SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

People are in exterminable — like flies and bed-bugs. There will always be some that survive in cracks and crevices — that’s us.

Robert Frost
London Observer (29 March 1959)

Life in words of Frost is a dictionary that provides him with the American mode of expression. From the beginning of his career he was acclaimed for his uncanny knack of catching the authentic native accent. Frost’s verses convey a most convincing chimera of real conversation. His speakers deliver a sense of spontaneous dialogues that tally with the reader’s observation of speech under normal and relaxed conditions.

Frost, who is universally regarded as synonymous with New England is praised for bringing into literature the New England tongue. Amy Lowell denied this view. According to her, his speech had the essence of New England, yet he had ignored it absolutely, for he was striving to provide his work with the greatest possible universality and permanence. He was aware that the use of the exact dialect unquestionably narrowed a writer’s immediate appeal. What readers hear and respond to in the poems are the recognizable rhythms of standard American colloquial speech. The fusion of speaker and language produces the authentic “local” flavour for which his poems are praised.

We’re always too much out or too much in.

At present from a cosmical dilation

We’re so much out that the odds are against

Our ever getting inside in again.

But inside in is where we’ve got to get.
My friends all know I’m interpersonal
But long before I’m interpersonal
Away ‘way down inside I’m personal.
Just so before we’re international
We’re national and act as nationals.  (Build Soil,139-148)

Introspection is what one needs to do. Everybody knew that Frost was interpersonal, but Frost knew how personal he was. He appeals that before being international, one should be national, have an obsession for one’s own nation. As T.A. Sinclair asserts in his translations that Aristotle had written, “The state belongs to a class of objects which exist in nature, and . . . man is by nature a political.” Frost had a different notion; he believed that man cannot be segregated from the society for he is a social animal. It will be the biggest catastrophe of his life, if he is isolated from the society. Man lives in society not because of his personal choice; it is not a revocable, contract-based relationship, but it is his necessity, a biological and moral necessity. (Stanlis, Peter J. 219) One cannot live as a recluse, for one is born in society, lives in it, and will breathe his last also in it. It is therefore natural, if one is so dependent on society and is an indispensable part of it that one should be bound by certain restrictions and duties to be performed. One should at the same time be free and independent within the framework of the laws and customs laid down by the society if one wishes peace, harmony and homogeneity in the environment. Frost gives due recognition and appreciates the continuous conflict between the society and the individual in matters of legal and moral authority. In his words, “I like all this uncertainty we live in, between being members and being individuals. That’s the daily problem: how much am I a member; how much am I an individual; how comfortable am I in my membership?” (Stanlis, Peter J. 220) In spite of the
continuous conflict between the individual and society, Frost felt they were interdependent keeping in mind their self-interest that keeps both, the individual and society together. It is this interdependency that binds both of them together though there are a lot of adjustments to be made.

This antithetical activity of separateness and unity of each individual in society is the central theme in Frost’s early poem “The Tuft of Flowers” that speaks about a feeling of brotherhood, and this remained a firm personal conviction of Frost throughout his life. In this dramatic monologue, the speaker who has come to mow the field begins stating his views. Just like the mower who had come earlier to him, done his job and “gone his way”, he too must work alone and be gone.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown
And I must be, as he had been – alone,

‘As all must be,’ I said within my heart,
‘Whether they work together or apart.’ (7-10)

Just then, he sees a butterfly which leads his eyes to a tuft of flowers that the mower had left standing. That streak of joy that must have driven the mower to admire and spare the flowers is transferred through the sight of the flowers to the speaker. This awakens in the speaker a sense of kinship with the mower. It banishes his loneliness. Now he feels he is in work with the mower, side by side. (Gerber, Philip L. 124)

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.
‘Men work together,’ I told him from the heart,

‘Whether they work together or apart.’  (37-40)

Many of his poems affirm the same theme in a variety of ways. Frost has repeatedly suggested that man by nature is a social being – through letters, interviews and conversations. He had a firm belief that the individual and society could resolve their differences and achieve harmony as they complemented each other. The relationship between the individual and civil society was more important and natural to Frost than the relationship between human nature and the external physical “nature”. “Nothing not built with hands of course is sacred.” (394) a line from New Hampshire clearly portrays his belief in mankind, giving priority to man before “nature”. This clearly shows that Frost was not just a nature poet. Nature serves as a backdrop for a human drama, instead of being the exclusive subject. Like Wordsworth, he never considered human society as “artificial” and mountains, rivers, brooks and the like to be something “natural”. He once even confessed in a television interview in the fall of 1952, “I guess I am not a nature poet. I have only written two poems without a human being in them.” To him human society with its structural social relationships and institutions is absolutely “natural” to man. Just like it’s natural for animals to live in a state of physical “nature”, it is perfectly natural for humans to live in a society. (Pack, Robert. 220)

I recollect a fable told as bed time story by my grand-mother. A crab crawled out of the sea onto the sea shore leaving its footprints behind. Just then, a huge wave drew in clearing the footprints of the crab. The crab looked aghast and said, “Dear wave, I always thought you to be my friend, I never expected this out of you. The wave said, “Dear friend, I spotted some fishermen coming this side in their boats. I was a little apprehensive on your account, so I played safe. This is what relationships
are. A little child then I hardly understood it genuinely. It is only after I grew up and read Frost’s poetry that I truly realised what importance relationships have in our lives. Frost’s poems are full of individuals drawn together by a bond of love and need. The fear of loneliness is deeply rooted in the human heart. For instance, in “The Fear of Man” one actually visualises a girl setting forth for home at midnight with a heightened pulse. Similarly, Old Silas in “The Death of the Hired Man” crawls back like a wounded dog to his den in the last moments of his life seeking a sense of security around loved ones.

