

ROBERT FROST'S NORTH OF BOSTON:

A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When Robert Frost and his family arrived in New York harbor in 1915, no fanfare or welcoming party greeted them. The trip across the Atlantic from England had been uneventful despite the war in Europe and the fears for an unsafe crossing. Frost had received a good measure of literary success in England during this three-year stay. He had published there his first volume of poetry, A Boy's Will (1913), readily received by the English critics, and more recently North of Boston (1914). Although the critics had given high, instantaneous praise to his second volume, the war dampened English literary spirits and curtailed book sales. The war also precipitated Frost's decision to come home to New England.

Anxiety accompanied him as he left the boat. England had recognized him, but he still had no fame in his native America. There was little satisfaction in that fact. But that same day he purchased a magazine, a copy of the New Republic, from a newsstand on a New York City street, and as he read it, he chanced across Amy Lowell's favorable review of North of Boston. He had been welcomed home.

Although Miss Lowell's review was not a particularly perceptive one, Frost was pleased with the attention drawn to his book.¹ The review was subsequently followed by others that praised his talents, and within a few months after Henry Holt and Company had purchased the publishing rights from the English David Nutt and Company, North of Boston, the first of Frost's books to appear in America, became a best seller. In January of 1915, a small edition of 150 copies was published, made up from sheets imported from England. In March of 1915, 1,300 copies appeared. The small volume went through six printings that year and six more before the end of 1922. Gorham Munson estimated that 20,000 copies of North to Boston were sold during that time to the American public.² North of Boston catapulted the middle-aged Frost to fame. He had become the literary "hero" he had so long envisioned being.

Frost, however, had already achieved fame in England. Favorable reviews poured into English literary circles after the 1914 publication of the book, providing a consistency of praise for these modern eclogues in "this book of people."

¹Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 4.

²George Wilson Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of a Poet's Conviction (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1960), p. 190.

One of the major English reviews of North of Boston was written by Ezra Pound, who was generous in his praise, acclaiming the book, though "unaccomplished," as "a contribution to American literature, the sort of sound work that will develop into very interesting literature if persevered in."³ He had opened the review with a needle jab at American editors for so long ignoring Frost's work, and further praised Frost for being "an honest writer, writing from himself, from his own knowledge and emotion. . . ."⁴ In addition to Pound's acknowledgments, Frost's newly made English friends, such as Edward Thomas, also wrote glowing reviews. An anonymous reviewer in the London Times Literary Supplement echoed the feeling that seemed to prevail in the English reviewers' minds:

Poetry burns up out of it--as when a faint wind breathes upon smouldering embers. . . . The simplest of Mr. Frost's poems--"The Wood Pile"--had this clear strangeness throughout, and in its last line the magic of intensest insight.⁵

American reactions to the book in 1915 were more varied, some even sprinkled with salt. Amy Lowell's review

³Ezra Pound, "Modern Georgics," Poetry: A Magazine of Verse (December, 1914), p. 130.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁵Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 451.

in the New Republic stated her admiration for "Mr. Frost's book," but she became overwrought with the "degeneration" of the New England stock and the "disease" in the rural civilization. She summed up North of Boston as being "the epitome of a decaying New England."⁶ Two years later Miss Lowell again illustrated her lack of perception for Frost's poetry. In Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, she reiterated what she had said in the earlier review, completely misinterpreted the ending of "The Fear," and in general found fault with North of Boston: "In some cases, the theme is exceedingly slight, yet the characters are so sharply drawn that they hold the reader's interest in spite of the extreme vagueness of the plot."⁷ On the other hand, in May of 1915 an anonymous reviewer in The Independent praised Frost's sympathetic treatment of the "tragic loneliness" of New England, but mistakenly saw his work cast in "vers libre";⁸ and Alice Henderson, reviewing the book for The Dial, commented:

North of Boston leaves such a strong impression of men and women in the mind that one is led to think of it as a new novel rather than as a book of verse . . . Mr. Frost, using verse . . . has

⁶Amy Lowell, "North of Boston: Review," New Republic, 2 (February, 20, 1915), 81-82.

⁷Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), pp. 111-112.

⁸"The Tragedy of Loneliness," Independent, 82 (May 31, 1915), 368.

conveyed an impression of life such as might be conveyed by Mr. Henry James or Mr. Joseph Conrad in prose.⁹

Although some adverse criticism was leveled at the book because of "prose" qualities in the dramatic dialogues, Edward Garnett came to Frost's defense, declaring Frost to be a master in "his exacting medium, blank verse":

But why put it in poetry and not in prose? the reader may hazard. Well, it comes with greater intensity in rhythm and is more heightened and concentrated in effect thereby. If the reader will examine "A Servant to Servants," he will recognize that this narrative of a woman's haunting fear that she has inherited the streak of madness in her family, would lose in distinction and clarity were it told in prose.¹⁰

But perhaps William Dean Howells' comments in Harper's best crystallized the importance of the book to the American literary scene and the essence of the poet himself: "Amidst the often striving and straining of the new poetry, here is the old poetry as young as ever; and new only in extending the bounds of sympathy through the recorded to the unrecorded knowledge of humanity."¹¹

⁹Alice Henderson, "Review of North of Boston," Dial, 57 (October, 1914), 254.

¹⁰Edward Garnett, "A New American Poet," Atlantic, 116 (August, 1915), 220.

¹¹William Dean Howells, "Editor's Easy Chair," Harper's, 13 (September, 1915), 634.

Even though many volumes of Robert Frost's poetry appeared on the American literary market after 1915 and four of those volumes won him four Pulitzer Prizes, in the judgment of many modern critics such as W. G. O'Donnell, North of Boston was the "major achievement of Frost's career."¹² North of Boston remained unique in the long list of works Frost was to publish before his death in 1963 at the age of eighty-eight. It was his only volume that was comprised almost entirely of dramatic narratives and dramatic dialogues. The tone of the poems is both tragic and comic. Frost was fascinated with the tension and suspense created by the juxtaposition of conflicting elements. Frost's subtle, sometimes dry humor is also an integral part of North of Boston, a quality which was recognized early by Ezra Pound:

Mr. Frost has humor, but he is not its victim. "The Code" has a pervasive humor, the humor of things as they are, not that of an author trying to be funny, or trying to "bring out" the ludicrous phase of some incident or character because he dares not rely on sheer presentation. . . . It is a great comfort to find someone who tries to give life, the life of the rural district, as a whole, evenly, and not merely as a hook to hang jokes on.¹³

¹²W. G. O'Donnell, "Robert Frost and New England: A Revaluation," in Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James Melville Cox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 49.

¹³Pound, p. 130.

In recent years, other critics have also commented on the significance of Frost's laughter:

It is a serious laughter, folded over tenderness and love, ringing through his poems, toning down the high lights, lifting up the shadows. . . . And with this laughter, there trembles a note of passion, a deep understanding of the conflict of mind with heart, of man with woman, of humanity with the forces of life and death.¹⁴

The interplay of tragedy and comedy thus gives a unity and an evenness to the lives and themes that make up North of Boston.

Perhaps the most important aspects of this book are the personalities and the themes Frost created. Critics over the last sixty years have largely glossed over, ignored, or misinterpreted what Frost wrote on the dedication page: "To E. M. F. / THIS BOOK OF PEOPLE." North of Boston is a book of people. They confront the complexities of life and its meanings, just as the poet himself did. Each dramatic narrative or lyric in the volume is a verbal portrait of human beings dealing with the tangible and intangible barriers of life. The approaches these people make to life, the philosophies to which they cling, their questions and answers, their successes and failures, their quests for identity and correspondences--these life struggles emerge as the themes of the book.

¹⁴Richard Church, "Robert Frost, a Prophet in His Own Country," Fortnightly Review, 153 (May, 1940), 545.

Most of the people in North of Boston are composites of real people that Frost knew during the years he lived on his farm in Derry, New Hampshire, from 1900 until he and his family moved to England. Casual acquaintances, neighbors, gossipy tales, colloquial speech patterns of back-country people--all these Frost blended with New Englanders' philosophies of living to create his powerful "book of people." Many years afterward he confided to Louis Mertins:

To a large extent the terrain of my poetry is the Derry landscape, the Derry farm. Poems growing out of this, though composite were built on incidents and are therefore autobiographical. There was something about the experience at Derry which stayed in my mind, and was tapped for poetry in the years that came after. . . . Some of the poems combine many incidents, many people and places, but all are real. . . .¹⁵

But driven by his poetic ambitions and the need for a major change in life, Frost sold his farm and moved his family to England. Elinor wanted to live "under thatch." The years in England proved to be the crystallizing element for his poetry. As John Doyle illustrates, this experience gave him three things he had not had before:

First, he was given complete detachment from his New England scene. Raw material he had gathered assumed perspective. He saw what could be built from it. Second, the environment he had transplanted himself into favored the poem builder.

¹⁵Marshall Louis Mertins, Robert Frost: Life and Talks-Walking (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 72.

In America the man who said he wanted to be a poet, that and nothing else, was never allowed to be entirely comfortable among his associates. But in England the desire went unremarked. Third, at last he found himself among literary people--people who not only thought about literature but talked openly about it.¹⁶

In this atmosphere the poet's creative talents flourished.

Only three of the dramatic narratives in North of Boston had been written before he went to England: "The Death of the Hired Man," "The Housekeeper," and "The Black Cottage"--all written at Derry as early as 1905 or 1906. Now in England past remembrances became poems. The poems, collected, became North of Boston. The book is a synthesis of Frost's personality, his observations, his experiences, his modern environment, his great talent.

Nevertheless, despite its achievements, little critical attention has been given to North of Boston. Outside of the minor and often superficial glosses made in early reviews, there is no major critical work dealing with the complete volume. And although a few of the individual poems, such as "Mending Wall" and "The Death of the Hired Man," have been given intense study and analysis, the major portions of the book have received but meager attention. Therefore, this study will examine the thematic concerns of the complete book.

¹⁶John R. Doyle, The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1962), p. 159.

One of the major issues is the theme of heroism. Those poems centering on heroism illustrate human confrontations. The dominant theme, however, evolving from the book is that of correspondence. Frost's people, like all human beings, have desperate needs to correspond, to communicate, to relate to other human beings and to the world about them. A third theme explores Frost's applications of William James's theories of self-seeking. The objective then is to analyze the poems in North of Boston in the light of these three themes and to assess Frost's unrecognized achievement in the collection.

CHAPTER II

THE THEME OF HEROISM

Perhaps the greatest conquest a man can make lies in the conquering of his own fears. Whether real or imaginary, fears can become the dominating forces in life. Unless one can find the courage to deal positively with his own fears, they can become destructive forces. For Robert Frost life was a series of minute wars within--a constant struggle for victories over the inner and outer fears that assailed him. A terrifying fear of darkness pursued him from childhood through early manhood; so intense was this fear that even during his high school days he slept in the same room with his mother.¹ Jealous fears marred his courtship of Elinor White, and he was plagued throughout his career as a poet with his fears of either real or imagined literary "enemies."² His fear of speaking in public almost destroyed his valedictory address when he graduated from Lawrence High School;³ this fear followed him throughout his life; and although he

¹Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 205.

²Ibid., p. 452.

³Ibid., pp. 128-130.

was eventually to make hundreds of public addresses, many observers noted his dark brooding and withdrawal that preceded those appearances.

Such large and small fears, more often magnified than diminished, threatened to annihilate him. Rather than confront his fears, he frequently found various methods of escaping from them. The act of escape from something feared was repeatedly dramatized in his life and his art.⁴ At times he even preached the virtue of escape in certain circumstances; yet his ambivalent attitude toward "escape" troubled him, for he could see the "psychological dangers which might be caused by the wrong kind of withdrawal."⁵ Such contrary attitudes made up the character of the man.

At a point in his early life when he seemed to be almost engulfed by fears, Frost was fortunate enough to hear a voice that gradually gave him the necessary courage for self-confrontation. The voice was the voice of William James, and it spoke to him from the pages of The Will to Believe and from Psychology, the text Frost studied during his brief stay at Harvard in 1897-98. The philosophy and psychology of this great man in American letters was perhaps the most important and formative influence upon the poet. Although he was never to meet James, the words Frost read written by him were one of the saving factors of his life.

⁴Ibid., p. 208.

⁵Ibid., p. 561.

Frost found solace in James's belief that "Fear of life in one form or another is the great thing to exorcise, but it isn't reason that will do it."⁶ From the beginnings of his life when his Scottish mother continually stressed the importance of heroism, Frost had been consumed with desire to be a hero. In the teachings of James, he found ways in which an ordinary man could achieve heroism:

". . . be systematically ascetic or heroic in little unnecessary points," and as a result, "when the hour of dire need draws nigh, it may find you not unnerved and untrained to start the test."⁷ Heroism then was the result of daily confrontation of the fears of life. Courage was built, bit by bit, by the little triumphs over the darker sides of one's self.

When Frost retreated to his farm at Derry in 1900, he was again escaping. As he had confided to John Bartlett, the years at Derry were "almost a fade out . . . an escape into a dream existence, as in dementia praecox."⁸ But here at Derry, he began to see some of William James's beliefs living about him. In the ordinary lives of his neighbors and the country peoples of the New Hampshire mountains, he witnessed incident

⁶Ibid., p. 231.

⁷Ibid., p. 239.

⁸Margaret Anderson, Robert Frost and John Bartlett: The Record of a Friendship (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 5.

after incident that exemplified James's definitions of heroism. These people came to grips with life and their environment of a hostile universe through heroic assertions of will, courage, and effort. Watching their life struggles day by day must have called to Frost's memory part of the last chapter of Psychology:

The world thus finds in the heroic man its worthy match and mate; and the effort which he is able to put forth to hold himself erect and keep his heart unshaken is the direct measure of his worth and function in the game of human life. He can stand this Universe. He can meet it and keep up his faith in it in presence of those same features which lay his weaker brethren low. . . . And thereby he makes himself one of the masters and lords of life. . . . But just as our courage is so often a reflex of another's courage, so our faith is apt to be a faith in someone else's faith. We draw new life from the heroic example. The prophet has drunk more deeply than anyone of the cup of bitterness, but his countenance is so unshaken and he speaks such mighty words of cheer that his will becomes our will, and our life is kindled at his own.⁹

The "heroic examples" Frost saw about him eventually became some of the people in North of Boston.

Thus in some of the dramatic narratives that comprise the book, Frost celebrates the unspectacular yet heroic qualities of ordinary people. Many years after the publication of North of Boston, Frost spoke his views to C. Day Lewis in a radio conversation broadcast in England in 1957:

⁹William James, Psychology (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1900), pp. 459-460.

