
 The lasting memory at all clearer,
 That life has for us on the wrack
 Nothing but what we somehow chose;
 Thus are we wholly stripped of pride
 In the pain that has but one close,
 Bearing it crushed and mystified.

In discussing this poem, Gorham B. Munson quotes another critic:

"As Llewellyn Jones has stated it, it is 'A recognition that suffering is always in terms of what we are, not an alien something hitting us by chance from without but somehow or other implicit in our very constitution.'⁶

Frost, with unusual optimism, sets out to prove, in spite of the things he hears the sages say, that this age of man is no darker than any age which has gone before. His method of proof is an imaginary conversation with some poet who lived generations ago. He entitles this poem "The Lesson for Today."⁷ The whole point of the conversation

6. Munson, op. cit., p. 113.

7. Frost, A Witness Tree, pp. 46-52.

is to see which can produce evidence to prove that his age will go down in history as the darker. This is the only time that Frost specifically says that he is dealing in universals.

Both must admit that it is difficult to appraise a time in which one is living; but they can pretend they know enough of what the long view will say to select the worst points of their respective ages.

They find a common ground to begin upon:

There's always something to be sorry for,
 A sordid peace or an outrageous war.
 Yes, yes, of course, we have the same convention.
 The groundwork of all faith is human woe.
 It was well worth the preliminary mention.
 There's nothing but injustice to be had.

.....

But let's get on to where our cases part,
 If they do part. Let me propose a start.

.....

Space ails us moderns: we are stuck with space.
 Its contemplation makes us out as small
 As a brief epidemic of microbes
 That in a good glass may be seen to crawl
 The patina of this the least of globes.
 But have we there the advantage after all?
 You were belittled into vilest worms
 God hardly tolerated with his feet;
 Which comes to the same thing in different terms.
 We both are the belittled human race,
 One as compared with God and one with space.
 I had thought ours the more profound disgrace.

.....

So science and religion really meet.

.....

But these are universals, not confined
 To anyone time, place, or human kind.
 We're either nothing or a God's regret.
 As ever when philosophers are met,
 No matter where they stoutly mean to get,

Nor what particulars they reason from,
They are philosophers, and from old habit
They end up in the universal Whole
As unoriginal as any rabbit.

Then Frost reaches the conclusion that "one age is like another for the soul, for all ages shine with equal darkness." He points out that he has gone to the grave yard to read the epitaphs and has noticed that life varies in length from a few hours to over a hundred years. There is another universal, not only mankind, but the race, the nation, and possibly the earth "are doomed to broken-off careers." So after all, one age is not in reality darker than another one, for the same universals apply to all.

D. POEMS WITH SETTINGS DEFINITELY OUTSIDE NEW ENGLAND

In further evidence of the fact that Frost's scope is broader than the provincial setting of his New England home, there are a number of poems which are definitely set outside that region. The poet spent the first ten years of his life in California in a period shortly following the gold rush days. There is nothing to indicate that the lad took all the intensity of such living very closely to heart, but there is evidence that he did not tear it from his memory so completely as some would have his readers believe. One of the poems of his boyhood is "A Peck of Gold."¹ Although the refrain is not a common device in the works of this poet, it is used here in a modified form.

Dust always blowing about the town
 Except when sea-fog laid it down,
 And I was one of the children told
 Some of the blowing dust was gold.

All the dust the wind blew high
 Appeared like gold in the sunset sky,
 But I was one of the children told
 Some of the dust was really gold.

Such was life in the Golden Gate:
 Gold dusted all we drank and ate,
 And I was one of the children told
 "We all must eat our peck of gold."

Though Frost left California when he was ten years old and, to this time, has not returned to that state, at least one of his experiences with the ocean left a profound impression on him. The name of the poem in which he reveals the thoughts---which must have come to him much later--induced by one ocean view is simply "Once by the Pacific."

1. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 312.

The shattered water made a misty din.
 Great waves looked over others coming in,
 And thought of doing something to the shore
 That water never did to land before.
 The clouds were low and hairy in the skies,
 Like locks blown forward in the gleam of eyes.
 You could not tell, and yet it looked as if
 The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,
 The cliff in being backed by continent;
 It looked as if a night of dark intent
 Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
 Someone had better be prepared for rage.
 There would be more than ocean-water broken
 Before God's last Put out the Light was spoken.²

There is a second part of "The Wind and the Rain" discussed on page thirty seven of this work. Because the setting is an arid region-- probably a desert area of the Southwest, this poem also may be classed with those placed outside of New England.

In one of the poems which expressed Frost's philosophy of letting what will be, be, there is another outside reference, though the reader must decide for himself whether the location is California or England; however, he can be sure, since the sun sets in a gulf, that it is not Frost's home state. The poem is called "Acceptance."³

When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud
 And goes down burning into the gulf below,
 No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud
 At what has happened.

One of the sections of his book of Collected Poems, Frost entitles "The Outland" perhaps some of the earlier critical jibes at his complete disregard of any part of the world or his experience other than New England led him to believe that he must of necessity write something more obviously of the outside world, and so label it.

2. Ibid., p. 314.

3. Ibid., p. 313.

Be that as it may, two of the three "Outlands" poems are historical narratives. The first one is "The Vindictives," which deals with a phase of the fall of the Inca kingdom. It was the great store of gold which the conquerors first sought. They took the king prisoner, then demanded all the gold his subjects could gather for his ransom,

But when there seemed no more to bring
His captors convicted the king
Of once having started a war,
And strangled the wretch with a string.

Whereupon the subjugated people determined that, since gold was the thing the conquerors wanted, no more gold should they have. The Incas in their hate began hiding the gold.

That self-sack and self-overthrow.
That was the splendoriest sack
Since the forest Germans sacked Rome.
And took the gold candlesticks home.

Even the rack could not tear from them the secrets of their treasures.

But the conquered grew meek and still
They slowly and silently aged.
They kept their secrets and died,
Maliciously satisfied.