Social Relationships – in quality and quantity affect the physical health, the mental health, and social behaviour of a person. It also affects the mortality risks. In an article “Social Relationships and Health” Debra Umberson states, that, as a torture to prisoners of war, the Captors isolated them from the society. This had a drastic effect on them. This kind of social isolation of otherwise healthy individuals very soon results in psychological and physical disintegration and sometimes even proves fatal. In contrast to these, adults who are more socially connected are healthier and live longer. Their key research findings are: Social Relationships have a significant effect on health; they affect health through behavioural, psychological and physiological pathways. Social relationships have costs and benefits for health.

Frost also advocates this perception. He has drawn several portraits to this effect. One is “Brown’s Descent”. There are some who need their own privacy, their own space. This Mr. Brown was a recluse who wished to alienate himself from society; therefore, he lived on the hill all by himself and could be seen by people below doing his household chores. But then it seemed he was tired and frustrated living alone. One day he tried to come down. On his way down he tumbled and his clothes got entangled. This made him fall on the very crust that soon covered him.
During this somersault the lamp that he held went round and round forming loops seeing which people thought he was celebrating something strange. This made him give up on his idea of joining company. Surprisingly, even after falling he was very optimistic about his going back. Looking at his abode up the slippery slope, he did not give up hope. He did not wait for the January thaw, but bowed with grace to natural law and started up once again, fully focused and patient... took the long way home / By road, a matter of several miles. (75-76) (Westbrook, Perry D. 249)

In “The Lockless Door”, Frost suggests that the narrator is losing an opportunity to save himself from isolation. This was possibly the first knock on the door for “many years” (1) and possibly the first chance that the narrator had to meet another person. Rather than communicating with that person in his “cage”, he chooses to abandon it. Important thing is he still invites the person to “come in”, he is willing to offer hospitality, but not on a personal level because even if the person enters the house the narrator will not be there to welcome him. Thus, in this effort to escape the visitor he intentionally welcomes his own enforced isolation.

In North of Boston and later volumes, Frost presents a gallery of portraits from a place and time that one writer has described as “the terminal moraine of New England Puritanism.” On these pages we see glimpses of the past – that has gone by, but has definitely had its effect on the future. The poet in his travels about New England had been a live witness to the “cellar holes of abandoned farmhouses, the stone wall that stretched for miles holding the township intact, had dwindled into a forest, the tottering and fallen stones of the family graveyard.” Some of his most moving lyrics, “The Census-Taker”, “Ghost House”, “The Black Cottage”, “Directive” – clearly portray his awareness of the desolation and decay that had spread the New England countryside. He was even more keenly aware of the close-lipped, who
remained as non-existent. He became very concerned about their successes and failures in trying to cope up with a harsh and deteriorating physical and social environment. (Westbrook, Perry D. 244)

A generation earlier, writers of poetry and fiction had started portraying life and people along the remoter stretches of the coast, and the colours in which they painted had tended to grow more and grave as the end of the century approached. Whittier and Harriet Beecher Stowe, writing about mid-century, had presented rosy versions of village and farm life. New England as painted by them consisted of contented and harmonious communities where old virtues, harmless happy folkways, the old-fashioned speech, the pursuit of wholesome livelihood, the observation of the old religion existed. But, soon the entire scenario changed. In the last two decades when dissolution was becoming a catastrophe, two writers, Rosy Terry Cooke of Connecticut and Mary E. Wilkins of Massachusetts and Vermont had a very different report. (Westbrook, Perry D. 245-246) According to them, in the remaining villages and farms what was left was nothing but meanness, vindictiveness, narrowness, psychosis and poverty. Mary Wilkins of the two was more authentic as being a New England villager and was very much like Frost in her efforts to analyse and understand what was wrong. In certain stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman, “the will becomes a positive force in meeting adversity as in her “Louisa” and “A Taste of Honey.” Sarah Orne Jewett, Mrs. Freeman’s contemporary wrote more frequently in an optimistic vein, repeatedly giving importance to the post-Puritan character that talks of survival and growth, “The Country of the Pointed Firs”, clearly exhibits her faith in the everlasting health of New England village life.