. . . one of the things that makes you go is making a hero out of somebody that nobody else had ever noticed was a hero. . . . You pick up the unconsidered person . . . people are saying there's no such thing as heroism left I know of a history book that says heroism is out of date. But it's in everything. It's in making a book, you know. And it takes a hero to make a poem.¹⁰

Heroes then are found throughout this volume of poetry, and to counterbalance them, cowards, too, frequently appear.

Two poems in North of Boston, "The Fear" and "A Servant to Servants," have as their central theme human courage in the face of fear; both are character portraits of women in terror. The woman in "The Fear" must deal with fears of her own making, the consequences of her past actions. The central events are grounded in actual experience and neighborhood gossip. In the summer of 1907 Frost and his family vacationed near Bethlehem, New Hampshire, staying in the home of John Lynch. One evening Frost took his five-year-old son Carol on a lengthy walk over the country roads. Misjudging the time and the distance, they were overtaken by darkness long before they reached home. Nearing a lonely farm house, they heard the approach of a horse and carriage and stepped off the road to let it pass. Frost noticed the woman driver whipped up the horse to hurry him and then turned in to the lane leading to the farm house.

¹⁰Edward Connery Lathem, ed., Interviews with Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 176.

When he and Carol walked past, the woman called out to them, coming toward them in the darkness with a lantern, demanding to know why they were prowling around her house at night. She apologized after his explanation, but Frost sensed much more in her voice.¹¹

When Frost mentioned the episode to the Lynches, Mrs. Lynch explained the reasons for the woman's strange behavior. The woman had been a local girl who had trained as a nurse in Boston and had married there. Later she had fallen in love with one of her patients, and after she had run away from her Boston husband, she and her lover lived in hiding on the small isolated farm. Mrs. Lynch said the woman seemed to live in "mortal terror of being found--and possibly murdered--by the husband whom she had forsaken for love of another man."¹² Frost obviously admired the woman's courage, for she became the subject of his haunting dramatic dialogue.

"The Fear" is one poem in North of Boston that has been neglected by critics. Early reviewers, finding fault with its inconclusive ending, placed it as one of the minor poems in the book. But the poem has a thematic power that makes it unforgettable to the perceptive reader. In this poem, Frost uses a common and effective dramatic technique. The poem begins in the middle of the action, giving the

¹¹Thompson, Early Years, p. 334.

¹²Ibid.

reader a momentary sense of being lost. But the method intensifies and compresses the action into a brilliant dramatic narrative and leaves questions and riddles for the interpretive reader. This technique, too, was one of Frost's favorite games.

The poem itself is cast in darkness, symbolically the darkness of fear, and is lit only by the lantern:

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.¹³

From the beginning of the dialogue between the man and woman, the woman's anxiety is revealed by the intensity of her words:

A horse's hoof pawed once on the hollow floor,
And the back of the gig they stood beside
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 roadsides--a man's face.
You must have seen it too."

(p. 111)

The man's voice seems full of doubt and then edged with impatience as he answers her:

"I didn't see it.
Are you sure--"

"Yes, I'm sure!"

"--it was a face?"

(p. 111-112)

¹³Robert Frost, North of Boston (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), p. 111. All subsequent references to this poem as well as all other poems in this volume will be indicated with page numbers immediately following the quotations.

The fear, as yet unknown to the reader, begins to rear its head, but at first glance it appears to be a common fear--the anxiety of returning to a dark house at night:

"Joel, I'll have to look. I can't go in,
I can't, and leave a thing like that unsettled.
Doors locked and curtains drawn will make no
difference.
I always have felt strange when we come home
To the dark house after so long an absence,
And the key rattled loudly in place
Seemed to warn someone to be getting out
At one door as we entered at another.
What if I'm right, and someone all the time--
Don't hold my arm!"

"I say it's someone passing."
(p. 112)

Joel's determination to remain cool-headed is sharply contrasted by the woman's emotionally charged reasoning. She reminds him of the remoteness of the road and counters his rationalization with a question:

" . . . What is beyond
That he'd be going to or coming from
At such an hour of night, and on foot too.
What was he standing still for in the bushes?"
(p. 112)

Joel still tries to remain level-headed, but he is the first to hint at the deeper fear--the real problem:

"It's not so very late--it's only dark.
There's more in it than you're inclined to say.
Did he look like--?"

"He looked like anyone.
"I'll never rest to-night unless I know.
Give me the lantern."

(pp. 112-113)

He protests, and she asserts her momentary dominance by pushing past him and getting the lantern herself. And now the fear, fed by her imagination, absorbs her as she commands Joel:

"You're not to come," she said. "This is my business.
If the time's come to face it, I'm the one
To put it the right way. He'd never dare--
Listen! He kicked a stone. Hear that,
hear that!
He's coming towards us. Joel, go in--please.
Hark!--I don't hear him now. But please go in."
(p. 113)

Her courage in confronting her fears is amazing. What is more amazing is her insistence that she must confront him alone. And here questions begin to plague the mind. Why does she insist on confronting the stranger alone? Is she concerned for Joel's safety, or as she suggests, is she aware that she alone is responsible and thus must face the consequences alone? Or are there deeper, unspoken motives that lie just beneath the surface of the dialogue? The deeper motives are eventually alluded to in the barbed cuts they make at one another in the emotional crisis of the moment. Joel remarks first:

"But it's nonsense to think he'd care enough."

"You mean you couldn't understand his caring.
Oh, but you see he hadn't had enough--
Joel, I won't--I won't--I promise you.
We mustn't say hard things. You mustn't either."
(p. 114)

Joel's remark is charged with multiple meanings. Its purpose, in the light of his preceding words, may have been to calm her, to balance her imagination with reason, but she chooses to interpret it as more. Her quick retort is an accusation that Joel himself has found her lacking. She seems to infer from his remark that if the roles were reversed, Joel wouldn't "care enough." Her wounded pride forces her to retaliate with, "Oh, but you see he hadn't had enough--." The incomplete line definitely has sexual overtones, even challenging overtones. Immediately she seems to regret her defensive cruelty, and she softens her remarks with the twice-repeated promise. Again the line is elliptical, leaving what is promised to the imagination of the reader. She follows with a plea for an end to the quarrel that is threatening between them.

He responds with his first statement in the poem of protectiveness toward her:

"I'll be the one, if anybody goes!
 But you give him the advantage with this light.
 What couldn't he do to us standing here!
 And if to see was what he wanted, why
 He has seen all there was to see and gone."
 (p. 114)

He loosens his hold on her, and they both advance:

"What do you want?" she cried to all the dark.
 She stretched up tall to overlook the light
 That hung in both hands hot against her skirt.

"There's no one; so you're wrong," he said.

"There is--
What do you want?" she cried, and then herself
Was startled when an answer really came.

"Nothing." It came from well along the road.

She reached a hand to Joel for support:
The smell of scorching woolen made her faint.
(pp. 114-115)

It is obvious now that the source of her courage in confronting the imagined fear was the greater fear of uncertainty, of not knowing. And when she finally knows that someone is there, terror truly grips her, reducing her to frailty. But it is only a momentary weakness, for she recovers and demands again of the dark:

"What are you doing round this house at night?"
(p. 115)

And again the reply of "Nothing," and then the voice advances, reassuring her:

"I'll just come forward in the lantern light
And let you see."

"Yes, do--Joel, go back!"
(p. 115)

Her command to Joel again asserts her necessity of facing this fear alone. But "her fear" turns out to be just what Joel had predicted: only a passerby, out walking with his small son. And the poem concludes with her final plea to Joel:

"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, clattered and went out.
 (p. 117)

The power and drama of this particular poem lie in the unspoken words, the half-spoken sentences that make up the crucial conversation between Joel and the unnamed woman. Floyd C. Watkins in his article, "Poetry of the Unsaid: Robert Frost's Narrative and Dramatic Poems," glossed over "The Fear" with a quotation of the last lines and a brief paragraph of summary which comes to the conclusion that "Symbolically, what went out with the lantern is not known."¹⁴ Unfortunately, he overlooked one of the poems that best supported his title.

The greatest understatement in the poem is in the title itself, for it leads one to believe that there is only one fear. A superficial reading brings one to the conclusion that "the fear" is the woman's fear of the man in her past. But in this context the ending is a piece of the puzzle that will not fit. Therefore, a closer view of the poem is necessary.

¹⁴Floyd C. Watkins, "Poetry of the Unsaid--Robert Frost's Narrative and Dramatic Poems," Texas Quarterly, 15 (Winter, 1972), 90.

Many fears are "said" and "unsaid" in the poem, but the key to the central fear lies in the woman's insistence that Joel "go back." Her deepest fear is the fear of her own reactions when she will at last come face to face with this man of her past. She is without a doubt a courageous woman. She is and probably always has been in command of her emotions. But her greatest terror is in the uncertainties of that meeting, for she is aware of, perhaps is even a victim of, the unpredictability of passions, especially suppressed passions. She does not want Joel to be a witness to the dark, uncontrollable side of herself that might surface when she confronts that ultimate fear.

The fragility of her relationship with Joel adds further pathos to the narrative. Her plea that he "won't think anything" probably goes unheeded. His silence is an indication that he is thinking, and her fears are now compounded by the fear that he has misinterpreted her behavior. Her promised "I won't--" is a reassurance to him that she would not leave him, but the utter despair in "This is a very, very lonely place" indicates that she herself is unsure she can keep that promise. When the lantern goes out, they are engulfed by darkness, and she is engulfed by fears and the darkness of her own soul.

A rather interesting side-light of this poem is Amy Lowell's interpretation of the ending. She viewed "The Fear" as an example of the moral degeneration of New England that was leading to insanity. She remarked of the ending: "Does he kill her, or does she merely think that he is going to do so? Which one is crazed, he or she? Either way, Nature has taken her toll."¹⁵ As Lawrance Thompson observed: "Obviously, Amy was also left in the dark when that lantern went out!"¹⁶

The second important poem in North of Boston that is centrally structured on a woman's response to fear is "A Servant to Servants." But unlike "The Fear," the woman in this poem is pursued by an inner, darker fear over which she has little, if any, control--the fear of insanity. This poem, too, has its roots in actual experience. In the summer of 1909, Frost took his family camping in a tent on the shores of Lake Willoughby. They pitched their tent on the Connolley farm. In Frost's repeated visits to the Connolley farmhouse to buy milk and eggs, he sometimes lingered to talk

¹⁵Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), pp. 121-122.

¹⁶Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), p. 110.

with the farmer's wife. Haggard and careworn from her daily rounds of cooking for her husband and his hired men, Mrs. Connolley feared that she could not keep up the pace demanded of her. Frost was touched more by her fears than her predicament. Insanity ran in her family, she once confessed to him: her father's brother was insane, and she herself had once spent time in an asylum. She had recently begun to fear that the same thing might happen again. Frost's pity for the woman eventually found expression in "A Servant to Servants."¹⁷

Robert Frost was not a stranger to the fear of insanity. He had grown up with the peculiarities of Jeanie, his sister. And he later watched her gradual mental deterioration culminate in her death in an insane asylum. Frost never really understood his sister's weaknesses, but as Thompson observes, even in high school he understood enough to take warning from his sister's condition:

He kept reminding himself that unless he could keep his own potentially self-destructive sensitivities, fears, rages under control, he might become the victim of problems even more serious than those which had already overtaken his sister.¹⁸

Thus he listened to Mrs. Connolley with an empathetic heart. Years later just before his daughter Marjorie's death, Frost

¹⁷Thompson, *Early Years*, pp. 352-353.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 113.

commented to John Bartlett: "We all have our souls--and minds--to save, and it seems a miracle that we do it, not once, but many times. I can look back and see mine hanging by a thread."¹⁹

This constant struggle with the darkness of the mind is dramatized in "A Servant to Servants." This poem is the only pure dramatic monologue in North of Boston, and the poetic form heightens the psychological study of the woman. No other voices are there to intrude upon the mental outpourings of the central character.

An excellent explication of the poem and the woman's psychological madness has been written by Donald Jones.²⁰ But he places little emphasis on the pervading fear in her existence and the heroic though pathetic efforts she makes to keep her sanity within reach. The woman begins her narrative with social courtesies to the silent listener who is camping on her land, but very soon she lapses into a description of her tired physical and emotional state:

. . . It seems to me
I can't express my feelings anymore
Than I can raise my voice or want to lift
My hand (Oh, I can lift it when I have to).
Did ever you feel so? I hope you never.

¹⁹Anderson, p. 178.

²⁰Donald Jones, "Kindred Entanglements in Frost's 'A Servant to Servants,'" Papers on Language and Literature, 2 (1966), 150-161.

It's got so I don't even know for sure
 Whether I am glad, sorry, or anything.
 There's nothing but a voice-like left inside
 That seems to tell me how I ought to feel,
 And would feel if I wasn't all gone wrong.
 (p. 64)

Her inner struggles have reduced her to external apathy and a sense of numbness. She continues with a description of the lake synonymous to herself: "Like a deep piece of some old running river/ Cut short off at both ends" (p. 64). She ambles on through her conversation commenting on Len and his advice for her salvation: "He says the best way out is always through" (p. 66). But Len is evidently not in complete understanding of her problem. He thinks she will "be all right with doctoring."

But she feels that an immediate answer to her problem would be a rest from the daily exertions necessary to keep the farm house running:

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.
 (p. 66)

She is obviously oppressed by the futility and monotony of such labor. Few modern women realize the full implications of being a farm wife at the turn of the century. The farm house on the lake certainly had no electricity and probably did not even have running water piped to the house. A wood

cook stove had to be fueled and cleaned of ashes daily. Just cooking and washing dishes three times a day for five hungry men would indeed be a physically consuming task. But despite her protests and her fears of not being able to continue in this direction without rest, these tasks that "won't stay done" give an order to her life. Though she herself is perhaps unaware of it, form and order are necessary in staving off insanity. The physical work that she so despises may be the balance that so far has kept her in control of her fear.

The fear that dominates her being is the fear that she will eventually become like her uncle--parading nude about his hickory-barred cage in the attic, shouting all through the night, tortured in mind, and being a torture to his family. He had died before she was born, she tells her listener. But her childhood memories are dominated by the empty cage in her father's house with the bars worn smooth by the demented uncle's hands, and by the family stories of his existence colored by her imagination. And now her adulthood is dominated by her fears that she too will have to take her "turn upstairs in jail."