The most coveted treasure of all was a thousand-linked chain of gold, each link of which weighed a hundred weight; it had served as the palace gate by being looped ten times from pole to pole. It was hidden in an old burial hole in a tribal cave, where its splendor shone among the decaying bones of human and beast, and every Inca asked concerning that treasure had a different story to tell in his hate: it had gone to the coast; it had been sent over the mountains to the east; a sun-priest had led a single file expedition into the north with it. But the gold lay in the filth, bright and untarnished, while the secret of its disposal and the slow seething of hate died with the people;

for they had a philosophy which backed them up in their non-violent resistance.

"The best way to hate is the worst.
 'Tis to find what the hated need,
 Never mind of actual worth,
 And wipe that out of the earth.
 Let them die of unsatisfied greed,
 Of unsatisfied love of display,
 Of unsatisfied love of the high,
 Unvulgar, unsoiled, and ideal.
 Let their trappings be taken away.
 Let them suffer starvation and die
 Of being brought down to the real."

"The Bearer of Evil Tidings," the second poem of this group, is a reminder that in the olden days the messenger who was so unfortunate as to be selected to carry bad tidings to his emperor was put to death in reward for his efforts. This particular bearer was half way to his destination when he remembered how dangerous to himself his news was, so he took the fork of the road that turned into the unknown. His running led him into the land of Pamir, where he met a girl of his own age, a member of an isolated tribe, who told him the story of her tribe's origin and religion. A Chinese princess had been enroute to wed a Persian prince when she was found to be with child. She and her army came to a troubled halt. "And though a god was the father and nobody else at fault, it had seemed discreet to remain there and neither go on nor back. Because this child was of divine parentage, he was given the rule of this tribe which grew from the halted people. The Bearer was so pleased with the situation that he decided to take up their religion and become a member of this Himalayan tribe.

At least he had this in common
 With the race he chose to adopt;
 They had both of them had their reasons
 For stopping where they had stopped.

As for his evil tiding,
 Belshazzar's overthrow,
 Why hurry to tell Belshazzar
 What soon enough he would know.

The third "Outlands" poem, "Iris by Night,"⁴ has been discussed among those which deal with the personal elements in Frost's poetry, but in the section now under discussion it will be well to point out that the setting of this poem is England:

One misty evening, one another's guide,
 We two were groping down a Malvern side
 The last wet fields and dripping hedges home.

In his recent book there is another of the narrative poems based upon legend, "The Discovery of the Madeiras."⁵ That the basic story is in good repute is evinced by its being mentioned in the Encyclopedia Britannica:

There is a romantic story to the effect that two lovers, Robert Mashim, a Machin or Macham, and Ann D'Arfet, fleeing from England to France (c1370) were driven out of their course by a violent storm and cast on the coast of Madeira at a place subsequently named Machica in memory of one of them.⁶

A stolen lady was coming on board,
 But whether stolen from her wedded lord
 Or from her own self against her will
 Was not set forth in the lading bill.

However she came, her courage was weak when the irrevocable moment of departure came, for "her lover to make the ordeal swift had to give her the final lift." The first days of the journey were so rough that the lady had to stay below deck; but when the weather turned fair

4. Ibid., p. 418.

5. Frost, Witness Tree. pp. 32-37.

6. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, London, (1937), Fourteenth Edition, v. 15, p. 609.

"she was carried out beside the mast," where she and her lover sat and conversed with one another more in looks and head shakings than in words. Occasionally the lover, to keep the captain's favor, would go to talk with him. The ship had formerly been a slaver and the captain liked to tell stories of those days. One he told the lover concerned a couple of captive lovers on board a slaver who, in their love for one another, were oblivious of surrounding conditions. Unfortunately the fever struck the boat, and the "nigger" man was among the first who took it. The crew decided to throw him overboard alive to prevent the spread of the disease, but the girl made such a savage scene in her fighting to prevent this step that the crew were angered. Some one had an idea,

Apparently these two ought to marry.
 We get plenty funerals at sea
 How for a change would a wedding be?--
 Or a combination of the two,
 How would a funeral-wedding do?
 It's gone so far she's probably caught
 Whatever it is the nigger's got."
 They bound them naked so they faced
 With a length of cordage about the waist,

.....
 They added clasps about the neck
 And went embraced to the cold and dark
 To be their own marriage feast for the shark.

When the lover returned to the woman he had left by the mast, he repeated some of the conversation, but she sensed there was more. Upon her demand, he told her the tale. She sought denial of its truth, but no denial was forthcoming. The story seemed to break her spirit; she could not flee physically, so she withdrew to herself. She daily faded more until the lover finally asked the captain to put them off

at the nearest land, hoping that an "untossed place" would effect a cure. The ship lay in the bay for awhile waiting for her recovery, but she grew worse rather than better.

Her lover saw them sail away,
 But dared not tell her all one day.
 For slowly even her sense of him
 And love itself were growing dim.
 He no more drew the smile he sought.
 The story is she died of thought.

And when her lover was left alone
 He stayed long enough to carve on stone
 The name of the lady with his own
 To be her only marriage line.
 And carved them round with a scroll of vines.
 Then he gouged a clumsy sailing trough
 From a fallen tree and pushing off
 Safely made the African shore,
 Where he fell a prisoner to the Moor.
 But the Moor strangely enough believed
 The tale of the voyage he had achieved,
 And sent him to the king to admire.
 He came at last to his native shore.
 The island he found was verified.
 And the bay where his stolen lady died
 Was named for him instead of her.
 But so is history like to err.
 And soon it is neither here nor there
 Whether time's rewards are fair or unfair.

It is not at all a dangerous generalization to say that any poet who writes with a consciousness of so many universal themes as have been illustrated in this chapter is not to be characterized as being local or provincial, and only that. His themes are not only those which have an appeal to the understanding and sympathy of mankind, but also those which find a common keynote in the emotions and interests of the men of the world and of the ages.