In the 1890s Edwin Arlington Robinson read Mrs Freeman’s Pembroke and was so inspired that reflections of this are seen in his Tilbury Town, where he has
drawn a gallery of portraits of eccentrics, misfits or failures. Obsession is a common feature in many of his characters – alcoholism in “Mrs. Flood’s Party”, miserliness in “Aaron Stark”, lechery in “John Evereldown”, self-destruction in “Richard Cory”. Whatever be their shortcomings, a few of them have learnt to cope up with their life in the social and economic plight of Tilbury Town. There were several authors besides Frost who wrote about New England country and village life. One of them was Alice Brown (1857-1948), a native of Hampton Falls, New Hampshire, only a few miles from Derry, and Dorothy Canfield Fisher from Vermont who’d been a neighbour of Frost for years. E. A. Robinson was another one whose work Frost admired. (Westbrook, 246) There were several others who wrote in regularly in periodicals and in books as essays which were well monitored by Frost as he was a voracious reader. According to some of them the natives and the inhabitants were defeated by their environment and hereditary traits. Among these is one such victim that Frost has highlighted, the housewife in “A Servant to Servants”, an epitome of self-sacrifice, self-worth, a character of a farm woman with a history of mental illness. She had been in the asylum once, who Frost had met at Willoughby Lake in Vermont in 1909. (Westbrook, 247) This particular situation is very true of that time, when cases of insanity among women were highest in northern New England. The woman in Frost’s poem has been and expects to return to the asylum. Mental illness runs in her family as she reveals the insanity of her uncle who’d been kept in a cage in the attic of his house. She also mocks the so-called love of the near and dear ones who feel the asylum is not the right place and proper care can be taken at home. Not only this, it is love that is needed the most, the love of folks at home. Probably under this pretext the poor insane uncle had been confined within the four walls and tortured. It was because of lack of love that her father’s brother had turned insane. This was not enough, a thunderbolt
fell on him because at that very moment instead of being a solace to him, her father got married, “. . . , to help take care of such a creature.” (127) The uncle, her father’s own blood being called here as “creature” is used in a very demeaning sense as though he was worthless. With acid sarcasm Frost writes:

In father’s building him a sort of cage,
Or room within a room, of hickory poles,
Like stanchions in the barn, from floor to ceiling,
A narrow passage all the way around.
Anything they put in for furniture
He’d tear to pieces, even a bed to lie on.
So they made the place comfortable with straw’
Like a beast’s stall, to ease their consciences.
Of course they had to feed him without dishes

(113-121)

Such rough and vicious treatment was given to the poor uncle that if her father had a conscience, he would be ashamed of himself. Frost very cleverly unmasks the brutality of kin who pose to be true, especially when, “They found a way to put a stop to it.” (139) Being a male-dominated society where women are considered as bonded labour, the house for her is equivalent to a jail, for the lady says, “‘It’s time I took my turn upstairs in jail’ –” (146), where one is almost like a prisoner living under deplorable conditions, succumbing every moment to fate. Through the woman, Frost has tried to bring out the complacent and defeated attitude of the woman. She is content with the way things are,

Unless Len took the notion, which he won’t,
And I won’t ask him – it’s not sure enough.

I s’pose I’ve got to go the road I’m going:

Other folks have to, and why shouldn’t I? (157-160)

She does not wish to be pointed at as a trouble maker, does not defy, or take the lead. Instead, she herself prefers the asylum as perhaps the superficiality of relationships wasn’t there. But being “afflicted by a rigid Calvinist conscience” that she has inherited from her Puritan forefathers, she exhibits a sense of duty. (Westbrook, 247) Her husband, whom she dotes on, fails to be a comforting soul. She is exhausted and desperate of her monotonous life, the complacent and callous attitude of her spouse. She is bound by the social and cultural restraints, and to the reader this has served as a blessing in disguise to reveal her plight. Such bleak and grim depictions of morose, gloomy and sick women of candour are common in the fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman. Examples of this are “A New England Nun” or “Sister Liddy”, and their male counterparts may be found in the early poems of E.A. Robinson. (Westbrook, 247)

Two of Frost’s poems deal with the lot of women on New England farms. “Home Burial” records not only the death of a child, but, the emotional collapse of a marriage. In “The Hill Wife”, a series of short lyrics traces the psychological deterioration and the eventual escape of a childless woman living on an isolated farm. These women have succumbed to “neurosis” or “inner stresses”. Three other women in Frost’s early poetry suffer from the prevailing morality, pointed out time and again by journalists and sociologists about New England. The narrative poem “The Witch of Coos” is a story of adultery and murder. The motif of witchcraft in the poem, although presented as a superstition, is not at all out of place in the primitive New England setting. (Westbrook, 248)
“The Pauper Witch of Grafton”, highlights a woman utterly without morals and "glorifying in her own vindictiveness." “The Fear” dramatizes the guilt of a woman who has left her husband and is living with another man. Maybe, Frost also wanted to emphasise that fear comes from the subconscious mind. The fear felt by the woman is caused by her belief in something that has some power over her. It also reveals the vanity of a woman who thinks that her former lover is obsessed with her and also her utter disappointment on realizing how wrong she was. The extinguishing of the lantern is symbolic of the extinguishing of the burning desire in her to have her former lover spying on her. “The swinging lantern lengthened to the ground, / It touched, it struck, it clattered and went out.” (103-104)

It is such poems in the *North of Boston* that made Amy Lowell consider it a “very sad book”. The most hideous and shameful thing for a woman is the decay and collapse of her character. “The Day That Was That Day” of Amy Lowell depicts a woman as desperate as the wife in “A Servant to Servants”.