In an effort to remove her from the actuality of the memory, she and Len had moved from her father's house to this farm on Lake Willoughby. For a while the new environment helped, but eventually the "change wore out like a prescription":

I 'spose I've got to go the road I'm going:
 Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?
 I almost think if I could do like you,
 Drop everything and live out on the ground--
 But it might be, come night, I shouldn't like it,
 Or a long rain. I should soon get enough,
 And be glad of a good roof overhead.
 I've lain awake thinking of you, I'll warrant,
 More than you have yourself, some of these nights.
 The wonder was the tents weren't snatched away
 From over you as you lay in your beds.
 I haven't courage for a risk like that.

(p. 71)

There is much psychological insight compressed into these lines. If she truly confronted herself, if she left behind the life she was familiar with and all the work and loneliness entailed, the new life might contain even greater terrors and hardships. She indeed would not have the courage to face new fears. A change in life style might tip the delicate balance of sanity. And so heroically she resigns herself "to go the road" she is going. Though painful, exhausting, and full of inner fears, her life has a semblance of security. She can muster weakened courage to follow this road, though it may end in terror.

Years after the poem first appeared in print, Robert Frost inscribed in Edward Lathem's copy of a first edition of North of Boston beside "A Servant to Servants": "A composite of at least three farm wives one of who I was glad to learn years afterward didn't go the way I foresaw."²¹ The "one" refers to Mrs. Connolley.

²¹Thompson, Early Years, p. 568.

One other poem in North of Boston makes fear an important concern. Although the theme is not structured on "fear," "Home Burial" cannot be fully understood unless one is aware of the terrors within it. The poem begins in fear:

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
 Before she saw him. She was starting down,
 Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
 She took a doubtful step and then undid it
 To raise herself and look again. He spoke
 Advancing toward her: "What is it you see
 From up there always--for I want to know."
 She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
 And her face changed from terrified to dull.
 He said to gain time: "What is it you see,"
 Mounting until she cowered under him.
 "I will find out now--you must tell me, dear."
 She, in her place, refused him any help
 With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
 (p. 43)

Outside the window is the small grave of her firstborn child. The woman is so terrified she has become a prisoner of this symbolic fear of death; thus she returns again and again to look at the visual representation of her fear. But there is another fear also contained in these lines that is more subtle and yet more devastating to the relationship between husband and wife. They are afraid of each other. The line "mounting until she cowered under him" leaves such connotations in the mind. His fear of her and his inability to understand her force him to mask his fears behind a role of masculine dominance: he towers over her. And she, like a wounded animal, cowers beneath him with silence her only

weapon. Though he tries to pursue a confrontation of their fears in their dialogue, she prefers escape. She cannot escape from her inner terrors of death, but by transferring some measure of abstract blame to him and by escaping from his presence, she achieves a type of emotional release.

In sharp contrast to the heroic efforts of all these characters is the humorously developed coward in "A Hundred Collars." The situation presented in this dramatic dialogue is reminiscent of Ishmael's first meeting with Queequeg in Moby Dick. Dr. Magoon, a college professor, finds himself stranded by train schedules in a small town with only one hotel. To complicate matters, the hotel has only one available bed in an already-occupied room. The clerk leads the professor to his room, and Dr. Magoon meets his companion for the night, Lafe, a bill collector. Lafe is obviously well plied with alcohol, and Dr. Magoon's apprehension is heightened to a comic terror when he sees the size of his strange roommate. Lafe says, indicating his collar:

"Number eighteen this is. What size do you wear?"

The Doctor caught his throat convulsively.

"Oh--ah--fourteen--fourteen."

(p. 35)

Dr. Magoon's panic humorously develops as he heads for his bed:

The Doctor made a subdued dash for it,
And propped himself at bay against a pillow.

"Not that way, with your shoes on Kike's
white bed.
You can't rest that way. Let me pull your
shoes off."

"Don't touch me, please--I say, don't touch
me, please.
I'll not be put to bed by you, my man."
(p. 36)

Thus, Frost develops the central fears of "A Hundred Collars" by way of a comedy of situation. This opposition of comedy and tragedy gives support to Floyd C. Watkins' comment: "No other American poet has equaled the quality or quantity of Frost's narrative and dramatic poems. He caught the humor of human foibles, and he saw deep, deep into the agonies of the mind."²²

Two other poems in North of Boston have heroism as their major themes: "The Black Cottage" and "Blueberries." Each of these dramatic dialogues has a Frostian hero as the central character. One of the qualities in man which Frost most admired was the courage to be an individual, and these poems celebrate heroes having such courage. "The Black Cottage" is a study in contrasting characters. The courageous character of the poem is the former occupant of the deserted cottage, an old woman who has been dead for some time, and she becomes the topic of the minister's conversation. As the isolated cottage is described, a picture

²²Watkins, p. 98.

of an almost idyllic country setting is painted by the words of the poet:

We chanced in passing by that afternoon
 To catch it in a sort of special picture
 Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees,
 Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass,
 The little cottage we were speaking of,
 A front with just a door between two windows,
 Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black.
 We paused, the minister and I, to look.
 He made as if to hold it at arm's length
 Or put the leaves aside that framed it in.
 "Pretty," he said. "Come in. No one will care."
 (p. 50)

The lonely little cottage framed by nature has become almost a private monument to the old woman who had lived there. And as the poem develops it becomes apparent that the minister has often made a personal pilgrimage to the spot to stand on the outside looking in at the window:

We pressed our faces to the pane, "You see,"
 he said,
 Everything's as she left it when she died.
 Her sons won't sell the house or the things
 in it.
 They say they mean to come and summer here
 Where they were boys. They haven't come
 this year.
 They live so far away--one is out west--
 It will be hard for them to keep their word.
 Anyway they won't have the place disturbed."
 (pp. 50-51)

While the minister talks, he reveals the various facets of the old woman's character that engendered admiration in him. Her husband had died on a battlefield of the Civil War, yet

her love for him and her sense of loss remained a part of her, undimmed by passing time:

"A buttoned hair-cloth lounge spread scroll-
ing arms
Under a crayon drawing on the wall
Done sadly from an old daguerreotype.
"That was the father as he went to war.
She always, when she talked about war,
Sooner or later came and leaned, half knelt
Against the lounge beside it, though I doubt
If such unlikelike lines kept power to stir
Anything in her after all the years."
(p. 51)

But the minister is deeply impressed by her strong principles and her immutable beliefs. Her individuality had isolated her from the mainstream of conforming humanity, just as her cottage is isolated:

"But what I'm getting to is how forsaken
A little cottage this has always seemed;
Since she went more than ever, but before--
I don't mean altogether by the lives
That had gone out of it, the father first,
Then the two sons, till she was left alone.
.
I mean by the world's having passed it by--
As we almost got by this afternoon."
(pp. 51-52)

The "old lady" had "her own idea of things," and she believed the purpose of the Civil War had been to uphold the belief that "all men are created free and equal." And nothing could shake her innocent faith in those words:

"And to hear her quaint phrases--so removed
From the world's view to-day of all those things.
That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's.
What did he mean? Of course the easy way
Is to decide it simply isn't true.

It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
 But never mind, the Welchman got it planted
 Where it will trouble us a thousand years.
 Each age will have to reconsider it.
 You couldn't tell her what the West was saying,
 And what the South to her serene belief.
 She had some art of hearing and yet not
 Hearing the latter wisdom of the world.
 White was the only race she ever knew.
 Black she had scarcely seen, and yellow never.
 But how could they be made so very unlike
 By the same hand working in the same stuff?
 She had supposed the war decided that.
 What are you going to do with such a person?"
 (pp. 52-53)

Thus the old woman remained true to her convictions. She had
 courageously kept herself from being swept into the current
 of changing worldly opinions. She remained steadfast,
 unswayed, isolated.

And here the contrast in character begins to emerge.
 The minister is not made of such steadfast metal. His beliefs
 are easily influenced by the world around him. He is not sure
 what Jefferson meant. He "heard a fellow say" it was not
 true. He was almost persuaded once to change the church creed
 to please the liberal youth. However, it was not the courage
 of his convictions that kept him from doing so, but her
 "bonnet in the pew" and his fear of displeasing or wounding
 her:

"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 truths being in and out of favour."
 (pp. 54-55)

Careful consideration of these words shows just how much the minister allows the world's opinions to sway him. And the great irony of the poem lies in the popular belief that a minister's "truths" are immutable, unchanged by the world. But Frost with his love for contradictions has created an interesting paradox in "The Black Cottage."

Some critics such as William H. Pritchard have seen wisdom in the minister's words. Pritchard views the last twenty lines as the vision of a "seer" who "summons up a world without death or change":²³

"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.
 So desert it would have to be, so walled
 By mountain ranges half in summer snow,
 No one would covet it or think it worth
 The pains of conquering to force change on.
 Scattered oases where men dwelt, but mostly
 Sand dunes held loosely in tamarisk
 Blown over and over themselves in idleness.
 Sand grains should sugar in the natal dew
 The babe born to the desert, the sand storm
 Retard mid-waste my cowering caravans--

"There are bees in this wall." He struck the
 clapboards,

²³William H. Pritchard, "North of Boston: Frost's Poetry of Dialogue," in In Defense of Reading, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1962), p. 50.

Fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted.
 We rose to go. Sunset blazed on the windows.
 (p. 55)

His vision is of an idyllic, utopian paradise. But it also is a beautiful, poetic embodiment of the minister's dreams of escape and his sad longing for an existence where he would not be troubled with mutable truths. His "cowering caravans," or his weaker, worldly church members, would be held fast by the desert sands as he would be held fast in a world of unchanging truths.

Other critics have interpreted the last three lines of the poem as symbols of decay.²⁴ The cottage now occupied by bees is reverting to nature. The windows reflect the twilight of a stronger generation. But this is not necessarily the interpretation Frost intended. Instead the lines echo Matthew Arnold's conception of a finely tempered nature: a harmonious balance of perfection in character of beauty and intelligence--of "sweetness and light."²⁵ These qualities of perfection the minister had envied in the old lady. The true wisdom is in this woman, for she had lived in the world and

²⁴For examples see John R. Doyle, The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 31-35; James R. Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), pp. 89-91.

²⁵Matthew Arnold, "Sweetness and Light," in Prose of the Victorian Period, ed. William E. Buckler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), p. 465.

yet had been courageous enough not to follow the "cowering caravans" of worldly travelers. Even after her death the little black cottage is a monument to her "sweetness and light."

A less serious dialogue concerning heroism is "Blueberries." This delightful rhymed conversation between a man and a woman presents one of Frost's "unconsidered" heroes. Loren, the subject of the conversation, has many of the qualities of character that Frost admired. Frost once said that Thoreau's Walden was perhaps his favorite book, for it proved the resourcefulness of man.²⁶ Frost believed, as Thoreau did, that man was at his best when he was self-sufficient and flexible, and able to make the most of any situation. He admired the natural man who with his independence, initiative, and ingenuity managed to stay on the top of things. Such a man is Loren.

The poem begins with a discussion about blueberries. The speakers, probably husband and wife, have just found some ripe berries:

"You ought to have seen what I saw on my way
To the village, through Mortenson's pasture
to-day:
Blueberries as big as the end of your thumb,
Real sky-blue, and heavy, and ready to drum
In the cavernous pail of the first one to come!"
(p. 56)

²⁶Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 207.

The man continues with a description of the blueberries that have suddenly appeared in the burned-out pasture:

"It must be on charcoal they fatten their fruit.
I taste in them sometimes the flavour of soot.
And after all really they're ebony skinned:
The blue's but a mist from the breath of the wind,
A tarnish that goes at a touch of the hand,
And less that the tan with which pickers are
tanned."

(pp. 57-58)

The speakers obviously find joy in picking blueberries, and a sense of excitement pervades the poem as they consider the property owner:

"Does Mortenson know what he has, do you think?"

"He may and not care and so leave the chewink
To gather them for him--you know what he is.
He won't make the fact that they're rightfully his
An excuse for keeping us other folk out."

(p. 58)

But this man and woman are not the only ones concerned with gathering wild blueberries, and the woman inquires:

"I wonder you didn't see Loren about."

"The best of it was that I did. Do you know,
I was just getting through what the field had
to show

And over the wall and into the road,
When who should come by, with a democrat load
Of all the young chattering Lorens alive,
But Loren, the fatherly, out for a drive."

(p. 58)

Loren is poor, and he must seek ways to keep all the mouths of his large family fed. And this he does by living off nature, finding wild fruit wherever he can:

"He seems to be thrifty; and hasn't he need,
With the mouths of all those young Lorens to feed?
He has brought them all up on wild berries,
they say,
Like birds. They store a great many away.
They eat them the year round, and those they
don't eat
They sell in the store and buy shoes for their
feet."

"Who cares what they say? It's a nice way to live,
Just taking what Nature is willing to give,
Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow."
(pp. 59-60)

There is obvious envy expressed by the speaker for this easy way, or so it seems, to earn a living. Echoes of Thoreau's ideal life are evident in their discussion of this ingenious family:

"I wish I knew half what the flock of them know
Of where all the berries and other things grow,
Cranberries in bogs and raspberries on top
Of the boulder-strewn mountain, and when they
 will crop.
I met them one day and each had a flower
Stuck into his berries as fresh as a shower;
Some strange kind--they told me it hadn't a name.

(p. 60)

The rather jealous two soon decide to go to Mortenson's field and enjoy a day's picking for themselves, even if Loren feels the berries belong to him:

"If he thinks all the fruit that grows wild is
for him,
He'll find he's mistaken. See here, for a whim,
We'll pick in the Mortenson's pasture this year.
We'll go in the morning, that is, if it's clear,
And the sun shines out warm; the vines must be wet.
It's so long since I picked I almost forget
How we used to pick berries."

(pp. 61-62)

A strange sense of property rights is revealed here, as William Goede suggests.²⁷ The speakers and the Lorens will actually be trespassing when they pick Mortenson's blueberries. The speakers have rationalized their actions by stating that Mortenson "won't make the fact that they're rightfully his/ An excuse for keeping us other folk out." But Loren's sense of property rights is more involved. Loren is a natural man who lives in congruency with nature. In the natural world man's property lines and boundaries are alien: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" (p. 11). The natural law gives possession to the first to claim it. And these natural laws are the laws that govern Loren's life. Thus he will regard the speakers as infringers on his rights:

"We sha'n'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.
You ought to have seen how it looked in the rain,
The fruit mixed with water in layers of leaves,
Like two kinds of jewels, a vision for thieves."
(pp. 62-63)

The speakers are "thieves" because they will in effect be breaking the laws both of man and of nature. And Loren is heroic because he is courageous enough to live the life of an individual guided by his own nature, in turn with the natural

²⁷William Goede, "The 'Code-Hero' in Frost's 'Blueberries.'" *Discourse*, 11 (1968), 33-41.

world around him. He does not allow himself to fall victim to social institutions that are contrary to his pursuit of life, even if he must turn to "civil disobedience."