CHAPTER V

POEMS WITH UNIVERSAL MEANING FOUND IN PROVINCIAL SETTING

A. OPINIONS OF THE CRITICS

How anyone can fail to see
 Where perfectly in form and tint
 The metaphor, the symbol lies!
 Why will I not analogize?
 (I do too much in some men's eyes.)¹

Previous chapter have dealt with poems of Robert Frost which show elements that are purely local and elements that are distinctly universal; there is still another group of poems characteristic of this author. This third division of poetry has received more attention from the critics than the other two, perhaps because it constitutes a larger body of his work and possibly because of the rare skill with which he accomplishes his aim. Not upon his universal poems alone has Frost won his reputation as a universal poet, but upon those which clothe the universal in the garments of a local setting. Since there are critics who analyze both his style and ability in this matter, further explanation of the term "the universal in the local" is quoted from them.

Blankenship has this to say:

In the history of American literature it has usually been accounted something to transmute into literary form the peculiar flavor, the atmosphere, the speech of a particular locality. For more than a century men have labored to describe the chill of New England winters, the pine woods under a deep snow, the beauty of the spring, the riot of autumn colors, and, above all, the taciturn inhabitants, rooted to the soil, and distinguished from all other Americans by their canny ways and clipped speech. Local colorists would have thought themselves successful if they had been able to depict only these

1. Frost, Collected Poems, p. 436.

things. But it remained for Robert Frost to describe lovingly and accurately the particularizing qualities of the New England land and people, and then to achieve a unique distinction in our letters by penetrating far enough below local peculiarities to reveal universal aspects of life and human nature.

Frost is certainly not the last person in the world to sense that he is more than a poet of New England, for in his "New Hampshire" he mildly objects to a local classification. The objection is rather noteworthy, for he is generally the most reticent of men about his own work.

And when I asked to know what ailed the people.
 She said, Go read your own books and find out.
 I may as well confess myself the author
 Of several books against the world in general.
 To make them as against a special state
 Or even the nation's to restrict my meaning.

.
 Because I wrote my novels in New Hampshire
 Is no proof that I aimed them at New Hampshire. ²

In speaking of the same subject, Monroe says of Frost:

This poet, however loyally local, is bigger than his environment: and his art, plunging beneath surfaces and accidents, seizes upon the essential, the typical, in the relation of men and women with each other, and all that lives and moves between them. Such art passes local boundaries as lightly as an airplane, and swings out into wider circles of time and space.

Lamberth credits Frost with unusual skill in revealing universal truth.

He has caught in his net of words the whole of a living experience clothed in its mere accidentals of time and place. And at the heart of such an experience is that universal truth which resides at the center of every particular truth, but which is visible only to those who have learned to see.³

Schwartz expresses his admiration for Frost's art in these words:

He is one of the great poets of our day; his work treats of his country and its people, being, like no other, bound to them by destiny and intention. Above all else, however, drawing his strength from

2. Blankenship, op. cit., p. 588.

3. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 142.

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this source, he reaches out into the range of that which concerns us all. For he is a poet of his country, and at the same time, one of the natural sages of mankind.⁴

Blankenship also has something to say concerning the way Frost deals with truth:

With the touch of a creative artist and the swift insight of a born poet, he has transmuted rustic provincialism into something of universal truth and spiritual significance.⁵

A. C. Ward speaks a little more conservatively:

A great deal of the essential America is in his poetry, but it is always interpreted in universal terms. A foreign reader of Frost's work cannot fail to know the American spirit better afterwards than before, though at no time is its interest solely American.⁶

Van Doren uses a much more sweeping statement to cover the same thought:

If he is not all things to all men he is something to almost anybody--to posterity, one supposes, as well as to us.⁷

James Southall Wilson elaborates a little more upon the subject.

Frost's philosophy always derives from personal experience and his poems in detail are personal and objective. They are, as has been indicated, human, conversational, humorous, quietly dramatic (sometimes in an almost commonplace way)--and very local. Yet he is the most American poet and he universalizes everything that he touches. Truth is often hidden in a paradox. So with Frost. He seems interested only in the particular but the particular is for him the universal. He finds the center of the universe in every grain of sand that blows by his Vermont farm gate: the center of the universe is the focus from which the poet, who is also the philosopher, looks out in all directions upon the universe.⁸

Van Doren also speaks of the world appeal found in Frost:

He is a New England poet, perhaps the New England poet, and reaps all the advantage there is in being true to a particular piece of

4. Ibid., p. 283.

5. Blankenship, op. cit., pp. 593.

6. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 264.

7. Ibid., p. 5.

8. Ibid., p. 241.

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earth--true to its landscape, its climate, its history, its morality, its tongue. But he is in the same breath a poet of and for the world. One needs not have lived in New England to understand him. . . his voice is immediately recognizable anywhere as a human voice, and recognizable for the much that it has to say. He has his roots, as literature must always have them; but he grows at the top into the wide air that flows around the world where men and women listen.⁹

Sergeant, borrowing Frost's own term, "World in general," to refer to the poets field, by saying that he gives clarity to

. . . human lives in this thin northern atmosphere of his, shut in by moral and physical solitude, yet escaping through their barriers to grapple together in situations of love and hate and suffering typical and inevitable of New England but also of 'the world in general'.¹⁰

One more quotation will suffice in this presentation of the evidence from the pens of the critics that Frost is an artist in presenting the universal by portraying its elements found in the local. Lewisjohn specifies several poems which he feels illustrate this characteristic which has been under discussion.

He is at best when from phenomena in life and nature, seen with the highest sobriety and poeticalness at once, he wrings a meaning which is both personal and universal, concrete and therefore general. He does that again and again in the 'Grace Notes' of the New Hampshire volume, in 'Fragmentary Blue,' in 'The Runaway,' 'Blue Butterfly Day' 'Good-Bye and Keep Cold,' 'A Brook in the City,' 'Gathering Leaves,' 'The Kitchen Chimney,' 'The Lockless Door.' These are extraordinarily satisfactory poems, profound and lucid.¹¹

9. Ibid, pp. 12, 13.

10. Sergeant, op. cit., p. 294.

11. Ludwig Lewisjohn, quoted by Thornton, op. cit., pp. 216, 217.

B. ANALYSES OF POEMS CITED BY THE CRITICS
AS PRESENTING THE UNIVERSAL IN THE LOCAL.

The critics have not stopped at saying that Frost is a universal poet who uses the techniques of the localist; they have used some of his poems to illustrate their points.