With Frost it is not the same. Many of his rural women characters do not lead such depressing lives and situations. Instead, they possess qualities that make survival possible and fulfil all the conditions of the Puritan heritage like the servile and guilty conscience that dooms the wife in “A Servant to Servants”. In contrast to her is the widow in “The Black Cottage,” inspired by an actual woman living near Frost’s farm. (Westbrook, 249) The minister in the poem tells us that the widow, who has been living in solitude for many years, is filled with old beliefs which are not only religious but also political. At a deeper level this poem deals with the human fear of change. The cottage has been referred to as “Black” because it had never been painted. It also symbolizes the darkness prevailing in the woman’s life: the gloom, the desolation, the
melancholic ambience of the place. It stood for the un tarnished and untainted truths from which the widow and the contemporary community drew spiritual strength. The narrator talks about how times have changed, people have become more detached. “These doorsteps seldom have a visitor” (48) since she had lost her husband in the war, her opinion was –

Whatever else the Civil War was for,
It wasn’t first to keep the states together,
Not just to free the slaves, though it did both
She wouldn’t have believed those ends enough
To have given outright for them all she gave (55-59)

She is not only a supporter of Civil War, for it would bring America together, but was also for equality for every race. Earlier she wouldn’t have believed, but now she is convinced that she’d given (probably lost) everything of hers. Her sacrifice touched the principle that all men are created free and equal. She never quite understood the mystery of Thomas Jefferson. What did he mean? For her this simply was untrue. Due to her lack of exposure her knowledge was restricted. “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.” (75-77)

This is just the opposite of Jefferson’s views. According to her how can there be so much of variation from man to man, whereas, Jefferson’s principle talked of liberty and equality. (Allen, Margaret V. 221) “By the same hand working in the same stuff?” (78) This is a reference to God, the creator of mankind. For her it was the war and not God that decided the fate of man. It was in fact “the survival of the fittest” that prevailed in the society. The phrase “her half asleep” (92) because of the
fear and anxiety, for this startled and kept her awake unless of course, “As a child
misses the unsaid Good night, / And falls asleep with heartache –” (102-103) The
innocence of a child is well reflected here.

The “Ghost House” reflects a sombre state of mind. It talks of a lonely,
abandoned house. It talks of “the disused and forgotten road” (13) “black bats tumble
and dart” (15) give an image of a place totally deserted. “It is under the small dim
summer star, / I know not who these mute folks are” (21-22) referring to his folks
who are no longer with him. He even calls them “tireless folks,” (26) who’ve been
lying there tirelessly. The stones do not have their names that “the mosses mar.” (25)
The names have probably become obscure because of the moss that has accumulated
over the years. He also talks about the young lass and lad who are lying there quietly
like sweet companions that never sing as though a sorcerer had swayed his magic
spell and stilled them forever.

The one and only character who belies the theory of New England decadence
to its hilt is the preacher Meserve in “Snow”, a poem suggested to Frost by an
anecdote he heard in Franconia, New Hampshire. Meserve triumphs in an ordeal of
which there was just no need. In the middle of the night, in spite of the fact that there
was a terrible blizzard outside, he chose to battle his way home. A person, who was
all out to give a helping hand. Perhaps this was why Mrs. Cole called him brother.
Why only Mrs. Cole, everyone called him that. Frost has put it beautifully, “. . . ‘It’s
right enough. / That’s all you ever heard him called round here. / He seems to have
lost off his Christian name” (51-53). The word fear does not exist in his dictionary.
He is daring, he is good, and he is tough. One who does not even think of himself.
Meserve has tremendous faith in himself. Being an inhabitant of the place he has faith
in the snow and above all he has faith in God. In spite of the blizzard he comes to
inquire of the Coles and goes back in the same blizzard. He could have even stopped there for the night and gone the next day. The Coles were very apprehensive on his account. The entire night they were restless regarding his safety, at the same time angry as he’d not adhered to their request. “I don’t like what he’s doing, which is what / You like, and like him for.” (111-112) The woman as usual has a soft corner. She is uncomfortable regarding his undertaking this ordeal. (Gerber, Philip L. 129.)

But the wind didn’t move it if it moved

It moved itself. The wind’s at naught in here.

It couldn’t stir so sensitively poised

A thing as that. . . .’

(154-157)

This indicates “the will power”, the miraculous effect of a strong will and firm determination. Frost has pointed out the other view too. He has not been didactic, but he brings out openly before the readers and makes them analyse the situation and decide for themselves. “The whole-to-do seems to have been for nothing. / What spoilt our night was to him just his fun. / What did he come in for? – To talk and visit?” (379-381) He had called just to tell them it was snowing. What was fun and adventure for Meserve had become a cause of pain for the Coles who would otherwise have had a nice, warm, comfortable and cosy sleep. Whatever one does should be logical and not at the cost of others. Suppose Meserve were to be dead, the poor old couple would have lived in regret throughout their lives. After undergoing so much of stress the old couple was so humble, so modest that they decided to forgive him saying that they’ve had a share in one night of his life. (Westbrook, 249)

What impressed Frost most about these rural acquaintances was their devotion and attitude towards work. Frost was an ardent believer in the Puritan principle that
God has granted some inert potential in every individual; one should look for it, pursue it to the best of his ability. He soon realized that farming was not his cup of tea. His inert potential was for writing poetry and this he’d realised way back during his adolescent years. His problem was he had to support his family while exercising his God gifted talent. Frost believed that pursuing this talent was a means of achieving self respect and the approval of God and society. Silas, the farm labour in Frost’s “The Death of the Hired Man” draws his sense of self-worth from his humble but useful skill which was the knack of loading a hay wagon. With this ability he wins the respect and affection of Warren and Mary with whom he’d worked in the past. Thus they accept and keep him towards his end, realising he has a sort of claim on them. The college boy who worked in the fields with Silas studied Latin just for fun. Such absence of serious purpose offended Silas, whose mastery of hay loading was the only justification of his (Silas) life.

“The Code” deals with the employer and employee relationship. A man isolated from society cannot be an achiever; isolation is the biggest catastrophe that he experiences. This leads him to egocentrism or even lonely madness. There should be an ideal balance between an individual and the group. There are times when anything or anyone could become a brick. Many reasons can be cited for the rise of this “alienation.” Here, in this poem the slightest breach of respect stands as a reason.