Many other characters in North of Boston are also heroic in the face of life and its struggles. The Broken One in "The Self-Seeker" courageously faces a dim future. Estelle in "The Housekeeper" finds the courage to change her life completely. Even Silas in "The Death of the Hired Man" has the heroic quality of pride in his work. Courage then is an important recurring motif in North of Boston. George W. Nitchie sees this human courage as an important part of Frost's art:

I think that the solidest part of his output is the fine dramatic poems of North of Boston . . . poems primarily concerned with man's qualified success or moving failure in achieving heroism or in getting by. These are the ultimate values.²⁸

As Robert Frost illustrates in North of Boston, the worth of a man or woman is measured by the heroic way he or she meets the problems of life. Destructive fears, whether real or imaginary, must be brought under control, and yet paradoxically there are fears that Frost feels are necessary:

Two fears should follow us through life. There is the fear that we shan't prove worthy in the eyes of someone who knows us at least as well as we know ourselves. That is the fear of God.

²⁸George W. Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of a Poet's Convictions (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1960), p. 50.

And there is the fear of Man--the fear that men won't understand us and we shall be cut off from them.²⁹

Thus, in addition to the theme of heroism, Frost also enlarges on man's fear of not being understood, of being "cut off" from others. This necessary communication of thoughts and feelings between human beings develops into the second major theme in North of Boston--the theme of correspondence.

²⁹Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost (New York: Collier Books, 1966), p. 38.

CHAPTER III

THE THEME OF CORRESPONDENCE

In his art and throughout his life, Robert Frost continually praised the worth of the individual. The man or woman who guided his or her destiny through sheer effort, who was not weighted down by conformities and public conventions, Frost recognized as heroic. The women in "The Fear" and "The Black Cottage" are his testaments to these beliefs, and in his own life, the poet cultivated his personal and artistic individuality and was intensely proud of it. Yet herein develops perhaps the greatest conflict of self, for parallel to man's need for his own separate entity is his need for understanding from the world around him. An excess of individuality alienates man, shutting him off from the approval of the outside world. As an isolate he suffers an unbearable loneliness. The woman in "The Fear" cries in despair: "This is a very lonely place."¹ Her feeling of isolation is devastating to the soul and to the sanity. Thus develops a conflict of goods: the need for individuality against the need for a sense of relation to the rest of the world.

¹Robert Frost, North of Boston (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), p. 117. All subsequent references to this poem as well as all other poems from this volume will be indicated with page numbers immediately following the quotations.

This conflict is the theme of "Good Hours," the meditative lyric Frost chose as his closing poem for North of Boston. It serves as a summation of the dominant theme in the volume of poetry--the need for correspondence with the world. In his quest for individuality the speaker finds:

I had for my winter evening walk--
No one at all with whom to talk,
But I had the cottages in a row
Up to their shining eyes in snow.

And I thought I had the folk within:
I had the sound of a violin;
I had a glimpse through curtain laces
Of youthful forms and youthful faces.

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.

(p. 137)

Man must pursue his own individuality, but in doing so he must not go too far, where there are "no cottages." For if he does, he will lose touch with the world; his progress through life will be only a "profanation," and the eyes of other persons will be only "windows" of black.

Frost sees this alienation as most dangerous to a poet. Like Tennyson, he longs for isolation, but he also sees that such a position is contrary to the purpose of the

poet. His belief in his "double vision" led him to believe in the prophetic role of the poet, and though he was reluctant to admit this kinship to the Victorian poets, he nevertheless subscribed to the role:² in order for a poet to be a prophet, he must be understood; he must live in the world; he must not withdraw into isolation and thus write obscure poetry. Frost does not object to poems that may be difficult, for they challenge the readers and make the game interesting. But he feels that willful obscurity is wrong.³ This obscurity was the fault Frost saw in the poetry of such poets as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.

Unlike Eliot and Pound, Frost feels that a poet must be in tune with the immediate world about him, for after all poetry is the expression of human feelings. Frost once observed that "feeling is behind everything that counts in a man's life."⁴ Consequently, the poet must feel the sense of things; he must have correspondence with the feelings of man, and he must communicate these feelings to his readers. Frost states:

²Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 626.

³Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches: A Portrait of Robert Frost (New York: Collier Books, 1966), p. 89.

⁴Tom Vander Ven, "Robert Frost's Dramatic Principle of Oversound," American Literature, 45 (May, 1973), 244.

We often hear people say that art and poetry are communications between the artist and his audience. I think a better and more accurate word is "correspondence." It isn't just saying to someone, as it is in communication. We have to feel that there is a similarity of feeling and ideas in the mind of the reader, and that our images will bring forth a response. That's what correspondence really is--bringing forth a response.⁵

Admittedly there is a great sense of the power of correspondence in Robert Frost's poetry and in the dramatic narratives of North of Boston. Frost puts his audience in touch, in correspondence with his characters. In addition, Frost uses man's innate desires for correspondence as thematic material in many of the poems. He knows that the search for human understanding is one of the greatest motivating forces in life. In 1935 he wrote:

We begin in infancy by establishing correspondence of eyes with eyes. . . . We went on [to] the visible motion of the lips--smile answered smile; then, cautiously, by trial and error, to compare the invisible muscles of the mouth and throat. We were still together. So far, so good. From here on the wonder grows. It has been said that recognition in art is all. Better say correspondence is all. Mind must convince mind that it can uncurl and wave the same filaments of subtlety, soul convince soul that it can give off the same shimmers of eternity. At no point would anyone but a brute fool want to break off this correspondence. It is all there is to satisfaction; and it is salutary to live in fear of its being broken off.⁶

⁵Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1958), p. 141.

⁶Cox, p. 92.

But as Frost is fully aware, it is difficult to achieve correspondence with another of the human race, for human beings are separated by barriers, even chasms, of differences even though they struggle throughout life to find sparks of similarities and understanding in others. Such discoveries are rare in a lifetime, and frustrations frequently crown man's efforts.

These efforts to achieve correspondence also direct the people in North of Boston. Successes and failures are here, just as they are in life. Men struggle for understanding in other men, and attempts are made to bridge the differences between men and women, husbands and wives. These become important themes that unify the book. At least three poems have as their central core the efforts towards correspondence between men: "Mending Wall," "The Code," and "A Hundred Collars." Conflicting interests, philosophies, politics, and even cultural backgrounds separate the characters in these poems, and though efforts are made to resolve or overcome such barriers, failure is more frequent than success.

"Mending Wall," which follows the brief lyric "The Pasture," a poem Frost used to introduce the volume, is the first major poem in North of Boston to explore the theme of correspondence. The poem has been tossed about and dissected

by critic after critic since its first appearance in 1914, and the "mischief" in the poem continues to puzzle critics today.⁷ A common misconception of "Mending Wall" is to ascribe opposing points of view to the two men of the poem. One wants the wall down; the other does not. Most critics agree that this is a wrong interpretation, for the mischievous speaker is after all the one who initiates the mending. But perhaps the poem can best be understood as an illustration of man's inability to communicate.

This poem Frost also created from memories of Derry. Frost's neighbor to the south of the Derry farm was a French-Canadian farmer named Napoleon Guay. The boundary line was marked by an old stone wall that separated Guay's white pine grove and one of Frost's apple orchards. Years later Robert Frost remembered: "I wrote the poem 'Mending Wall' thinking of the old wall that I hadn't mended in several years and

⁷For examples, see Joseph W. Beach, "Robert Frost," Yale Review, 43 (1954), 204-217; John C. Broderick, "Frost's 'Mending Wall,'" Explicator, 14 (1956), item 24; John C. Doyle, The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 72-73; S. L. Dragland, "Frost's 'Mending Wall,'" Explicator, 25 (1967), item 39; Carson Gibb, "Frost's 'Mending Wall,'" Explicator, 20 (1962), item 48; Clark Griffin, "Frost and the American View of Nature," American Quarterly, 20 (1968), 21-37; John L. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), pp. 27-29; James R. Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 92; Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), pp. 108-109; Charles N. Watson, Jr., "Frost's Wall: The View from the Other Side," New England Quarterly, 44 (December, 1971), 653-656.

which must be in terrible condition. I wrote that poem in England when I was very homesick for my old wall in New England. . . ."⁸

A simple feeling of homesickness, then, kindled the creation of one of Frost's most complex poems. The contrast of the poem lies not in whether there should be a wall, but in the motives behind the actions and thoughts of the two menders. The speaker is a thinker. He meditates on the destructive forces of walls:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall.
(p. 11)

He weighs natural explanations--nature's forces or hunters, perhaps. The "something" could even be supernatural "elves." But his actions of actual mending prove that he believes in the value and necessity of the wall. The symbolic representations embodied in that wall are endless. It is a boundary, a mark of identity, the difference between "you" and "me," but the speaker knows that there are forces in the world that seek to destroy man's identity. These are the things he wants to discuss with his neighbor, when he humorously says:

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.
(p. 12)

⁸Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 432.

But his attempt to draw his neighbor into a metaphysical conversation fails, for the neighbor continues to repeat his maxim:

He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
(p. 12)

However, the speaker does not give up easily. Correspondence in thought is important to him. Perhaps he can put such thoughts into his neighbor's head with the Socratic method:

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbours? 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."

(p. 12)

Yet the neighbor does not catch the "notion." His motives for repairing the wall are rooted in the past, a remembered proverb of his father's. The neighbor sees no need in thinking through causes; he is concerned only with effects. The wall needs mending; so he mends. The speaker's questioning touches no correspondence in him. His thinking is absorbed with the concrete; his questioner is concerned with the abstract.

Sadly, neither understands the other. And even though they work together to achieve the same end,

We keep the wall between us as we go.
(p. 11)

By implication the speaker passes judgment on his co-worker. Because his neighbor does not understand him and does not think as he does, he attributes failure at correspondence to his neighbor's "backwardness." He then surmises that there is no true correspondence between two people if one has to do the other's thinking for him:

. . . 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.

(pp. 12-13)

Although the reader's sympathy tends to be drawn toward the speaker's side of the wall, one should not overlook the values of the neighbor's side simply because the speaker does. The speaker considers himself in the "light," yet he has failed in communicating with a fellow human being.

Most critics, however, tend to judge the neighbor as a blind traditionalist. For example, Thompson calls the proverb "Good fences make good neighbors" the "repetition of meaningless dogma."⁹ This stance is an unfair judgment of the reticent New England farmer. The people of early rural America often patterned their lives after such little bits of metaphoric philosophy that were packed into the farmer's

⁹Lawrance Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1942), p. 108.

almanacs. Denied the intellectual development of college educations and even any type of formal education, farm mothers and fathers often used such "meaningless dogma" from the almanac, gleaned usually from such writers as Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson, as educational devices for their children. The neighbor is obviously a product of such an environment, and since the poem is limited to the speaker's point of view, there is no way to determine whether the farmer does know why "good fences make good neighbors." Perhaps he, too, is playing a teasing game across a wall, and the speaker also fails to understand. At any rate, both men adhere to the same principle, but neither is able to communicate to the other the validity of that principle.

On the other hand, a similar lack of understanding precipitates violence in "The Code." Though Frost referred to this poem as "almost a joke," it is a strange mixture of light and dark. The poem is a dramatic dialogue between a city-bred farmer and a proud, caustic hired hand. It is based upon a code of what must not be said:

The hand that knows his business won't be told
 To do work better or faster--those two things.
(p. 77)

The word "code," as John F. Lynen points out, has two meanings. It can signify either an ethical standard or a system of

communication.¹⁰ Both these meanings are used simultaneously in the poem.

The poem begins in a meadow where three men, a city-bred farmer and two hired hands, are working. A storm is approaching when suddenly one helper thrusts his pitchfork angrily in the ground and goes home. The other helper explains the strange behavior to the puzzled farmer. The farmer had said they needed to "take pains," and thus he had violated the code, injuring the dignity of his hired hand. The hired hand, who had stayed behind because he knew the farmer "didn't know our ways," uses the opportunity to narrate a similar story from his past.

He had once worked for a man named Sanders. No one liked this boss, for he, too, had violated the code:

"But what he liked was someone to encourage.
 Them that he couldn't lead he'd get behind
 And drive, the way you can, you know, in mowing--
 Keep at their heels and threaten to mow their
 legs off.
 I'd seen about enough of his bulling tricks
 (We call that bulling). I'd been watching him.
 So when he paired off with me in the hayfield
 To load the load, thinks I, Look out for trouble."
(p. 78)

All of Sanders' indignities toward his helpers had built up a murderous rage in the hired hand, and when they unloaded

¹⁰ John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 101.

the hay in the barn, the hired hand tried to bury his boss in hay and thus smother him:

"I looked over the side once in the dust
And caught sight of him treading-water-like,
Keeping his head above. 'Damn ye', I says,
'That gets ye!' He squeaked like a squeezed rat."
(p. 80)

But Sanders escaped and hid out for the rest of the day to avoid meeting his murderous hired hand. At this point the city-bred farmer asks:

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

"No! and yet I don't know--it's 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."
(pp. 81-82)

The poem is thus an amusing illustration of the theme of unspoken correspondence, for it shows that the code, which the hired man follows, is based upon the principle that a man who knows his own worth and takes pride in his work and accomplishments does not need to be goaded by words. A violation of this code then affronts his manly pride and injures his self dignity. Rage and revenge in one form or another are products of a breakdown in correspondence. Although "The Code" is basically a humorous poem, it has its darker elements, too. The reader cannot really condone the hired hand's attempted murder, and yet in a curious, rather morbid way his

actions are amusing. But they are also frightening because violence, rage, hatred, or other dark human responses are often triggered by such seemingly insignificant misunderstandings.

The two men in "A Hundred Collars" are also separated by barriers to understanding. Dr. Magoon, the college professor, and Lafe, the bill collector, are sharply contrasted both physically and mentally. Dr. Magoon, who wears a size-fourteen collar, is evidently a weak little man, for even though he has just four hours to wait between trains he cannot face the "ordeal" without lying down:

. . . four hours to wait at Woodsville Junction
After eleven o'clock at night. Too tired
To think of sitting such an ordeal out,
He turned to the hotel to find a bed.

(p. 32)

And in the hotel he is forced to share a room with Lafe, whose collar size is eighteen:

The Doctor looked at Lafe and looked away.
A man? A brute. Naked above the waist,
He sat there creased and shining in the light,
Fumbling the buttons in a well-starched shirt.