Perhaps only one other of Frost's poems has been quoted in whole or in part more than "Mending a Wall";¹ its epigrammatic line "Good fences make good neighbors" is one of the touchstones of Frost's poetry, even though he warns against too general an application of its philosophy. He begins by saying, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that sends the frozen-ground-swell under it. . . ." Hunters make gaps, too, but theirs are different, for they practically tear the stone wall down to get the prey out of hiding; but this force of nature which does not love a wall takes a stone off here or there or makes a gap large enough for two to pass abreast at different places along the whole length of the wall. The poet finds his neighbor in the spring at mending-time, and they walk the line.

We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.

The work is arduous, for some of the boulders are so round the men must say a charm to make them stay in place.

There where it is we do not need the wall;
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good Fences make good neighbors."

Spring is the mischief in men, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head;

1. Frost, Collected Poems, pp. 47, 48.

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 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 offence.
 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That wants it down," I could say "Elves" to him,
 But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
 He said it for himself. I see him there
 Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
 In each hand, like an old stone savage armed.
 He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
 Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
 He will not go behind his father's saying,
 And he likes having thought of it so well
 He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

Although the universal elements in this poem dealing with both local character and local circumstance, not to mention local tradition, are obvious enough that they need not be pointed out, it is interesting to note what Louis Untermeyer says of it. In his American Poetry Since 1900, published in 1919 he writes:

It is after one has finished the poem that its power persists and grows. It takes on the quality of symbolism of two elemental and opposed forces. In its dispute about border lines, we have the essence of nationalism vs the internationalist. Beneath the whim and social anarchy of the one and the blind, literal insistence of the other, one senses the endless struggle between a pagan irresponsibility and a strict accountability. It is not just a conflict between the old and the New England; it is an echo of nature as primitive as Law and Revolution.²

Although it is startling to find Frost called a social anarchist and an irresponsible pagan, the comment does show Untermeyer's early interest in the poem. This critic's works offer an unusual opportunity to observe the degree to which Frost has held his position over a decade and a half; for seventeen years later, Untermeyer compiled another

2. Untermeyer, American Poetry Since 1900, p. 23.

collection of American poetry in which he again placed a comment on Frost. He has somewhat modified his opinion of "Mending Wall."

In "Mending Wall," we see two elemental and opposed forces. . . . Here we have the essence of nationalism versus the internationalist, the struggle, though the poet would be the last to prod the point, between blind obedience to custom and questioning inconcinnams.³

The poem of Frost's quoted equally with "Mending Wall" is "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."⁴ The element of the universal in this is no less present than in the one just discussed; but that element is a little more difficult to define, as a reading of the poem will show.

Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

McBride Dabbs has found the words which well express the depths of the poem.

I know of no other symbol in Frost's poetry that, partly because of the appropriate music, says so much as this. . . . In 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' we hear the more than human music of a typical human situation, the insistent whisper of death at the heart of life. For we are all travellers, travelling alone through haunted country. Strange voices allure us away to nature, friendly voices call us back to men. Whichever call we heed, we sleep at last. And often today, in tragic indecision confused by the conflicting voices,

3. Untermeyer, Modern American Poetry, pp. 209.

4. Frost, op. cit., p. 275.

we fall asleep murmuring of the miles we have to go.⁵

"The Runaway"⁶ is a poem of too perfect balance and perfection to permit distortion or mutilation by quoting less than all of it.

Once when the snow of the year was beginning to fall,
 We stopped by a mountain pasture to say, "Whose colt?"
 A little Morgan had one forefoot on the wall,
 The other curled at his breast. He dipped his head
 And snorted at us. And then he had to bolt.
 We heard the miniature thunder where he fled,
 And we saw him, or thought we saw him, dim and grey,
 Like a shadow against the curtain of falling flakes.
 I think the little fellow's afraid of the snow
 He isn't winter-broken. It isn't play

With the little fellow at all. He's running away.
 I doubt if even his mother could tell him, "Sakes,
 It's only weather." He'd think she didn't know!
 And now he comes again with clatter of stone,
 And mounts the wall again with whited eyes
 And all his tail that isn't hair up straight,
 He shudders his coat as if to throw off flies,
 Whoever it is that leaves him out so late
 When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,
 Ought to be told to come and take him in.

Van Doren points out the universal truth illustrated in this poem.

The poem called 'The Runaway' is a perfect picture of a young colt escaped from its mother in a snowstorm. It is also, though there are no words in which it says this, a complete reminder of a universe full of young, lost things, of a universe in which every creature, indeed, lives touchingly and amusingly alone. And there is no human being alive who would miss this poem.⁷

"The Black Cottage"⁸ is different in type from the three gone before. Its interest lies chiefly in the character of an old New England woman who is typical of many old women the world over. One day when

5. McBride Dabbs, "Frost and the Dark Woods," Yale Review, v. 23, (March 1934), p. 50.

6. Frost, op. cit., p. 273.

7. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 10.

8. Frost, op. cit., pp. 74-77.

Frost and the minister were out walking, they passed a little cottage set back among the cherry trees. The minister invited the poet in; then, in a Browning-like monologue, related the story of the house. The place was just as the old woman had left it when she died, for her sons refused to have it disturbed. This attitude was a token of their affection for their mother, whose apparent simplicity and naivete were backed by a wisdom profound enough to retain that affection untarnished. The boys lived in California, but, the minister told the poet parenthetically,

(Nothing could draw her after those two sons.
 She valued the considerate neglect
 She had at some cost taught them after years.)

The two went into the house as the minister talked. On a wall of the living room was a crayon portrait of her husband who had been killed in the Civil War. This picture seemed to represent something of the life of that old woman.