“. . . but my just trying
To bury him had hurt his dignity.
He had gone to the house so’s not to meet me.
He kept away from us all afternoon.  (105-108)
This poem talks of the feeling of New England countrymen regarding their work. If one attained an excellence in any work, he need not be given any suggestions or advice even by the employer as to how he should do it. An accomplished farmhand demands and deserves not only total confidence in his abilities but also the respect that he should get because of his excellence. It is because of this that the hired men of New England farms have always eaten at their employer’s table and have otherwise been treated as equals. (Westbrook, 250) The same reason for the rise of alienation is seen in “The Housekeeper”. Lack of concern and the need of fellow humans for sharing the same empathy also lead to alienation, as is the case of Estelle’s elopement. It talks of a man and woman relationship. Estelle and John had a live-in relationship for fifteen years and both were happy and content with each other. John did not wish to make a commitment, whereas, Estelle wanted to give a legal name to their relationship. On his refusal she walked out of the relationship, thus preserving her self-esteem.

Frost’s “An Old Man’s Winter Night” is a presentation of existential isolation. Many prose writers wrote on this same theme, some of them being people living alone, dependent on their inner assets. The whole purpose of Thoreau’s “Walden”, was to explore the spiritual resources that can be tapped from within. These resources under proper discipline and conditions are limitless. Others weren’t such optimistic examples: Mary Wilkins Freeman, whose pages abound in recluses realised that instead of releasing their inner strength, solitude frequently retarded the growth and development of their spirit as in “A New England Nun”. “A Solitary” is one of the few stories of her that deal with a male recluse and is very much like Frost’s “An Old Man’s Winter Night”. In this tale, Nicolas Gunn has convinced himself that, most misery stems from human relationships, especially with those one loves. He secludes himself in a cabin outside the village and lives on a meagre diet, forgoing every
comfort, even that of fire when he is not cooking. He has killed his desire, thus, making himself more and more wretched, until one bitterly cold moonlit January night – (very much like the scene in “The Old Man’s Winter Night”, except, there is no heat in the stove) when a sick destitute neighbour knocks at his door and asks to be taken in. Grudgingly, Nicholas admits him and builds a fire, under the influence of which both, the house and Nicholas’s heart begins to grow warm. The neighbour thus found a permanent home and Nicholas too abandoned his hermit ways and found a new meaning of existence (Westbrook, 251-252). In Mary Wilkins Freeman’s view, prolonged solitude destroys the soul. This commonly happens to her spinsters who live alone, with perhaps a cat or a chained dog.

Sarah Orne Jewett is not a pessimist as regards the solitary life that she portrays. Poor Joanna in The Country of the Pointed Firs has, like Nicholas Gunn, suffered in a relationship with the person she loved, but unlike Nicholas she feels that she has committed the most heinous and unpardonable crime in rebelling against God in her misfortune. As a result she isolates herself during both winter and summer as the only inhabitant of a bleak, offshore island. The people and the local parson fail in their effort to convince her to return to the village. She, in spite of the feeling of guilt, achieves a life of dignity and wins the respect if not approval of the town people. Though now she has done away with all her desires, she develops a “sustaining” strength of spirit. One more of Jewett’s character, a recluse and in complete harmony is Aunt Cynthy Dallett, whose lonely cottage is far up a mountainside. Only in extreme old age does she agree to live with a companion; a personification of wholesome and happy self-dependence. She is very much like Frost’s widow in “The Black Cottage” as an inspiration to people who look up to her from the valley below. She is an epitome of total reliance on self and God. (Westbrook, 252)
An even more idealized case is found in Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s “Old Man Warner”, the story of an elderly Vermonter who, defying the pleas of friends and town officials lives out for decades in advanced old age on a remote farm and finally dies alone in mid winter. He is a more unconvincing character than Jewett’s Aunt Cynthy Dallett because Dorothy Canfield Fisher has failed to take into account the feebleness and other miseries of old age (Westbrook, 253). Frost’s “An Old Man’s Winter Night” adopts the mid-way. He avoids Mrs. Fisher’s and Miss Jewett’s sentimentalising of the solitary life as well as Mrs. Freeman’s rejection of it as destructive to mind and soul. In Frost’s poems moralizing is as absent as it is in Emily Dickinson’s “This Consciousness that is aware . . .” (Westbrook, 254) For Frost the Old Man survives the night, that is all and that is enough. He is not an inspiration to the neighbourhood like Old Man Warner or Aunt Cynthy Dallett. He is “a light . . . to no one but himself.” (15) He feels helpless, becomes feeble enough, weak shouldered and has lost control over things. In short, he represents no mastery over elements. “One aged man – one man – can’t keep a house, / A farm, a countryside . . .” (26-27) Here, it is the vice versa. They in turn keep him as he sleeps in the cold winter night. He is content to let nature control the scene:

He consigned to the moon, such as she was,

So late-arising, to the broken moon,

As better than the sun in any case

For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,

His icicles along the wall to keep;

And slept. . . . (18-23)
This has been a very ironical lyric put forth by Frost that brings about the insignificance of man in front of the magnanimity of nature. “Acceptance and resignation enabled the old man to sleep through the cold winter night, while the logs shift and the embers burn low in the stove, like the fires of his life.” Frost has been able to capture the very essence of the spirit that lingered on in the desolate and half deserted New England countryside. The old man is not tragic, not heroic, and not pathetic. He possesses the same dignity as does the humble labour in “The Death of the Hired Man”. The dignity of the spirit as well as the body surviving in such hostile conditions only points out that the soul is immortal and we need to have faith in God and ourselves only then can we face the challenges of life. This depiction of the New England men and women is a very positive theme picked up by Frost in many of his poems.