(p. 34)

But the sharper contrast between the two men is not in their physical size but in their abilities to correspond to others.

From the very beginning of the poem it is clear that Dr. Magoon is not in touch with his fellow man. Frost

characterizes him as a scholarly snob who has a distorted sense of his own importance:

Lancaster bore him--such a little town,
Such a great man. It doesn't see him often
Of late years, though he keeps the old
 homestead
And sends the children down there with their
 mother
To run wild in the summer--a little wild.
Sometimes he joins them for a day or two
And sees old friends he somehow can't get near.
They meet him in the general store at night,
Pre-occupied with formidable mail,
Rifling a printed letter as he talks.
They seem afraid. He wouldn't have it so:
Though a great scholar, he's a democrat,
If not a heart, at least on principle.

(p. 31)

The image that he is a "great" man ironically diminishes rapidly. He has lost the ability to "get near" old friends, and though he "wouldn't have it so," by rifling through mail he intimidates these village friends of earlier years. This "great scholar" has become so involved with principles of the mind that he has neglected the principles of the heart. Not only has he lost touch with old friends, but he has also created a distance between himself and his family. He sends them for the summer down to the "homeplace," but he only "sometimes" spends a day or two with them.

His feelings of superiority cause him to reduce Lafe from a man to a brute: "The Doctor looked at Lafe and looked away./ A man? A brute" (p. 34). Yet Lafe, on the other hand,

is a generous, amiable character who loves to talk, to correspond with his fellow man. He makes every effort to draw the professor into companionable conversation; he even offers to give Dr. Magoon all the collars he has "outgrown" when he learns the professor's collar size:

"Fourteen! You say so!
I can remember when I wore fourteen.
And come to think I must have back at home
More than a hundred collars, size fourteen.
Too bad to waste them all. You ought to
have them.
They're yours and welcome; let me send them
to you."

(p. 35)

But Dr. Magoon is so frightened of the mountain of a man that he does not respond in a friendly way to Lafe. Eventually as a show of "faith" in each other, the two men reveal how much money each carries. Dr. Magoon carries only five dollars, but Lafe has ninety dollars. Obviously Lafe has "more to lose" if his roommate should turn out to be a thief, especially since Lafe confesses the money does not really belong to him:

"I'm a collector.
My ninety isn't mine--you won't think that.
I pick it up a dollar at a time
All round the country for the Weekly News,
Published in Bow. You know the Weekly News?"

"Known it since I was young."

"Then you know me.
Now we are getting on together--talking."
(pp. 37-38)

Lafe is comfortable now, for he feels he has established a link of correspondence with this college professor. He talks on, discussing his political role with the Weekly News. Lafe is a practicing "Vermont Democrat," unlike the doctor, who turns out to be only a theoretical "democrat." Lafe not only has a good rapport with those who manage the paper, but he also keeps in contact with his rural customers:

"You see I'm in with everybody, know 'em all.
I almost know their farms as well as they do."
(p. 38)

And as Lafe continues talking, he reveals not only the enjoyment he derives from his occupation but also the closeness he feels for everything about him:

"What I like best's the lay of different farms,
Coming out on them from a stretch of woods,
Or over a hill or round a sudden corner.
I like to find folks getting out in spring,
Raking the dooryard, working near the house.
Later they get out further in the fields.
Everything's shut sometimes except the barn;
The family's all away in some back meadow.
There's a hay load a-coming--when it comes.
And later still they all get driven in:
The fields are stripped to lawn, the garden patches
Stripped to bare ground, the apple trees
To whips and poles. There's nobody about.
The chimney, though, keeps up a good brisk smoking.
And I lie back and ride. I take the reins
Only when someone's coming, and the mare
Stops when she likes: I tell her when to go.
I've spoiled Jemima in more ways than one.
She's got so she turns in at every house
As if she had some sort of curvature,
No matter if I have an errand there.

She thinks I'm sociable. I maybe am.
 It's seldom I get down except for meals, though,
 Folks entertain me from the kitchen doorstep.
 All in a family row down to the youngest."
 (pp. 39-40)

This passage is a lovely description of Lafe's journeys through the countryside. There is even a soft tenderness in his relationship with his horse. Dr. Magoon, however, does not sense any of Lafe's endearing qualities, for his only comment to Lafe's rather long speech reflects the doctor's doubt. He finds it hard to believe Lafe is entertained by farm families all in a "row down to the youngest," for he remarks:

"One would suppose they might not be as glad
 To see you as you are to see them."
 (p. 40)

The doctor then has judged Lafe on superficialities. Dr. Magoon finds him physically repulsive; he must be so to everyone else. Bill collectors are unwanted, undesired creatures of society; so why should the farmers welcome him? It is obvious that although the doctor has heard Lafe talking, he has not listened with his heart. But Lafe's response to this rather cruel remark indicates even more his deep concern for others:

"Oh,
 Because I want their dollar. I don't want
 Anything they've not got. I never dun.
 I'm there, and they can pay me if they like.
 I go nowhere on purpose: I happen by."
 (p. 40)

Lafe thus, with his good heart, does not fit the doctor's stereotype of a bill collector. Yet Lafe in his innocent generosity makes a friendly gesture that completely breaks any thread of correspondence that exists between them. He offers to share what he has with the doctor:

"Sorry there is no cup to give you a drink.
I drink out of the bottle--not your style.
Mayn't I offer you--?"

"No, no, no, thank you."
(p. 40)

The doctor is incensed by this revolting social blunder. The tone in his answer tells Lafe that they are not really "getting on together," and Lafe decides to leave the room, to find companionship elsewhere. But before he goes he makes one last attempt to gain the doctor's approval:

"Those collars--who shall I address them to,
Suppose you aren't awake when I come back?"

"Really, friend, I can't let you. You--may
need them."

"Not till I shrink, when they'll be out of style."

"But really I--I have so many collars."

"I don't know who I rather would have them.
They're only turning yellow where they are.
But you're the doctor as the saying is."

(p. 41)

The doctor's use of "friend" is extremely ironical, for Dr. Magoon has rebuffed all of Lafe's extensions of friendship. The walls that shut off correspondence between them

have been erected by this "great scholar." But despite all the rejections, Lafe remains a compassionate, considerate human being; for even as he leaves the room, he shows his concern for the doctor's feelings:

"I'll put the light out. Don't you wait for me:
I've just begun the night. You get some sleep.
I'll knock so-fashion and peep round the door
When I come back so you'll know who it is.
There's nothing I'm afraid of like scared people.
I don't want you should shoot me in the head.
What am I doing carrying off the bottle?
There now, you get some sleep."

He shut the door.
The Doctor slid a little down the pillow.
(pp. 41-42)

Though the doctor is relieved by the closing of the door, the action is symbolic of the theme of the poem. He projects his feelings of superiority, whether knowingly or unknowingly, to those he considers beneath him. He is thus isolated, shut off from any meaningful contact with the people outside his narrow academic circles. He will never understand that the Lafes of the world are the true "great scholars" of humanity. Magoon is as John Doyle describes him: ". . . a man who cannot give himself to others under any circumstances."¹¹

A similar barrier in correspondence is presented in "The Death of the Hired Man." Silas, the hired man, has been disturbed by the views of young Harold Wilson, a college boy.

¹¹John R. Doyle, The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1962), p. 112.

The two had worked together haying one summer on Warren's farm. The conflict that arose between them developed from opposing points of view. As Mary tells Warren, Silas

" . . . thinks young Wilson a likely lad,
though daft
On education--you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on."

(p. 17)

Silas is the primitive farm hand. For him life should be made up of only useful things. His own values hinge upon the quality of work he puts forth, and he judges another man's worth by his physical skills. In opposition to his beliefs is the intellectualism of Harold Wilson. Silas has no comprehension of Harold's sense of values. He sees no "use" in studying Latin. Even approaching death, Silas is still troubled over his inability to reach Harold, to bridge the barriers in correspondence. As Mary explains to Warren:

"Harold's young college boy's assurance
piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used.
I sympathise. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin like the violin
Because he liked it--that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong--
Which showed how much good school had ever
done him.

He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay--"

(p. 18)

The rural, back-country skepticism of all things intellectual is reflected in Silas' concern for the boy. Silas thinks he might still be able to direct the boy to a useful life:

"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."

(p. 19)

Thus the values, philosophies, and cultural background of men often separate them from other men. Unless some common ground of understanding is reached, the walls that prevent correspondence can become permanent isolating barriers.

In addition to the correspondences of men, other poems in North of Boston are concerned with the needs of effective communication between men and women, husbands and wives. The majority of the dramatic narratives that comprise this volume are dialogues between men and women. Each of these poems deals with a different aspect of human life, but they all contain the same basic theme. If a man and woman are to share successfully their lives together, they must have visible love and effective methods of bridging their differences to achieve correspondences.

Robert Frost was painfully aware of the barriers that exist between a man and a woman. His own marriage suffered from such differences. Frost was a great conversationalist; he loved to talk to friends into the early morning hours.

But the woman he deeply loved, the woman who shared his life, was a woman of silence. Her "meaningful silences" troubled and frustrated him throughout their married life.¹² His pragmatic view of life often clashed with her emotional, sentimental view. This difference as well as his intense love for her is contained in a remark he made in 1938 after her death: "I refused to be bowed down as much as she was by other deaths. But she has given me a death now that I can't refuse to be bowed down by."¹³

His intense love for Elinor is reflected in many of his poems to her; most of these were not published before 1940. He dedicated to her all of his books published until her death. And many of the poems of North of Boston echo the many sides of their love affair. The years they spent on the farm at Derry were pleasant, often happy ones where their love for each other increased in intimacy. Even after they had been away from the farm for years, remembered moments of lovemaking at Derry continued to inspire poems.¹⁴ One of these poems, "The Pasture," Frost chose to place at the beginning of North of Boston.

¹²Thompson, Early Years, p. 129.

¹³Ibid., p. 511.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 311.

"The Pasture" serves as an invitation to the book of poetry. But viewed as a love poem, as Lawrance Thompson insists, it is also an invitation to a silent lover for correspondence:

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I shan't be gone long.--You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I shan't be gone long.--You come too.

(p. 7)

As Thompson suggests, the invitation evokes responses which lovers delight to share: pleasure in small tasks that involve quiet beauty and protective tenderness.¹⁵ The poem is a lovely blend of the practical and the sentimental.

Another poem that involves a conversation between young lovers is the playful dramatic dialogue "The Generations of Men." Critical interpretations of this poem are almost non-existent. It is briefly summarized by Robert H. Swennes, who comments on Frost's use of "myth and fantasy."¹⁶ Other critics have simply mentioned the poem or ignored it altogether. It is one of the longest narratives in the volume, but although it lacks in dramatic intensity, it does

¹⁵Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 128.

¹⁶Robert H. Swennes, "Man and Wife: The Dialogues of Contraries in Robert Frost's Poetry," American Literature, 42 (1970), 368-369.

not lack in interest. The amusing dialogue begins with a governor's proclamation inviting descendants of the Stark family to Bow, New Hampshire. The origins of the Starks having been traced to a cellar hole in Bow, descendants soon overcrowd the little town for a planned fete at the cellar site:

Nothing would do but they must fix a day
 To stand together on the crater's verge
 That turned them on the world, and try
 to fathom
 The past and get some strangeness out of it.
(pp. 83-84)

But rain spoiled all the festivities. And just one young man ventures out into the rain to view the cellar hole. On the road there he meets another descendant, a young girl. "I only idled down," she says to explain her presence. They compare their ready-made ancestral charts and find they might be distant cousins. Thus the young strangers meet. But dangling their feet among the raspberry vines, they sit on the cellar wall, under "the shelter of the family tree." Their playful conversation gradually reveals similarities of the heart. They begin to fall in love.

Not only is their conversation a playful dialogue of a quiet lovers' game, but it is also a fanciful correspondence with the past. They conjure visions of ancestors in the cellar hole. The young man sees:

" . . . When I lean like this
 I can make out old Grandsir Stark distinctly,--
 With his pipe in his mouth and his brown jug--
 Bless you, it isn't Grandsir Stark, it's Granny,
 But the pipe's there and smoking and the jug.
 She's after cider, the old girl, she's thirsty;
 Here's hoping she gets her drink and gets out
 safely."

"Tell me about her. Does she look like me?"

"She should, shouldn't she, you're so many times
 Over descended from her. I believe
 She does look like you. Stay the way you are.
 The nose is just the same, and so's the chin--
 Making allowances, making due allowance."
 (pp. 89-90)

The young man continues by telling her of the voices he hears:

"We have seen visions--now consult the voices.
 Something I must have learned riding in trains
 When I was young. I used the roar
 To set the voices speaking out of it,
 Speaking or singing, and the band-music playing.
 Perhaps you have the art of what I mean.
 I've never listened in among the sounds
 That a brook makes in such a wild descent.
 It ought to give a purer oracle."
 (pp. 90-91)

Perhaps these lines are autobiographical, for Frost himself supposedly heard inner voices throughout his life.¹⁷ The young man, seeking understanding from the girl, asks, "Perhaps you have the art?" But she with a more realistic view replies:

"It's as you threw a picture on a screen:
 The meaning of it all is out of you;
 The voices give you what you wish to hear."

¹⁷Thompson, Early Years, pp. 35-36.

"Strangely, it's anything they wish to give."

"Then I don't know. It must be strange enough.
I wonder if it's not your make-believe.
What do you think you're like to hear to-day?"
(p. 91)

His account of what the voices say is a carefully phrased prophecy of their future together:

". . . The voices say:
Call her Nausicaa, and take a timber
That you shall find lies in the cellar charred
Among the raspberries, and hew and shape it
For a door-sill or other corner piece
In a new cottage on an ancient spot.
The life is not yet all gone out of it.
And come and make your summer dwelling here,
And perhaps she will come, still unafraid,
And sit before you in the open door
With flowers in her lap until they fade,
But not come in across the sacred sill--"
(p. 93)

His "voice's" oracle is charged with meanings. Nausicaa, the daughter of a Phaeacian king, befriended the shipwrecked Odysseus, and the young man chooses to call the girl by the adventurous name from Greek antiquity. Correspondences with the past continue as the young man uses a "voice" from Granny Stark to disguise his own feelings:

"I dunnow!
Mebbe I'm wrong to take it as I do.
There ain't no names quite like the old ones
though,
Nor never will be to my way of thinking.
One mustn't bear too hard on the new comers,
But there's a dote too many of them for
comfort.