She had her own ideal of things, the old lady.
 And she liked talk. She had seen Garrison
 And Whittier, and had her story of them.
 One wasn't long in learning that she thought
 Whatever else the Civil War was for,
 It wasn't just to keep the States together,
 Nor just to free the slaves, though it did both.
 She wouldn't have believed those ends enough
 To have given outright for them all she gave.
 Her giving somehow touched the principle
 That all men are created free and equal.

For she believed that the Civil War produced racial equality, and that thence it was thoroughly established. She was such a naively innocent and trusting soul that, the minister confesses,

Do you know but for her there was a time
 When to please younger members of the church,
 Or rather say non-members in the church,
 Whom we all have to think of nowadays,
 I would have changed the Creed a very little?
 Not that she ever had to ask me not to;
 It never got so as that; but the bare thought
 Of her old tremulous bonnet in the pew,
 And of her half asleep was too much for me.

Why, I might wake her up and startle her
 It was the words "descended into Hades"
 That seemed too pagan to our liberal youth.

It is at this point that Kreymborg takes up the theme to show the universal-in-the-local interpretation.

An observation follows whose application is universal to men swinging back and forth between conservatism and romanticism. It applies even to poetry movements:

I'm just as glad she made me keep hands off
 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 truth being in and out of favor.⁹

The poem does not continue far from there, except that as the minister continues with his little conclusion he expresses another universal desire: that of finding unquestioned truth so that one's outlook and philosophy might have a degree of stability and certainty.

As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish
 I could be monarch of a desert land
 I could devote and dedicate forever
 To the truths we keep coming back and back to.

Another narrative poem in which the critics find universal meaning is "Blueberries."¹⁰ Two are discussing a patch of ripe blueberries they have seen in a spot that only two years ago was burned over; they would like to go pick them, but "Loren" will probably beat them to it since he saw them looking at the berries. The saying of the community has it that he has brought "all those young Lorens" up on wild berries, "like birds." What they don't eat, they sell in the stores. The two almost envy the family the knowledge of wild berries and of the names

9. Kreymborg, op. cit., p. 325.

10. Frost, op. cit., pp. 80, 81.

of flowers and their habits. One of the men recalls an earlier incident.

I've told you how once not long after we came,
 I almost provoked poor Loren to Mirth
 By going to him of all people, on earth
 To ask if he knew of any fruit to be had
 For the picking. The rascal, he said he'd be glad
 To tell if he knew. But the year had been bad.
 There had been some berries--but those were all gone.
 He didn't say where they had been. He went on:
 I'm sure--I'm sure--as polite as could be.
 He spoke to his wife in the door, 'Let me see,
 Mame, we don't know any good berrying place?
 It was all he could do to keep a straight face."

The two decide to pick the patch in the morning to show Loren that the fruit doesn't grow wild just for him.

We shan't have the place to ourselves to enjoy--
 Not likely, when all the young Lorens deploy.
 They'll be there to-morrow, or even to-night.
 They won't be too friendly--they may be polite--
 To people they look on as having no right
 To pick where they're picking. But we won't complain.

Alfred Kreyndorg mentions this poem as one which especially illustrates the power of Robert Frost to depict a universal incident in a purely local setting.

The landscape is never described for its own sake; nor are the human records, coloring the landscape, merely of interest because of their country character. The natural order of things and comments and delicious connotations, the essential humanness and seemingly careless music contribute to a concentrated intensity.

Then he turns specifically to "Blue Berries," of which he says this: "Though the idiom is personal, the experience is so universal as to make the reader wonder why he missed telling it himself, and telling it just so. . ."¹¹

This demonstration of the universal is not limited to poems which deal with New England geography or character; there are also those local in the sense that they are concerned with the personal life or

11. Kreyndorg, op. cit., p. 324.

experiences of the author. One of these is "Canis Major."¹²

The great Overdog,
That heavenly beast
With a star in one eye,
Gives a leap in the east.

He dances upright
All the way to the west
And never once drops
On his forefeet to rest.
I'm a poor underdog,
But tonight I will bark
With the great Overdog
That romps through the dark.

When one is weary, he may find rest in an escape from reality, and this escape may come through the identification with something larger and freer than oneself; in this poem, the poet identifies himself with the starry Overdog.

Wegandt points out the universal elements found in "Canis Major."

There are none of us who feel at all that have not had our spirits lift and soar as we watched the march of the stars on a winter's night. There are none of us with vigor who have not felt even in later years the urge to run wild in the dark as children and all other animals run wild at nightfall.¹³

Another of the personal experiences of Frost which has a significance for every one is "After-flakes."¹⁴ De Selincourt says of Frost, "Frost is a poet of delicatest degrees, but universal in the sense that he sees in these degrees the very secret of truth."¹⁵ Specifically of "After-flakes" he says, "If all is wrong, each one of us can at any rate deal with our own blacknesses and see how they can

12. Frost, op. cit., p. 331.

13. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 75, 76.

14. Frost, op. cit., p. 398.

15. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 251.

be put right."¹⁶

Another of the personal experience poems with a wider significance is "Locked Out, as Told to a Child;"¹⁷ in this one, McBride Dabbs sees that "this is childhood; with its wonder; its peace; its brevity."¹⁸

16. Ibid., p. 253.

17. Frost, op. cit., p. 169.

18. Quoted by Thornton, op. cit., p. 169.

C. ANALYSES OF ADDITIONAL POEMS SELECTED BY THE AUTHOR OF THIS THESIS

Perhaps Frost has written no narrative poem which has attracted wider attention than "The Death of a Hired Man,"¹ for its content, its diction, and its character development are unsurpassed. Also, it is one of Mr. Frost's favorites, one which he especially enjoys quoting when the occasion arises. The most important character, the hired man, does not appear directly in the poem, but it is his story and his character upon which the interest of the reader is centered. Both the characters and the setting are New England, yet they are representative of characters any one might know.