“The Self Seeker” portrays Willis, an aesthetically attuned man disabled with the mill wheel crippling him in an industrial accident. It familiarises us with the plight of a man how he struggles to retain his identity as an amateur botanist.

“In the Home Stretch” the very first stanza gives a picture of a house inhabited by many men. The woman seems so busy in the kitchen that she has no time to stop her work and listen to them, “And now and then a smudged, infernal face / looked in a door behind her and addressed / Her back. She always answered without turning.” (10-12) She feels good being respected, being called a lady, “More than so many times make me a lady.” (23) Otherwise she is always held with contempt, “More than some women like the dishpan, Joe.” (32) This was the demeaning status given to the women. “I only see the years. They come and go.” (50) Just like the woman in “A Servant to Servants” there is a feeling of indifference, life is monotonous with no change, no excitement. “A wire she is of silver,”(77) here the moon is personified as
“she”, the light won’t last long because it’s the new moon though of course it’ll become stronger, this is also an indication that is made later – there is a feeling of loss, a feeling of depression when people at home leave. One feels low in spirits, but slowly and gradually one gets over it. The taking away of the stove by the people who entered is indicative of the light that is extinguished from the house bringing in total darkness.

Many of Frost’s earlier poems feature speakers who actively choose solitude and isolation in order to learn about themselves, but ultimately they discover a firm connection to the world around them. Glimpses of this are well illustrated in “Mending Wall”. The speaker does not care for walls, when he asks his neighbour, why he needs a wall that serves no purpose, his neighbour replies, “Good fences make good neighbours”. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” (1). When one talks of a human being who “wants” the wall down, it means he has a heart that cares about brotherhood, community and human interaction. If a man cannot maintain this, he’ll be a recluse all his life.

The speaker may scorn his neighbour’s obstinate wall building, he may observe the whole activity with a kind of detachment, but he himself goes to the wall at all times of the year to mend the damage done by hunters. In fact he is the one who takes the initiative to contact the neighbour at wall mending time to set the annual appointment. A point to note the speaker says he sees no need for a wall here, “here” implies there could be a need for a wall elsewhere, e.g. “Where there are cows” etcetera. There is something in him that does love a wall, or at least the act of making a wall. The wall building act seems ancient, and the neighbour appears a Stone Age savage while he ‘hoists’ and ‘transports’ a boulder. Here, somewhere it brings to the mind that the building of wall marks the foundation of society. Barriers confine, but
they also encourage freedom and productivity by offering challenging frameworks within which to work. “And set the wall between us once again / We keep the wall between us as we go.” (14-15) This does not have just the literal meaning, here it is metaphorically used. The speaker talks of the social boundaries between the two. This could be the wall of traditions and customs. Rules and laws could also be the wall. Justice here could be the process of wall mending.

This annual ritual of maintenance highlights the dual and complementary nature of human society. The right of each individual is affirmed through the affirmation of the rights of others. This act also demonstrates another benefit to the community, for this communal act, this civic “game” (21) offers a good excuse to the speaker to interact with his neighbour. I could say “Elves” (36) to him. Frost is here trying to argue that the wall is unnatural, that is why Nature breaks this man-made boundary. He even mocks his neighbour by making a suggestion, maybe it’s “Elves” breaking the wall. Besides, there are different types of people, who wouldn’t mix, so, there is no need for the wall, and the trees are different. Therefore it is evident whose land it is. “He is all pine and I am apple orchard.” (24) The speaker is merely pointing out that by building a boundary we are socially restricting ourselves, limiting both the risk of social failure and any likelihood of friendship. The neighbour repeatedly insists, “Good fences make good neighbours” which means that with limited social interaction; the two will not be able to annoy one another, keep middle-of-the-road relationship, as a safe option. Also, the process of repairing the wall is in itself a bonding exercise for neighbours. (Parini, 138)

One could also say that walls are a part of nature; they require spring rejuvenation just like plants and other wildlife. The poem begins in a straightforward manner but ends in complete ambiguity, when the speaker is trying to resolve his own
dilemma, “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out.” (32-33) Was he rational in his approach? or, out of sheer ignorance, he was creating a barrier for himself, thus alienating himself from some such human relationship. Bearing a social front, the farmer in “A Time to Talk” responds to the invitation of his neighbour for a friendly talk, without any inhibitions, in spite of being busy with his hoe. Spending more time with a friend is valued more highly than finishing one’s work for the speaker feels the work will remain where it is whereas the opportunity to talk will go away.