I should feel easier if I could see
 More of the salt wherewith they're salted.
 Son, you do as you're told! You take the
 timber--
 It's as sound as the day when it was cut--
 And begin over--"

(p. 94)

There is a strong sense of Yankee pride in ancestry expressed in these lines. Frost himself was proud of his ancestors who first immigrated to New England in 1634. And Granny's voice seems to emphasize the need to blend the present with the past and thus the past with the future--to come full circle, thus strengthening their heritage. The poem ends with symbolic affirmations of attraction for one another. She tells him she must go, and he asks:

"How shall we say good-by in such a case?"

"How shall we?"

"Will you leave the way to me?"

"No, I don't trust your eyes. You've said enough.
 Now give me your hand up.--Pick me that flower."

(p. 95)

But he cannot let them part without arranging another meeting:

"Where shall we meet again?"

"Nowhere but here
 Once more before we meet elsewhere."

"In rain?"

"It ought to be in rain. Sometime in rain.
 In rain to-morrow, shall we, if it rains?
 But if we must, in sunshine." So she went.

(pp. 95-96)

With the voices and prophecies and the rain, echoes from Shakespeare's Macbeth rise from these last few lines. The poem has an interesting supernatural cast, blending reality with fantasy as lovers tend to do. The dialogue between the two is typical of the masked, verbal games men and women play in seeking responses from one another. Their conversation is full of remarks meant to denote one thing yet connote so much more. And this method of communication Frost knows is the method of young lovers.

The most successful dialogue concerned with correspondence between a man and woman is in "The Death of a Hired Man." Critics usually interpret this famous dramatic dialogue as a character study of the hired man, Silas. Only a few such as Lawrance Thompson and Robert H. Swennes have recognized what really happens in the conversation between Mary and Warren.¹⁸ The poem is a carefully balanced blending of two opposing wills. The sharp edges of conflict are softened and even eliminated by the correspondences of feelings between the wife and her husband.

¹⁸ For examples, see Doyle, pp. 215-217; Bess Cooper Hopkins, "A Study of 'The Death of the Hired Man,'" English Journal, 43 (1954), pp. 175-176; Lynen, pp. 112-113; William H. Pritchard, "North of Boston: Frost's Poetry of Dialogue," in In Defense of Reading, ed. Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1962), pp. 38-56; Swennes, pp. 363-372; Thompson, Fire and Ice, pp. 112-114; Charles C. Walcutt, "The Death of the Hired Man," Explicator, 3 (October, 1944), item 7.

Mary is the sentimentalist, as most women are, and her responses to life are motivated by her feelings and emotions. Warren is the logical, pragmatic man who responds first to reason and usefulness. The poem opens at night with Mary waiting for Warren:

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. "Silas is back."
She pushed him outward with her through the door
And shut it after her. "Be kind," she said.
She took the market things from Warren's arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

(p. 14)

Mary has waited, thinking of the effect that Silas' return will have on Warren. She knows Warren is bitter toward the old man, and so to prevent an angry outburst and to prepare Warren for what she must eventually tell him, she draws him outside where Silas may not overhear. And thus they sit, side by side, to discuss the problem of Silas. Warren's words reveal his bitterness and the reasons for it:

"When was I ever anything but kind to him?
But I'll not have the fellow back," he said.
'I told him so last haying, didn't I?
'If he left then,' I said, 'that ended it.'
What good is he? Who else will harbour him
At his age for the little he can do?
What help he is there's no depending on.
Off he goes always when I need him most."

(pp. 15-16)

Silas then has taken advantage of the kindness of Warren and Mary, and Warren, tired of being used, had told Silas not to come back. Now, as always, Silas is back:

"In winter he comes back to us. I'm done."
(p. 16)

Warren's anger is justifiable. His farm is small; he cannot afford to room and board a shiftless, undependable farm hand. Mary knows this, too, but she has found Silas:

"Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
A miserable sight and frightening too,--
You needn't smile--I didn't recognize him--
I wasn't looking for him--and he's changed.
Wait till you see."

(pp. 15-16)

She has already been touched by the pathos of Silas' condition, and she must now somehow touch Warren with it in spite of his bitterness. And so she begins to play on the chords of tenderness she knows are in Warren as she begins to describe the "changed" Silas:

"Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
Two or three times--he made me feel so queer--
To see if he was talking in his sleep."

(p. 17)

She continues, reminding Warren that Silas wasn't totally useless, for he could build a load of hay, and he still wanted to teach the young college boy how to build a load. But her poignant summation of Silas is what reaches the tenderness in Warren:

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

(p. 19)

Mary knows Warren will respond compassionately to such despair in any human being, and so she can now say what she has been waiting to say:

"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."
(p. 20)

Warren's definition of home reflects a callousness which stems from his childhood. It is a home built on duty. Mary's definition is built on love and human understanding. And Silas, like the hound, has sensed that the home of Mary and Warren is built on love and compassion. It therefore is the only "home" he knows. When Warren hears Mary's compassionate words, the last of his logical resistance is broken, like the stick in his hand. Mary explains why Silas does not talk of his banker brother:

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

"I can't think Si ever hurt anyone."

"No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged
chair-back.

He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there tonight.
You'll be surprised at him--how much he's
broken.

His working days are done; I'm sure of it."

"I'd not be in a hurry to say that."

"I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself."
(p. 22)

Warren's sudden loss of bitterness is revealed by his reply, "I can't think Si ever hurt anyone," for in reality Warren has been hurt repeatedly by Silas. When Warren goes to see Silas for himself, he finds him dead.

What is important in the poem is the change in attitude that takes place in Warren--a change from bitterness to human compassion. And the change is achieved through correspondence with his wife. This poem shapes into Frost's example of perfect correspondence. Mary is first moved by Silas' condition, and she in turn engenders these feelings in Warren. With love and understanding she is able to overcome the natural barriers in communication between a man and woman.

In direct contrast to Mary and Warren's successful correspondence is the tragic failure in "Home Burial." This poem represents an imaginative blending of experiences in Frost's past. In his hundreds of public and private readings, Frost never read "Home Burial." He told Lawrance Thompson it was "too sad" for him to read aloud.¹⁹ Frost insisted repeatedly that the inspiration for the poem was the crucial marital estrangement of Leona and Nathaniel Harvey after their first-born child had died in Epping, New Hampshire, in 1895. Leona was the older sister of Elinor. Her marriage was particularly unstable and after repeated separations finally resulted in permanent estrangement in 1915.²⁰ But the dramatic intensity of the poem is probably grounded in more personal experience, for Frost and his wife Elinor had also suffered the grief of losing their first-born son. Elliot had been almost four years old when he died from cholera infantum. The shock of his death crushed his parents. Frost felt he was somehow responsible for the child's death, and Elinor suffered inconsolably in silence for days. When she could finally talk, the weight of her grief caused her to denounce everything. "There was no God, she said; there couldn't be. The world was completely evil, and she hated

¹⁹Thompson, Early Years, p. 598.

²⁰Ibid., p. 572.

all life that was left, including her own."²¹ Thus the poem seems to have some bearing on the difficulty with which Elinor survived that grief. Amy, the woman in "Home Burial," also cries: "The world's evil" (p. 48).

Frost obviously was not patient with his wife's reaction to death. As Thompson points out, the ending of "Out, Out . . ." and "Home Burial" seems to dramatize Frost's pragmatic belief "that the primary concern with living must be with life, and that there is something psychologically unhealthy about even well-intended brooding over the dead."²² Frost once stated this belief in a letter to Louis Untermeyer written after the death of Frost's sister Jeanie: "And I suppose I am a brute in that my nature refuses to carry sympathy to the point of going crazy just because someone else goes crazy, or of dying just because someone else dies."²³ Frost was not "bowed down" for long even after his favorite daughter Marjorie's death, and though he did say he was bowed down by Elinor's death in 1938, he obviously turned back to the living.²⁴

²¹Ibid., p. 258.

²²Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 703.

²³Robert Frost, The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 103.

²⁴Thompson, Years of Triumph, p. 704.

Such conflicting attitudes toward grief are part of the tragic division of the husband and wife in "Home Burial." Most critics in reviewing the poem tend to sympathize with the husband, who has to deal with his overwrought wife; few choose to find blame in the husband's words or actions.²⁵ For instance, Reginald Cook feels the husband has "heart, generosity, and fearlessness of the fact."²⁶ But to place all the blame on either the man or the woman is not necessarily accurate. The total breakdown in communication between them is precipitated by faults in both their natures. They are as far apart in correspondence as Mary and Warren are close. Even the characters' physical positions in the beginnings of both poems allude to this fact: Mary and Warren are side by side, equals; conversely, the husband in "Home Burial" stands above Amy.

The lack of communication has existed between them even before the initial action of the poem begins. She has

²⁵For examples, see Eben Bass, "Frost's Poetry of Fear," American Literature, 43 (January, 1972), 608-609; Cook, pp. 128-135; Doyle, pp. 35-39; Randall Jarrell, "Robert Frost's 'Home Burial,'" in The Moment of Poetry, ed. Don Cameron Allen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), pp. 99-132; George Wilson Nitchie, Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost: A Study of a Poet's Convictions (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1960), pp. 166-167; Pritchard, pp. 38-56; Swennes, pp. 363-372; Thompson, Fire and Ice, pp. 110-111; Floyd C. Watkins, "Poetry of the Unsaid--Robert Frost's Narrative and Dramatic Poems," Texas Quarterly, 15 (Winter, 1972), 78, 85.

²⁶Cook, p. 130.

long been silent, for he demands to know what she sees outside the window: "What is it you see/From up there always--for I want to know" (p. 43). A thinly masked command is implied by his "I will find out now--you must tell me, dear." The "dear" in context with the structure of the statement and the insistence of "I will" and "must" make the usual term of endearment sound shallow. His male dominance and her resistance is revealed in the lines:

She, in her place, refused him any help
 With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
 She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
 Blind creature; and a while he didn't see.
 But at last he murmured, "oh," and again, "oh."
(p. 43)

With a weapon of silence she fights his airs of masculine superiority that put her "in her place." But she is also guilty of classifying him as her inferior. She is sure he "wouldn't see." He is a "blind creature." She feels that he lacks the sensitivity to fathom what troubles her. But he does see, at least superficially:

"The little graveyard where my people are!
 So small the window frames the whole of it.
 Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
 There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
 Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
 On the sidehill. 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.
(p. 44)

Her grief is thus so intense that she cannot bear to hear it made more real by words. Words become a desecration when one is suffering so deeply. And she seeks an escape from him and his words:

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid
 downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
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."
(p. 45)

And here she almost puts into words the impossibility of any correspondence in grief between a man and a woman over the loss of their child. To her, no father can feel the loss as deeply as the mother, and no other grief of life can equal a mother's loss of her child, the child of her own body. Thus no man can ever truly understand this terrible grief a woman suffers.

Yet the husband is also moved by grief. He does try to understand. Her willful retreat from him is as painful to him as the loss of his son, and he tries to establish some semblance of correspondence with her.

"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."

"Help me, then."

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

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

(pp. 45-46)

But in all his apparently sincere desire to give sympathy to her, his true feelings slip out. He might "be taught" to talk to her, but he does not "see how." The truth is that he cannot be taught; one does not "learn" such lessons in matters of the heart. And his lack of knowledge in these types of correspondence is what has really made Amy's life with him so unbearable. She must escape his words, his presence, and his condescension. But his attempts are only external attempts, for he allows his own selfishness to surface when he says:

"You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead."
(p. 47)

Her reply finally forms into words the true horror in her feelings for him. She in her inconsolable grief cannot understand his actions or his words:

"You can't because you don't know how.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand--how could you?--
his little grave;

I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so
lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it."
(pp. 47-48)

She is horrified that he had so dispassionately executed the terrible task of digging his own child's grave. She feels his actions as well as his words belied any feelings of true grief, as she recounts what she heard him say:

"I can repeat the very words you were saying.
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot
To do with what was in the darkened parlour."
(p. 48)

But there is a horror in his remark that does have something to do with what was in the darkened parlour. Their child laid to rest in the grave is now at the mercy of the decaying elements of the earth. The irony though is that the woman apparently missed the double meaning of the man's remark. He, too, is suffering from the horrors of his task, yet he knows the "manly" thing is not to give in to emotions but carry

through with his task. No matter what he faces in life, he must play his role as a "man," unbowed and courageous. And sadly he will not even partially give up being a man to please her. His lack of demonstrative sensibilities, though manly, leads her to believe he is completely insensitive.

She even finds fault with the world's commonplace acceptance of death. Grief should be so much more:

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

(p. 48)

Thus Amy's emotional nature cannot accept the pragmatic response to death, at least not now, and she cannot correspond to such views she sees in her husband. They are cut off from one another, each shutting the other out. For even after she has tried to explain to him the depth of her grief, he does not understand. He thinks that words are the important things:

"There you have said it all and you feel better."
(p. 49)

He does not and cannot comprehend, for there is no bridge, not even love, left between them. And as she turns to go, he threatens her a final time with his masculine superiority:

"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!--."

(p. 49)

The poem then ends with despair in both of them. Neither is capable of reaching the other. They are two separate, lonely, isolated human beings, and they will remain so.

Other poems in North of Boston also are concerned with the loss of communication between a man and his wife. The lonely woman in "A Servant to Servants" pours her heart out to a stranger because she feels Len does not really understand her even though he tries. "The Fear" ends in Joel's silence in answer to the woman's pleas. And Estelle leaves John in "The Housekeeper" partly because he refuses to understand the basis for her troubles.

Although there are poems in North of Boston that present the negative sides of man's correspondence to others, Frost has also given subtle and obvious suggestions throughout the volume for ways that man can deal positively with the isolating barriers that exist between men and women.

"The Wood-Pile," though often viewed as a nature poem, contains one of Frost's subtle suggestions. Frost placed this narrative lyric at the end of his dramatic dialogues, and it contains much of the theme of correspondence. Critics have seen the retreating bird and the deserted woodpile as symbols of man's relation to nature.²⁷ But the bird Frost uses as a

²⁷For examples, see Ferman Bishop, "Frost's 'The Wood-Pile,'" Explicator, 18 (1960), item 58; Alexander Kern, "Frost's 'The Wood-Pile,'" Explicator, 28 (1970), item 49; Lynen, pp. 144-145.

simile for a human response, and the woodpile triggers a response to the laborer who created it. Both experiences place the speaker in correspondence with other human beings though he is walking alone through the woods.

The description in the beginning of the poem indicates loneliness and a sense of depression in the speaker:

Out walking in the frozen swamp one grey day
I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.
No, I will go on farther--and we shall see."