Mary was waiting for Warren, and when he came she tiptoed to meet him at the doorway and pushed him back onto the porch, closing the door behind her. "Silas is back; be kind," she said to him as they sat upon the wooden steps of the porch. Warren replied that he had always been kind to him, but that he would not take Silas back again as the hired man because it was customary with him to stay with Warren during the dull season when he hardly earned the little tobacco money he must have besides his keep, then, in haying time, when some neighbor offered him more in wages, to leave. Mary warned him to speak more quietly, lest he awaken Silas. He had been so tired out when he came back that she had hardly known him. He would not tell where he had been, only that he had come back to ditch the meadow for Warren--that was, they easily saw, to save his self-respect--and to do other odd jobs he had left unfinished. His mind had wandered, too, for he kept recalling

1. Frost, op. cit., pp. 49-55.

incidents which had occurred years earlier during the time he had worked on the farm. By then, Mary had Warren cajoled into a more kindly mood, so that even he must admit the excellency of Silas' one accomplishment, haying:

I know that's Silas' one accomplishment.
 He bundles every forkful in its place,
 And tags and numbers it for future reference,
 So he can find and easily dislodge it
 In the unloading. Silas does that well.
 He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
 You never see him standing on the hay
 He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.

One summer a college boy had worked with Silas for Warren, and during his recent wanderings Silas had seen the boy, now teaching in his own college. That, Mary said, kept coming into his conversation; he wanted Warren to get the boy again this summer so that he might teach him proper haying.

He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
 Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
 He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
 Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
 And nothing to look backward to with pride,
 And nothing to look forward to with hope,
 So now and never any different.

Mary sat silently in the moonlight.

She put out her hand
 Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
 Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
 As if she played unheard some tenderness
 That wrought on him beside her in the night.
 "Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:
 You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?
 It all depends on what you mean by home.
 Of course he's nothing to us, any more
 Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
 Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in."

"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Those definitions of home it is which prove the theme, the universality of the poem; for if one culls the poem down to its most meager meaning, the story of the hired man and of his relationship to Mary and Warren is but the illustration of the definition at which the two arrive.

But to continue with Frost's story: The two remember that Silas had a brother thirteen miles down the road; Silas had never told them, but they knew it. Warren wondered what was between them. Mary thought she knew.

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

It is obvious to the reader that Mary has hit upon another of the universal characteristics of the human race.

Then Mary went the softened, but still a trifle skeptical, Warren to see Silas.

"I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon."

It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned --too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

"Warren?" she questioned.

"Dead," was all he answered.

Another of the poems dealing with death is "Out, Out."² If the setting were not given as Vermont, there would be no excuse for classifying this as local, for everywhere death comes unexpectedly, and the living must go on. The men had been sawing wood on the buzz-saw all day, and the day was nearly done. They might well have quit half an hour earlier, but they continued until the boy's sister came to tell them supper was ready.

At the word, the saw,
 As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
 Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap--
 He must have given the hand; however it was,
 Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
 The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
 As he swung toward them holding up the hand
 Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
 The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all--
 Since he was old enough to know, big boy
 Doing a man's work, though a child at heart--
 He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off--
 The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister."
 So. But the hand was gone already.
 The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
 He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
 And then--the watcher at his pulse took fright.
 No one believed. They listened at his heart.
 Little--less--nothing!--and that ended it.
 No more to build on there. And they since they
 Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

This swift unexpectedness of death is to be noticed also in "The Impulse," one of the poems of "The Hill Wife" sequence. Since this poem has been discussed on page eighty six of this work, here only the last stanza, which is sufficient to show the similarity of thought in it and "Out, Out--," will be quoted.

2. Ibid., pp. 171, 172.

Sudden and swift and light as that
 The ties gave,
 And he learned of finalities
 Beside the grave.

"Home Burial " (see page of eighty-eight) suggests in the character of the man that the living must go on with their affairs, since "they are not the one dead"; the manner in which he has alienated his wife is by turning to commonplace conversation with other men immediately after digging the grave for their child's body.

Frost strikes another universal note in "Hyla Brook"³ when he says "We love the things we love for what they are." Once that truth is pointed out to the reader, its application to many of the things with which he comes in contact is so obvious that no further elaboration is necessary.

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

"The Strong Are Saying Nothing"⁴ tells of the simple farm process of planting in the spring, but from the method of planting and the size of the plots, one knows the setting must be New England. The first

3. Ibid., p. 49.

4. Ibid., p. 391.

three stanzas are entirely local; it is in the fourth, in a typically Robert Frost manner, which adds the universal.

Wind goes from farm to farm in wave on wave,
 But carries no cry of what is hoped to be.
 There may be little or much beyond the grave,
 But the strong are saying nothing until they see.

In this particular case the "little or much beyond the grave" may refer to the unpredictable fate of the seeds, for their growth depends upon the weather; but even the wind which probably knows if anything does, has no message of the future. Or the grave may be taken literally, and the poem have that universal reference concerning the uncertainty man has about the fate he meets after death.

Paul was a lumberman; he was a big burly fellow afraid of nothing, but let anyone ask him "How is the wife?" and he would leave that camp to find a new job. The story of this is told in "Paul's Wife."⁵ There were current numerous stories about her, and Murphy's was the one most nearly accepted, for "To match a hero, she would have had to be a heroine." The tale of her supernatural origin was not much more unlikely than the baser tales which might concern the woman who was Paul's wife. Once Paul and a sawer had been working hard and fast when an unusual log came through the carriage, for a hollow pine was very much out of the ordinary. They all treated it as Paul's and suggested that he take it home, spread the opening, and use the log for a dug-out to go fishing in. Even Paul could not imagine what had caused such a clean opening. He decided to investigate carefully by

5. Ibid., pp. 235-239.

using his jackknife, to cut into it to see if it was empty.