Frost once claimed that in writing the poems of *North of Boston* he’d “dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above.” We get to see this in “The Death of the Hired Man”, a pastoral poem of a New England couple, Mary and Warren, who converse about their farmhand Silas, who here is being accused of negligence by walking off the farm when he was required to work – during the haying time. According to a linguist and a German philosopher, Martin Joos, as man and wife Mary and Warren were expected to communicate at an intimate level, but this would then exclude public information. Frost, therefore, had to turn to the casual and consultative level of language. As Joos said, Frost wanted to involve participation; otherwise it would become a collection of monologues, so all he did was to add dialogues. With the rural environment as its backdrop it exhibits the everyday struggle of the farm couple over their relationship to the farmhand. Frost here outlines the traditions of duty and hard work. Silas returns to the farm so that he could fulfil his broken contract to Warren and die honourably, having fulfilled his duty to the family and community. Silas’s return to the farm also signals the importance of the work that he performed on the farm as a way to give his life meaning and satisfaction. Silas does not have any children or close family to provide
a sense of fulfilment in his last hours. It is only a sense of duty and the satisfaction of hard work that can provide him with comfort. Ironically, even after Silas’s attempt to die in the companionship of Mary and Warren, the people who he views as family more than anyone else, he ultimately dies alone without fulfilling his contract to ditch the meadows and clear the upper pasture. All his attempts seem futile, even the way in which his death is introduced expresses its bleak isolation. Warren merely declares, “Dead”. A very important thing highlighted here is the definition of “home,” which is debatable, and Mary and Warren take a different stand. This begins when Mary announces, “Warren, he has come home to die.” (114) Warren, whose very name is suggestive of “war” does not like the thought of taking care of a hired man who had not been loyal. He mockingly says, “Home!” He further says, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.” (122-123) to which Mary replies, “I should have called it / Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”(124-125) Home has more than one meaning, and it means more than house. Silas is not just coming to the farmhouse with “harp-like morning-glory strings, / Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves . . .” (110-111) He is coming home, coming to the only place he can claim as a temporal home, on his way to his eternal home. Warren’s definition of home, “have to go” and “have to take” – the person going does not want to go, and the person welcoming doesn’t want to welcome. To Mary home is a place you don’t have to deserve. You have a right over it. It is like homecoming. In this statement it seems there is a slight hint towards the eternal home. There is one thing that Warren realised: his thoughts immediately flew to Silas’ banker brother who lived thirteen miles down the road. His own blood he was, but still, in the hour of death when one wishes to be near one’s near and dear ones, Silas chose to come to them. Warren’s heart melts at this thought; he picks up a stick and breaks it, thus
signifying the breaking of his hardheartedness. He chooses to be kind, only to realize that Silas is no more. This poem is a debate between justice and mercy and Frost being on the side of mercy continued to “explore the contraries of justice and mercy” after North of Boston. To name a few, he does this also in “Directive,” A Masque of Reason, and A Masque of Mercy similar to Warren. (Vogel, Nancy 201)

In “The Death of the Hired Man,” the poem wherein “mercy tempers justice,” just as in A Masque of Mercy the keeper ends the play by concluding that “Nothing can make injustice just but mercy.” “The Death of the Hired Man” “is a drama of man’s justice and woman’s mercy and the pull between both values when set against the simplest and deepest of claims – the dignity of man. The essence of the poem lies in the pull and in its resolution as mercy tempers justice.”

Warren is taken aback by Mary’s bluntness when she says, “He don’t know why he isn’t quite as good / As anybody. Worthless though he is, / He won’t be made ashamed to please his brother.” (159-161) He tries to soften her judgment of Silas with an observation that “I can’t think Si ever hurt anyone” (162). In calling him “Si,” Warren inadvertently reveals his affection for Silas, which previously he had repressed. Perhaps, such an admission was too painful to him. It may be true that Warren means to say that Silas never intended to hurt anyone, but Mary’s point, “No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay / And rolled his old head on that sharp edged chair back” (163-164) makes it clear that hurt does not necessarily come from deliberate or malevolent intent; it rather comes from one witnessing the spectacle of human suffering or defeat in another. In this sense we are all bound together by hurt that is in the world as the very condition of life.

For Mary the issue is not whether Silas deserves the fate of his loneliness and destitution, but the simple fact of “how much he is broken” (168). Pity and sympathy
determine how she treats Silas. She tells Warren: “I made the bed up for him there tonight.” (167) The making up of the bed is Mary’s way of making Silas at home and of accepting his death. And then, as if she needs something to distract her from the hurt that Silas’s very existence has caused her, Mary looks upwards and turns her attention to the moon. If the cloud hits the moon, that event will signify to Mary that Silas will die. The narrator then tells us that “it hit the moon,” (178) hinting that we know that Silas has died even before Warren returns to inform Mary of the fact. This confirms Mary’s intuition about human fate – that it is determined by forces beyond human understanding and human control.