(p. 133)

Alone, and far from home, he disturbs a bird that flies before him:

. . . He was careful
To put a tree between us when he lighted,
And say no word to tell me who he was
Who was so foolish as to think what he thought.
He thought that I was after him for a feather--
The white one in his tail; like one who takes
Everything said as personal to himself.
One flight out sideways would have undeceived
him.

(pp. 133-134)

His response to the bird reflects, and perhaps helps him understand, similar actions in men or perhaps even similar actions in himself. And the bird leads him to discover the woodpile. The wood has been carefully cut and stacked, but is now deserted, forgotten, left to decay for a long time. Nature is gradually reclaiming it:

The wood was grey and the bark warping off it
And the pile 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 latter 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.

(pp. 134-135)

At the beginning of the poem the speaker is searching for a positive direction in which to travel. He turns aside his hesitancy to turn back and continues in the frozen swamp. But his path leads him to the woodpile that places him in correspondence with the long-absent laborer. Here was a man who had changed his direction. He had left behind "the labour of his axe" and sought new tasks and forgotten the old tasks. Embodied in his correspondence with another human being the wanderer has found an answer: man lives a meaningful life by "turning to fresh tasks."

Thus "The Wood-Pile" embodies Frost's ideas of correspondence and its necessity to man. What is true of "The Wood-Pile" is true also of other poems in North of Boston. It is though these responses to others where mind touches mind and heart touches heart that man finds meaning in his existence. Without them he is alone, isolated, bereft in a hostile universe.

CHAPTER IV

THE THEME OF SELF-SEEKING

Robert Frost's curiosity about people was insatiable. He loved gossip and obviously used many neighborhood tales as the basic materials for his poetry. But his curiosity was psychological as well as literary; therefore, he was equally interested not only in a man's thoughts but also in his behavior. At Harvard in 1898 Frost had studied psychology under Professor Hugo Munsterberg, who had used as a text the recently published Psychology by William James. Frost had hoped to study under James himself and was disappointed when he learned that the reknowned philosopher had been granted a year's leave of absence from the university.

Nevertheless, Frost was strongly influenced by James. For in 1911 when Frost taught psychology at Plymouth Normal School, he chose James's book as his text. Frost gained much from the psychological and philosophical teachings of this man, and much of Frost's poetry is best understood against this pragmatic background. Furthermore, Frost's study of Psychology gave him a direction in his own life. From James, Frost learned to accept the view that the individual must hold himself responsible for his own psychological

health. "This life," wrote James, "is what we make of it, from a moral point of view, and we are determined to make it from that point of view, so far as we have anything to do with it, a success."¹ Clinging to these ideas, Frost was gradually able to draw himself up from the dark depression that had marred his first year on his Derry farm in 1900. He began to realize that much of his darkness was a product of his own attitudes, as James had said in Psychology: "The hell to be endured hereafter . . . is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way."²

Frost first applied the wisdom of William James to his own life and then gradually to the lives of others. One of the ideas from Psychology that seems to have particularly interested Frost was James's insistence upon man's need for certain kinds of selfishness. In the chapter on "Self," James divides these into three categories of self-seeking: material or bodily self-seeking, social self-seeking, and spiritual self-seeking. Man must satisfy some desires in each of these facets of self in order to exist. James explains their order of importance:

¹Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1894-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 537.

²William James, Psychology (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1900), p. 149.

The social self as a whole . . . ranks higher than the material self as a whole. We must care more for our honor, our friends, our human ties, than for a sound skin or wealth. And the spiritual self is so supremely precious that, rather than lose it, a man ought to be willing to give up friends and good fame, and property, and life itself.³

James defines material self-seeking as the inner drives and instincts for self-preservation and material improvements in life. Social self-seeking is man's desires for social approval, his needs to please and attract notice, and his love for glory and power. Spiritual self-seeking embodies every impulse toward psychic progress whether intellectual, moral, or spiritual. Success or failure in life usually hinges on the individual's ability to control and maintain a proper balance in these forces of selfishness. Frost, therefore, uses man's struggles with self as themes for some of the poems in North of Boston. Although Amy Lowell saw "degeneration" in the book, there is actually much progression. And this is the progress of human growth. Frost viewed life as a continuous enlargement of man's inner self, a life-long series of inner struggles, and a man was successful in life only if he could avoid excesses, suppressing his negative desires and elevating his positive ones.

³Ibid., p. 191.

"The Housekeeper" is an interesting presentation of the failure of a man and a woman to fashion their characters in the right directions. This dramatic dialogue was one of the earliest accomplishments of Frost. It was written at Derry, and it contains a relatively accurate characterization of one of Frost's friends, John Hall, whose name is actually used in the poem. Hall lived in Atkinson, New Hampshire, on a farm smaller than Frost's, and Frost's friendship with him grew out of a mutual interest in poultry. Hall was an expert poultry man. He won prizes for his Wyandottes, geese, and ducks, and his farm was filled with all kinds of plain and fancy birds. Hall was not married, but he lived comfortably with a common-law housekeeper-wife, her mother, and a large number of Angora cats. Blue-ribbon prizes were tacked all over the kitchen walls. Frost's interest in Hall was also literary, for the poet admired the farmer's curious, picturesque manner of speech.⁴

The poem, however, contains the narration of the flight of Estelle, the housekeeper, from her common-law husband John. The story is told to a visiting friend by Estelle's mother, who has been left behind. The woman's description of herself is a memorable one:

⁴Thompson, Early Years, p. 283.

"It's you," she said, "I can't get up. Forgive me
 Not answering your knock. I can no more
 Let people in than I can keep them out.
 I'm getting too old for my size. I tell them."⁵

Although Estelle has left her behind for the moment, the
 mother plans to join her daughter later:

"Estelle's to take me when she's settled down.
 He and I hinder one another.
 I tell them they can't get me through the door,
 though:
 I've been built in here like a church organ.
 We've been here fifteen years."

(p. 99)

Estelle has been gone two weeks. She has run away to hide,
 leaving John and the life she has known for fifteen years
 behind her. The mother describes the effect her flight has
 had on John:

"I never saw a man let family troubles
 Make so much difference in his man's affairs.
 He's just dropped everything. He's like a child.
 I blame his being brought up by his mother.
 He's got hay down that's been rained on three times.
 He hoed a little for me yesterday:
 I thought the growing things would do him good.
 Something went wrong. I saw him throw the hoe
 Sky-high with both hands. I can see it now--
 Come here--I'll show you--in the apple tree.
 That's no way for a man to do at his age:
 He's fifty-five, you know, if he's a day."

(p. 100)

⁵Robert Frost, North of Boston (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1935), p. 97. All subsequent references to this poem as well as all other poems from this volume will be indicated with page numbers immediately following the quotations.

The effect on John is profound. His mental state is sad indeed, for the mother says:

" . . . he's made up his mind not to stand
What he has got to stand."

(p. 101)

But John is not the innocent victim of circumstances. His past actions and his own self-pursuits have created this hell he must now endure. The friend inquires:

"Where is Estelle?
Couldn't one talk to her? What does she say?
You say you don't know where she is."

"Nor want to!
She thinks if it was bad to live with him,
It must be right to leave him."

"Which is wrong!"

"Yes, but he should have married her."

"I know."

"The strain's been too much for her all these years:
I can't explain it any other way."

(p. 101)

Estelle then has been driven to this flight by the conflicts within herself. The satisfaction of only the material, bodily self is not enough to sustain life. One must also satisfy the needs of the social self. The respect and admiration of others is necessary to maintain mental health, and Estelle has obviously been weighted down by the social stigmas attached to her life with John. She has also denied her spiritual self, for she feels guilt in this breach of morals.

In her efforts to right these wrongs to herself, however, she has chosen a selfish method that threatens to destroy another human being. And this action, too, as the friend says, "is wrong."

Though John is basically a kind and gentle man, he is simply not perceptive enough to realize the inner needs of Estelle. He mistakenly assumes that because his inner selves have been satisfied, she also should be content:

"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!

"I wonder why he doesn't marry her
And end it."

"Too late now: she wouldn't have him.
"He's given her time to think of someone else.
That's his mistake. The dear knows my interest
Has been to keep the thing from breaking up.
This is a good home; I don't ask for better.
But then I've said, 'Why shouldn't they be married,'
He'd say, 'Why should they?' no more than that."
(p. 102)

John's social self has been satisfied with the pride he has taken with his birds. The prizes displayed in the kitchen have won him admiration from the world. He has allowed his pride in his chickens to become the dominating force in his life. Even with his farm mortgaged, he has paid fifty dollars for an imported Lanshang cock that roams free in the farm yard. And now, repentant though he may be, it is too late to make amends, for, as the mother reveals, Estelle has

married someone else. And when John returns home at the end of the poem, the mother sums up her rather accurate estimation of him as she shouts out the door at him:

"Who wants to hear your news, you--dreadful fool?"
(p. 110)

Thus, though misguided self-seeking both John and Estelle have created for themselves lives of misery. And now whether he is prepared or not, John must face what he has made of his life. "Isn't it Hell," he says (p. 110).

Another aspect of self-seeking is described allegorically in "The Mountain." This strangely curious dramatic dialogue has received, as Laurence Perrine suggests, many "simple-minded readings."⁶ Perrine's explication of the poem is fresh and interesting. He views the mountain as a symbolic representation of poetry. But the mountain can also be seen as human aspiration, perhaps as a representation of fame. At the time Frost wrote "The Mountain," the as yet unrecognized poet was consumed with his social desire for fame. His aspiration was to become a great, famous poet; however, he was forty before he achieved fame.

In "The Mountain" there is a philosophical discussion of the mountain between the traveler and a man whom the traveler meets on the road:

⁶Laurence Perrine, "Frost's 'The Mountain': Concerning Poetry," Concerning Poetry, 4 (1971), 5-11.

I crossed the river and swung round the mountain.
 And there I met a man who moved so slow
 With white-faced oxen in a heavy cart,
 It seemed no harm to stop him all together.
 (pp. 24-25)

Soon the mountain becomes the topic of their conversation.

It is monstrous in size, according to the farmer:

"There is no village--only scattered farms.
 We were but sixty voters last election.
 We can't in nature grow to many more:
 That thing takes all the room!" He moved his goad.
 The mountain stood there to be pointed it.
 Pasture ran up the side a little way,
 And then there was a wall of trees with trunks:
 After that only tops of trees, and cliffs
 Imperfectly concealed among the leaves.
 (p. 25)

But for all its awesome size and magnitude, the traveler has
 wistful thoughts of climbing it:

"That looks like a path.
 Is that the way to reach the top from here?--
 Not for this morning, but some other time:
 I must be getting back to breakfast now."

"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.
 (p. 26)

The traveler has desires for fame, but like most of humanity,
 he lacks the true ambition, or he would sacrifice his break-
 fast for the climb. Thus while he likes to talk about and
 think about the glories and adventures of climbing the moun-
 tain, he will never really do it.

The farmer, however, has a totally different view of
 the mountain, and he describes its mysteries and beauty:

" . . . There's a brook
 That starts up on it somewhere--I've heard say
 Right up on the top, tip-top--a curious thing.
 But what would interest you about the brook,
 It's always cold in summer, warm in winter.
 One of the great sights going is to see
 It steam in winter like an ox's breath.
 Until the bushes all along its banks
 Are inch-deep with the frosty spines and bristles--
 You know the kind. Then let the sun through!"
 (pp. 26-27)

Thus the myth of fame is introduced. Worldly fame endows one with a sense of immortality. A famous man lives on in the minds of men forever. And like the brook, fame forever defies the natural laws of mortality and nonentity that plague ordinary men.

The traveler is caught up in his imagination of what it would be like on top. The power and perception would be great:

"There ought to be a view around the world
 From such a mountain--if it isn't wooded
 Clear to the top." I saw through leafy screens
 Great granite terraces in sun and shadow,
 Shelves one could rest a knee on getting up--
 With depths behind him sheer a hundred feet:
 Or turn and sit on and look out and down,
 With little ferns in crevices at his elbow.
 (p. 27)

But as he looks at the mountain, he begins to realize the hardships and exertions and even dangers involved in reaching that "view around the world." He retreats from his desires with a mask of skepticism. It might be "wooded clear

to the top." And when the farmer mentions the spring, the traveler questions:

"If it's there.
You never saw it?"

"I guess there's no doubt
About it's being there. I never saw it.
It may not be right on the very top:

.

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."

(pp. 27-29)

The pragmatic farmer has no doubts of the values in the achievement of climbing the mountain. But though he has always meant to go and look for himself, he has not done so because he sees no personal utility in the feat. He is also realistic enough to know that fame after all is only an imaginary substance, a quality of words and nothing more:

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

(p. 29)

This old farmer has a delightfully poetic way of saying things. But he is not overpowered by excessive desires of social

self-seeking. Although fame is attractive to him, he has a practical life to lead, and he finds enough satisfaction in that.

Critics such as Joseph W. Beach often identify Frost with the traveler in the poem.⁷ Because Frost uses the first-person point of view in his narrative poetry, critics are often misled. But if the mountain is viewed as a representation of fame, then the skepticism expressed by the traveler and his indecisive attitude do not fit Frost's personality. According to Lawrance Thompson, fame and literary achievement were the dominating forces in Frost's life. He allowed nothing to interfere with his goals.⁸

The theme of "After Apple-Picking" is also concerned with aspiration. There seems to be a curious mixture of pursuit for satisfaction in all three phases of self-seeking in this strangely constructed lyric. The poem has puzzled

⁷Joseph W. Beach, "Robert Frost," Yale Review, 43 (1954), 204-217.

⁸Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph, 1915-1938 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), pp. xi-xix.

many critics, and interpretations of the poem are wide and varied.⁹ But no critic has applied a Jamesian perspective to the poem. In the beginning of the poem the speaker describes his actions for bodily or material self-seeking. He has been picking apples to eat and most likely to sell at the market:

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking
 through a tree
 Toward heaven still,
 And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
 Beside it, and there may be two or three
 Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
 But I am done with apple-picking now.
 (p. 73)

But the manual labor in picking apples has led him to envision more. The essence of a dream comes upon him, a dream of wealth and social importance that a "great harvest" would bring. But his "two-pointed ladder" sticking toward heaven implies a deeper meaning. This physical effort cannot satisfy his need for spiritual fulfillment:

⁹For examples, see Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, Understanding Poetry (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1951), pp. 389-397; Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1958), pp. 104-105; John C. Doyle, The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 26-31; Joe M. Ferguson, "Frost's 'After Apple-Picking,'" Explicator, 22 (1964), item 53; James R. Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), pp. 57-59; William B. Stein, "'After Apple-Picking': Echoic Parody," University Review, 35 (1969), 301-305; Robert Penn Warren, "The Themes of Robert Frost," in The Writer and His Craft: Being the Hopwood Lectures, 1932-1952 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1954), pp. 226-227.

Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
 The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
 I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
 I got from looking through a pane of glass
 I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
 And held against the world of hoary grass.
 It melted, and I let it fall and break,
 But I was well
 Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
 And I could tell
 What form my dreaming was about to take.

(pp. 73-74)

And then his dream becomes an illusion of distorted perception; he experiences an amplification of each of his physical senses:

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.

(p. 74)

The dream then is almost a nightmare literally brought on by physical exhaustion. But the speaker also seems to question whether this experience is just a dream or a prophetic vision intended to reveal something to his inner self:

One can see what will trouble
 This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
 Were he not gone,
 The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
 Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
 Or just some human sleep.

(pp. 74-75)

An animal of nature would not be "troubled" with illusions or visions; these are only human "sleeps." The woodchuck's hibernation, however, is a natural process, yet it is his escape, his defense against the cruelties of a New England winter. If the speaker had dreamed of spiritual redemption through his labor, then perhaps his nightmare calls attention to his illusion. William James warns that there are mistaken desires taken for spiritual self-seeking:

It must be admitted, however, that much that commonly passes for spiritual self-seeking . . . is only material and social self-seeking beyond the grave. In the Mohammedan desire for paradise and the Christian aspiration not to be damned in hell, the materiality of the goods sought is undisguised. In the more refined view of heaven, many of its goods, the fellowship of the saints and of our dead ones, and the presence of God, are but social goods of the most exalted kind. It is only the search of the redeemed inward nature, the spotlessness from sin, whether here or hereafter, that can count as spiritual self-seeking pure and undefiled.¹⁰

The dream then becomes a prophecy warning the speaker that one does not fulfill spiritual needs through the acquisition of material wealth. Such a pursuit of a "great harvest" is a profanation of the purely spiritual, and his ultimate fate if he continues in this quest will be as the "bruised" and defiled apples that go "to the cider-apple heap/ As of no worth" (p. 74).

¹⁰James, p. 185.

The last poem that concerns James's theories of self-seeking is appropriately titled "The Self-Seeker." Frost placed this long dramatic dialogue as the last dialogue in North of Boston, but despite the importance of its position, critics have only mentioned it in passing on to other poems. "The Self-Seeker" is one of the most tragic of the poetic dramas in North of Boston. This poem is definitely one of Frost's major achievements, and yet no critic appears to have recognized it. Biographically the poem grew out of one of the few friendships, perhaps the only friendship, of Frost's early manhood. Frost had met Carl Burell when they had both attended Lawrence High School. Burell, though a student, was several years older than Frost. Burell's age and odd behavior isolated him from the other students, but he and Frost built a casual acquaintance on their common interest in poetry.

After Frost graduated from high school, the two corresponded but each drifted his separate way. In the summer after Frost and Elinor married in 1895, Frost's friendship deepened with Burell. He had helped Frost and Elinor find and rent a small isolated cottage near Allentown, New Hampshire, where they had their delayed honeymoon. Burell was working nearby in a box factory in Pembroke. Burell had a passion for amateur botanizing and farming, and

the three of them often spent days walking in the woods, searching for flowers and ferns. And during this idyllic summer vacation Frost caught the passion, too. Burell impressed upon Frost his keen observant eye and his enthusiasm for nature. But this lovely summer devoted to orchids was suddenly marred by Burell's very serious accident in the box factory. Burell's coat caught on a leather pulley-belt. In an effort to free himself, he was thrown over a pulley near the ceiling where his feet struck the girders. He fell to the floor, unconscious. His feet were so badly crushed the doctor feared they might have to be amputated. Burell was confined to bed at his home, where Frost visited him repeatedly, both of them realizing the consequences if he could never walk again. Frost was a witness when Burell was paid a relatively small sum by an insurance representative before it was known how badly injured he might be. Amputation was not necessary, but even though Burell did regain use of his feet, he was badly crippled and limped for the rest of his life. Years later Frost still felt acute agony over the incident, and in England in 1913, he dramatized the heart of it in the blank verse narrative "The Self-Seeker."¹¹

The poem involves four characters: the Broken One, his friend Willis, the Boston lawyer, and the little girl

¹¹Thompson, Early Years, pp. 220-221.

Anne. Each of the three men represents a different type of self-seeker, and the motives and the conflicts inherent in the situation are movingly pathetic. The poem opens with the Broken One's sadly humorous speech:

"Willis, I didn't want you here to-day:
The lawyer's coming for the company.
I'm going to sell my soul, or, rather, feet,
Five hundred dollars for the pair, you know."

"With you the feet have nearly been the soul;
And if you're going to sell them to the devil,
I want to see you do it. When's he coming?"

"I half suspect you knew, and came on purpose
To try to help me drive a better bargain."
(p. 118)

And Willis counters with the reasons why the Broken One's feet are the same as his soul:

"Yours are no common feet.
The lawyer don't know what it is he's buying:
So many miles you might have walked you won't walk.
You haven't run your forty orchids down."
(p. 118)

The Broken One collects flowers. He finds spiritual satisfaction in his quests for rare and new species of wild flowers. The two friends continue in a discussion of the nearly fatal factory accident that left the Broken One with crushed feet. The doctor says he may walk again, but he does not know for sure. He might still have to amputate. And after the Broken One finishes recalling the events of the accident, he makes a comment that reflects the impersonal, inhuman atmosphere created by an industrial society:

"Everything goes the same without me there.
 You can hear the small buzz saws whine, the big saw
 Caterwaul to the hills around the village
 As they both bite wood. It's all our music.
 One ought as a good villager to like it.
 No doubt it has a sort of prosperous sound,
 And it's our life."

"Yes, when it's not our death."

"You make that sound as if it wasn't so
 With everything. What we live by we die by.
 I wonder where my lawyer is. His train's in.
 I want this over with; I'm hot and tired."

(p. 120)

The Broken One has a stoical acceptance of things as they are. The things of the world cannot be changed; therefore, man must do the changing within himself. The noise of the factory saws can be music if one chooses to make it so. But the music of a factory can be only material music, sung for the sake of greed.

Willis, though, is bitter over the accident, more bitter it appears than the Broken One himself. Willis is concerned with the price one sets on something so valuable:

"You've got to tell me how far this is gone:
 Have you agreed to any price?"

"Five hundred.
 Five hundred--five--five! One, two, three, four,
 five.
 You needn't look at me."

"I don't believe you."

"I told you, Willis, when you first came in.
Don't you be hard on me. I have to take
What I can get. You see they have the feet,
Which gives them the advantage in the trade.
I can't get back the feet in any case."

(pp. 121-122)

But Willis, who is basically a bodily and material self-seeker, cannot understand this attitude in his friend. He feels the Broken One is entitled to much more compensation than just \$500.00 for the loss of his feet, and he pleads with his friend:

"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 shakes I want to nail."

"But what about your flora of the valley?"

"You have me there. But that--you didn't think
That was worth money to me?"

(pp. 122-123)

There is something very pure in this Broken One. This unselfish man sets no monetary worth on true values. His flowers cannot be bought and sold, just as his spiritual self cannot be. Willis, the materialistic one, cannot understand this

attitude, nor does he understand the Broken One's reason for submission without a fight. "I just want to get settled in my life/ Such as it's going to be," he says.

The Boston lawyer finally arrives, and following up the stairs behind him is a little barefoot girl, Anne. The cold, impersonal attitude of the lawyer is reflected in his first words:

"Well, and how is Mister--"
The lawyer was already in his satchel
As if for papers that might bear the name
He hadn't at command. "You must excuse me,
I dropped in at the mill and was detained."
(p. 124)

The lawyer, motivated by his social self, has become so impressed with his own personal, socially oriented world that he is unable to relate to the lesser human beings. The self he presents to them is cold, businesslike, and dispassionate. He is a symbol of the industrial society itself.

Little Anne has brought flowers to the Broken One, and Willis learns that she has become the Broken One's "feet." He is teaching her the way of his flowers, and his kind and loving soul is even more evident in his method of talking with the child:

Anne just wagged her dress
With both hands behind her. "Guess," she said.

"Oh, guess which hand? My, my! Once on a time
I knew a lovely way to tell for certain
By looking in the ears. But I forget it.

Er, let me see. I think I'll try the right.
 That's sure to be right even if it's wrong.
 Come, hold it out. Don't change.--
 A Ram's Horn orchid!"

(pp. 124-125)

In sharp contrast to the Broken One's gentle nature is the hardness of the lawyer's. The impatient Boston lawyer interrupts the flower exchange with a loud snap of his watch case, and the transaction takes place. Willis still protests, but the Broken One, anxious to get it over with, signs the documents:

The lawyer gravely capped his fountain pen.
 "You're doing the wise thing: you won't regret it.
 We're very sorry for you."

Willis sneered:

"Who's we--some stockholders in Boston?
 I'll go outdoors, by gad, and won't come back."
 (p. 131)

Certainly, there is a heartlessness in the social system of man, and yet people are drawn by its attractions of power and glory. Willis, suffering for his friend, is agonized even more by the heartlessness and by his friend's refusal to fight this system for what it owes him. But the Broken One is aware of the futility of such a fight; it would drain him of energy necessary for more important inner struggles. Yet the despair of the Broken One that he has tried so courageously to mask with pathetic humor is revealed in his rapid staccato speech that closes the poem:

"Willis, bring Anne back with you when you come.
 Yes. Thanks for caring. Don't mind Will: he's
 savage.
 He thinks you ought to pay me for my flowers.
 You don't know what I mean about the flowers.
 Don't stop to try to now. You'll miss your train.
 Good-bye." He flung his arms around his face.
 (p. 132)

His final gesture clutches at the heart. The structure and tone of his words suggest that he is on the verge of an emotional breakdown. His mask of courage he has used to face Willis, and the lawyer, and Anne is breaking, and he must throw his arms over his face to contain his emotions. The final pathos is in the irony of the title. Before the accident the Broken One had inner peace. He was not a self-seeker. But now this gentle, unselfish man is adrift and helpless in a hostile world. His life as he has known it must now be drastically changed. He may forever lose the things that give him spiritual comfort, and thus he will have to restructure his inner selves to again find inner peace. He will have to become a self-seeker.

Yet Robert Frost believed that such was life. Man seeks and finds and loses and must seek again. If he builds from the destruction, he is successful; if he will not rebuild, he has failed. The discoveries man makes within himself are the meanings he gives to life. In a letter written to his oldest daughter, Leslie, Frost once said:

We grow in the power to think as we become aware of ourselves, or have ourselves pointed out to ourselves by circumstances and by other people. I suppose it starts too in the realm of plain observation, that is outward observation. From there it goes on to inward observation. There is sight and there is insight. You learn first to know what you see and to put fresh words on it: you learn second to know what you feel and put fresh words on it. That's the whole story. I don't believe there's anything in literature that that doesn't cover.¹²

¹²Robert and Elinor White Frost, Family Letters of Robert Frost and Elinor White, ed. Arnold Grade (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1972), p. 85.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Robert Frost has too often been considered a poet of nature when in actuality he uses nature only as a metaphorical framework for his poetic dramas of man. Each poem in North of Boston serves as evidence that Frost was primarily a humanist. In a television interview in the fall of 1952, Frost told his nation-wide audience: "I guess I'm not a nature poet. I have only written two poems without a human being in them."¹ The major thematic emphasis of North of Boston is man and his approaches to the vicissitudes of life. And the human concerns of these rural New England people, although drawn from a quieter American era, continue to interest modern readers.

Nevertheless, since Amy Lowell's remarks in the New Republic, critics have often mistakenly judged the book as regional. For Miss Lowell the people in North of Boston were New England "left-overs of the old stock, morbid, pursued by

¹Marion Montgomery, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man vs. Nature Toward God," in Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James Melville Cox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 138.

phantoms, slowly sinking to insanity."² She interpreted the book according to her own narrow views and obviously missed the purposes behind its creation. Robert Frost traced portraits of New Englanders not to glorify New England; he traced them because these were the people he knew. New England was the environment that was a part of him. His purpose was not one of "local color": his purpose was to portray life, life as it is lived, endured, and conquered by people. The universality of his characters and the greatness of the book hinge on this outlook. The human qualities and life struggles echoing through the poetry are those that are forever with humanity regardless of time and place.

Frost viewed life as synonymous with pain, yet he believed man could conquer life through heroic effort. And man's goals should be accomplishment and effort, not happiness. The tragedies in North of Boston are most often precipitated by man's failures to shape his will and character. Frost believed the beauty of life is in "struggle and change and taking tough decisions,"³ for life is a continuous struggle in which at best man must settle for only temporary victories. And these beliefs are evident in the themes of

²Amy Lowell, "North of Boston: Review," New Republic, 2 (February 20, 1915), 81.

³Edward Connery Lathem, ed., Interviews with Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 177.

North of Boston. These dramatic dialogues of people brilliantly illustrate Frost's own definition of poetry: "A successful poem ends in a clarification of life--not necessarily a great clarification . . . but in a momentary stay against confusion."⁴

If there is a terror in Robert Frost's poetry as Lionel Trilling suggests,⁵ it is the terror of life itself. North of Boston is full of terror: alienation, loneliness, grief, death, failures, fears. But the book is also full of love, generosity, correspondences, laughter, heroism, and success. The book is not excessively tragic or comic; it is a successful blend of tragedy and comedy. Frost knew that man "must cry a little and laugh a little, but neither cry nor laugh too much."⁶ Understanding the necessity of contraries, Frost structured his poetry accordingly. North of Boston is comprised of paradoxes, conflicts, and contrasts because these were evident complexities of the poet's own life, for as Reginald Cook has said: "Frost's poems are like

⁴Lawrance Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, 1874-1915 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. xxii.

⁵Lionel Trilling, "A Speech on Robert Frost: A Cultural Episode," in Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James Melville Cox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 158.

⁶Lathem, p. 165.

pyramids whose huge bases are broad extensions in experience: the present reaching into the past and the past reaching into the future."⁷

Viewed in its entirety, North of Boston is a micro-cosm of life, full of negations as well as affirmations. But Frost offers to the perceptive reader positive answers to the dark questions of life. Truth and wisdom are revealed in the unfolding of the lives of ordinary people, and he celebrates the qualities of courage and magnanimity that fulfill man's spiritual self-seeking. For these accomplishments North of Boston may well be Frost's major contribution to American literature.

⁷Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1958), p. 77.

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