He made out in there
 A slender length of pith, or was it pith?
 It might have been the skin a snake had cast
 And left stood up on end inside the tree
 The hundred years the tree must have been growing.
 More cutting and he had this in both hands,
 And, looking from it to the pond near by,
 Paul wondered how it would respond to water.
 Not a breeze stirred, but just the breath of air
 He made in walking slowly to the beach
 Blew it once off his hands and almost broke it.
 He laid it at the edge where it could drink.
 At the first drink it rustled and grew limp.
 At the next drink it grew invisible.
 Paul dragged the shallows for it with his fingers,
 And thought it must have melted. It was gone.
 And then beyond the open water, dim with midges,
 Where the log drive lay pressed against the boom,
 It slowly rose a person, rose a girl,
 Then she climbed slowly to her feet,
 And walked off talking to herself or Paul
 Across the logs like backs of alligators,
 Paul taking after her around the pond.

Murphy has been watching them from the shore, but they were oblivious of anyone else. The next evening, Murphy and some of his drunken companions saw the couple on a bare cliff up Catamount.

They sat together half-way up a cliff
 In a small niche let into it, the girl
 Brightly, as if a star played on the place,
 Paul darkly, like her shadow. All the light
 Was from the girl herself, though, not from a star,
 As was apparent from what happened next.
 All those great ruffians put their throats together,
 And let out a loud yell and threw a bottle,
 As a brute tribute of respect to beauty.
 Of course the bottle fell short by a mile,
 But the shout reached the girl and put her light out.
 She went out like a firefly, and that was all.

It is Untermyer who points out the universal element in this poem.

Possibly there is a "grim" commentary on the way in which the world usually receives magic in the passage Murphy and his pals see the two young lovers honeymoon on the cliff and, with instinctive

unanimity, they put their throats together, "And let out a loud yell. . . as a brute tribute of respect to beauty."⁶

Another universal element is expressed by the old mountain character in "The Mountain"⁷ who says,

"It doesn't seem too much to climb a mountain
You've worked around the foot of all your life,"

It is characteristic of men in general that what he has at his own back door does not prove an adventure though that very scene or act may be one which others come miles to see or to experience. It is man's placid acceptance of what is near at hand though it constitutes the wonders of the earth.

The poet had spent the night in the town, and, at dawn, had gone toward the mountain which, with the usual deception of distance found in mountainous regions, was much farther than it looked. Nearer, he met a man moving unbelievably slowly with his ox-cart. From him Frost learned that the village was Lunenburg, but that it was not a village at all, only scattered farms.

"We were but sixty voters last election.
We can't in nature grow too many more:
That thing takes all the room!"

Frost asked the fellow the way up.

"I don't advise your trying from this side.
There is no proper path, but those that have
Been up, I understand, have climbed from Ladd's.

.....

"You've never climbed it?"

6. Untermeyer, American Poetry Since 1900, p. 37.

7. Frost, op. cit., pp. 56-60.

"I've been on the sides,
Deer-hunting and trout-fishing. There's a brook
That starts up on it somewhere--I've heard say
Right on the top, tip-top--a curious thing
But what could interest you about the brook,
It's cold in summer, warm in winter"

.....

"There ought to be a view around the world
From such a mountain--it isn't wooded
Clear to the top.".....

"As to that I can't say. But there's the spring,
Right on the summit, almost like a fountain.
That ought to be worth seeing."

"If it's there.

You never saw it?"

"I guess there's no doubt
About its being there. I never saw it.
It may not be right on the very top:
It wouldn't have to be a long way down
To have some head of water from above,
And a good distance down might not be noticed
By anyone who'd come a long way up.

.....

"I've always meant to go
And look myself, but you know how it is:
It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain
You've worked around the foot of all your life.
What would I do? Go in my overalls,
With a big stick, the same as when the cows
Haven't come down to the bars at milking time,
Or with a shotgun for a stray black bear?
'Twouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it."

"I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to--
Not for the sake of climbing. What's its name?"

"We call it Hor: I don't know if that's right."

.....

"Warm in December, cold in June, you say?"

"I don't suppose the water's changed at all.
You and I know enough to know its warm
Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm.
But all the fun's in how you say a thing."

"You've lived here all your life?"

"Ever since Hor
Was no bigger than a--what, I did not hear.

For the typical old character of the region had touched his oxen with his goad, and the strange fellow was on his way.

"The Bear"⁸ shows its New England setting in the first lines of the poem:

The bear puts both arms around the tree above her
And draws it down as if it were a lover
And its choke cherries lips to kiss good-bye,
Then lets it snap back upright in the sky.
Her next step rocks a boulder on the wall
(She's making her cross-country in the fall).
Her great weight creaks the barbed-wire in its staples
As she flings over and off down through the maples.

Frost points out that this bear is uncaged; that boundaries mean nothing to her, for she goes where she wishes; "The world has room to make a bear feel free." But even the world is not enough for man; he has broadened his boundaries by the telescope at one end and the microscope at the other, yet he acts more like the poor bear in the cage, "his mood rejecting all his mind suggests" until he becomes a pathetic creature.

Frost seems to have said here that man is never content with the boundaries that he has succeeded in establishing for himself; for even in space, he is not satisfied with what his mind suggests, he wants a wider range.

Some of the personal poems of Frost deal with experiences truly his own and no one else's; some deal with his philosophy; and still others cloak the universal, for they present experiences or thoughts common to

8. Ibid., pp. 347-348.

mankind. "The Road Not Taken"⁹ is one of the latter group; probably no man or woman has ever reached the period of middle age without having said to himself, "What if I had chosen differently when I started on my career? What if I had taken that chance with its possibility of a better position? What if---?" Frost, too, considers the difference his choice in roads had made; he does not regret or rejoice, he merely recognizes that the choice was a determining factor.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear.

.....

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

A poem which might be considered to follow "The Road Not Taken" in thought is "An Empty Threat,"¹⁰ for in it the poet makes the threat that he may some day take the other road, or escape to another choice. There is within the nature of every one the desire for an escape from "life's victories of doubt that need endless talk to make them out." It is this type of mental escape through which many men obtain release though they have neither the courage nor the conviction of the advisability that would lead them to turn such a step into reality.

9. Ibid., p. 131.

10. Ibid., pp. 256, 257.

I stay;
 But it isn't as if
 There wasn't always Hudson's Bay
 And the fur trade,
 A small skiff
 And a paddle blade.

Then the poet paints a mental picture of what this Hudson Bay
 escape region would hold for him. There would be only he and his
 French Indian Esquimaux, John-Joe, a fur trader, and the seals yelping
 on the ice cakes. The expanse of bleak territory is great.

There's not a soul
 For a wind-break
 Between me and the North Pole—

Give a head shake
 Over so much bay
 Thrown away
 In snow and mist
 That doesn't exist,
 I was going to say,
 For God, man or beast's,
 Yet does perhaps for all three.

The philosophy to sustain such a person is this:

"Better defeat almost,
 If seen clear,
 Than life's victories of doubt
 That need endless talk talk
 To make them out."

But the threat never becomes a reality; it remains empty.

An experience common to everyone is the positive after image which
 follows a task toward which one has long bent his efforts. One who has
 washed dishes for hours on ends finds images of the dishes passing before
 his eyes when he would sleep; one who has worked with figures all day
 sees figures when the work is no longer before him; and Robert Frost
 tells all of this in one local experience in the poem "After Apple-
 picking." ¹¹ All the apples except a stray one or two in the top of the

11. Ibid., pp. 256, 257.

tree have been picked; the season is over, for the frost has left a thin glass of ice on the water trough the night before. He is trying to drowse to sleep.

Magnified apples appear and disappear,
 Stem end and blossom end,
 And every fleck of russet showing clear.
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder round.
 I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
 And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
 The rumbling sound
 Of load on load of apples coming in.
 For I have had too much
 Of apple-picking: I am overtired
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.

The storms that occur within the personality and character of an individual are paralleled by storms that occur in nature; the individual who is storm tossed is aware of this similarity and often gains some comfort from it. In "Tree at My Window"¹² Frost tells of one of his experiences in which his storm mood and nature's met at once.

Tree at my window, window tree,
 My sash is lowered when night comes on;
 But let there never be curtain drawn
 Between you and me.

Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground,
 And thing next most diffuse to cloud,
 Not all your light tongues talking aloud
 Could be profound.

But tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
 And if you have seen me when I slept,
 You have seen me when I was taken and swept
 And all but lost.

That day she put our heads together,
 Fate had her imagination about her,

12. Ibid., p. 318.

Fate had her imagination about her,
 Your head so much concerned with outer,
 Mine with inner, weather.

Perhaps one of the reasons that man has come to look with melancholy upon the last of the falling leaves in the autumn is that poets have been so fond of comparing these leaves to death that they have influenced the thought of man. Be that as it may, the theme has come to be a universal one; Robert Frost touches upon it in "A Leaf Treader,"¹³ yet he realizes that man need not die with the leaves, for he is not of so seasonal a nature.

I have been treading on leaves all day until I am autumn-tired.
 God knows all the color and form of leaves I have trodden on and mired.
 Perhaps I have put forth too much strength and been too fierce from fear.
 I have safely trodden underfoot the leaves of another year.

All summer long they were overhead, more lifted up than I.
 To come to their final place in earth they had to pass me by.
 All summer long I thought I heard them threatening under their breath.
 And when they came it seemed with a will to carry me with them to death.

They spoke to the fugitive in my heart as if it were leaf to leaf.
 They tapped at my eyelids and touched my lips with an invitation to
 grief.

But it was no reason I had to go because they had to go.
 Now up to my knee to keep on top of another year of snow.

There can be no doubt that one of Frost's greatest skills is to be found in his ability to portray universal themes through his presentation of local setting and character. It was this ability that awakened the English to the quality of his work even before the Americans recognized him; it was this same ability which soon endeared him to the hearts of the people of his homeland. He has become the universal neighbor.

13. Ibid., p. 388.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

After one has surveyed the poems of Robert Frost, he must admit that the poet is New England; the region is found in the writer's characters, in his settings, in his philosophy. One cannot read a score of Frost's poems without coming to the realization that here is a man who is presenting New England with a skill and an understanding that only an artist and a native son can have. There is the tang and brusqueness of the region; it is inescapable.

Besides picturing the region itself, Frost has portrayed the character of the people. Perhaps no other author has more vividly put on paper that characteristic New England reserve and emotional restraint which may pass among outsiders as rudeness and bluntness. The habit of using only one word if one word will suffice, of calmly accepting obstacles, then just as calmly planning to surmount them is a well-known New England trait; it is the personality of these people which Frost has given an understanding and sympathetic treatment.

Had Frost done no more than depict his own New England so well, he would be an outstanding poet; but he has done more. He has written poetry which deals with basic human emotions: with love and fear; with loneliness and war; with man's struggle against nature and with the faith that he somehow retains in the ultimate magnanimity of nature in spite of his own susceptibility to her whims.

Nor has he been unconscious of his own time, for with a keen stroke born of intelligent insight Frost uncovers weaknesses of contemporary society: the tendency to exalt the machine above the man who makes it; the extreme interpretations that man is inclined to give to the theories of such people as Freud and Darwin; the inequality in the distribution of wealth; the "suitcase" farmer who would wring all from the soil instead of putting all into it; and, in his philosophy of neighborliness, international relations.

Neither in his ability as a local poet, as a universal poet, nor as a poet of the times is Frost's greatest and most nearly unique ability to be found: it is his skill in presenting the universal in the provincial that has won for him the greatest fame. Even though he may name birds and flowers characteristic of New England, the reader feels that the thought or incident of many of the poems is, only by chance, not set within the reader's own environment. This universality is so apparent that the poet never adds a line, or even a word, to indicate that he is not restricting his meaning to New England. To be sure, some of the critics, as has been pointed out in earlier chapters, would not see beyond the written words of the poems until Frost dropped the suggestion that, just because he was writing in and about New England and especially New Hampshire, his works were not necessarily meant just for her. The only reason the critics had been so long blind was that Frost has broken a tradition: he was not a provincial or a universal poet; he was a provincial and a universal poet. And now, later in his career, a third term has been added to describe his abilities; he is also a universal-in-the-provincial poet.

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