The narrator describes Warren’s return with the news of Silas’s death: He “slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited” (182). And finally he takes Mary’s hand, uniting himself with the moonlight as well as with some kind of universal “tenderness” that her hand can be seen to represent. The poem concludes with Warren’s statement of Silas’s death, “Dead, was all he answered.” (184) In effect their mourning of Silas has already taken place since their grief has focused on Silas’s life- a focus that makes the question of judgment after death and Silas’s ultimate worthiness seem less compelling. If there is a moral implicit in this poem, it is that enough grief pervades life to exhaust our capacity for mourning without prolonging mourning through the repressions Freud so well understood. It is an undeniable fact that life and mourning are inseparable and thus, this demands acknowledgment and acceptance, though the sharing of grief, as this poem shows may make grief more bearable and even strengthen the bond between those who are able to share their sorrow. (Pack, Robert 92)
“Home Burial” dramatises a debate on the two different ways of grieving on the death of a child. The wife’s grief “infuses every part of her,” she does not want her grief to wane with time. She remarks that most people make only a pretence of following their loved one to the grave, when in truth their minds are “making the best of their way back to life / and living people, and things they understand.” (106-107) She, however, will not accept this kind of grief; she will not turn from the grave, back to the world of living, for to do so is to accept death. Instead, she declares that the world is evil. She has been compared to a female character in Frost’s *A Masque of Mercy*, of whom another character says, “She’s had some loss she can’t accept from God.” The husband, on the other hand, has accepted death. Time has passed and now he is more likely to say, ‘That’s the way of the world.’ He did grieve but in a different manner. He threw himself into the horrible task of digging his child’s grave – into physical work. The father did not leave the task of burial to somebody else; instead he physically dug into the earth and planted his child’s body into the soil. This action further associates the father with a ‘way-of-the-world’ mentality, with the cycle that makes the farmer’s life. This poem was written about the same time that Elliot, Frost’s son died. Frost knew the heart-rending experience of losing children. Frost and his wife, Elinor’s response was somewhat to the same effect. Frost covered his pain with talking, she with silence.

The insensitivity and callous attitude of the people is well captured in ‘Out, Out—’

‘... They listened at his heart.

Little – less – nothing! – and that ended it.

No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs. (31-34)

There was no feeling of empathy. They watched the whole spectacle as silent spectators. Perhaps, as Frost says in “Stars”, that is how life is, “Those stars like some snow-white / Minerva’s snow-white marble eyes / Without the gift of sight.” (10-12) They were dumb spectators, witnessing the death of one who is helpless. Similarly, “Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart –” (24) here is a very subtle protest made against child labour. By this living example Frost has brought forth to his readers a real life situation and made them realise for themselves what is right and what is wrong.

“Lodged,” talks of the malevolence of nature as symbolic of human nature that derives pleasure in the suffering of humans. It talks of the conspiracy of the rain and the wind to torment and create havoc on land. Each and every word is heavy with meaning; there is so much beauty in the lines, so much that the poet has said in just a few lines that explanation of the lines will rob the beauty. In the words of Frost, “All I’ve wanted to do is to write a few little poems, it’ll be hard to get rid of.”

The rain to the wind said,

‘You push and I’ll pelt.’

They so smote the garden bed

That the flowers actually knelt,

And lay lodged – though not dead.

I know how the flowers felt. (1-6)

In the words of Frost himself, “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” This is applicable to the above lines. Mankind is very much the same like nature with flashes of terror and cruelty, ruthless apathy towards their weaker lot as seen in “The
Vanishing Red”: “And the Miller is said to have laughed – / If you like to call such a sound a laugh.” (2-3) There was a kind of shrewd satisfaction and satanic cruelty on the Miller’s face. The last stanza gives a trailer of the cruel elements present in human nature.

He took him down below a cramping rafter,
And showed him, through a manhole in the floor,
The water in desperate straits like frantic fish,
Salmon and sturgeon, lashing with their tails.
Then he shut down the trap door with a ring in it
That jangled even above the general noise,
And came upstairs alone – and gave that laugh (20-26)

What fault was done to deserve such a big punishment given for “he gave no one else laughter’s license” (4) and poor little John had committed the most offensive crime on making “Some guttural exclamation of surprise.” (14) “The Vindictives” talks of the greed of man. Man forgets the biggest truth of life; he is a “mortal”. He has to complete his temporary stay here and is answerable to the almighty for all his good as well as bad deeds. The lust for gold made the king in “The Vindictives” stack his rooms thinking it would keep him away from doom, but then they say, ‘might is right’. His captors accepted it, made the king their captive. They made him ask his subjects for more. Frost writes, “And his subjects wrung all they could wring / Out of temple and palace and store.” (12-13) and when they couldn’t get any more he was brutally killed. If gold was all that the conquerors wanted, they would not have killed him in such a manner. They in fact derived pleasure torturing him, “hate gave a terrible laugh, / Like a manhole opened to Hell.” (22-23) Very soon they forgot the king and made themselves busy trying to hide the gold deep down below the earth.
The poet sarcastically says, “Of many a treasure by name / That vanished into the black / And put out its light for the foe.” (34-36) They hid it, trying to keep it away from their enemies. In the midst of looting and plundering there is an indirect reference to Jean Val Jean and the Bishop’s Candlesticks when Frost says, “And took the gold Candlesticks home.” (40) Some Inca prince took them, told them if they wanted more they would have to dive in the lake. On not finding anything they were asked to dive till they drowned. Exhausted, with their tongues hanging out they became meek and aged, their lust made them secretive and finally they died without regrets. In the last stanza the poet makes an invocation and prophesises the worst to befall them.

The bearer in “The Bearer of Evil Tidings” realised it was dangerous to bear evil things, so being an adventurer and knowing that power corrupts, when he came to the fork end of the road, one heading for the throne and the other into the unknown wild, he took the one to the mountains, the road that gave him an exposure into the beauty of nature. There he met a girl who showed him the path to religion and related a mythological anecdote about a princess from China who was on her route to marry the Persian prince. Her army was troubled because she’d been found with a child, with none but God as his father. She could neither go ahead nor return, so they stayed there and declared it as a village. The very word ‘village’ indicates habitation. This child came of her established a royal line. People respected and adhered to him as he was divine. Hearing this, the bearer of evil things decided to stay there as there was one thing in common between them, “They had both of them had their reasons / For stopping where they had stopped” (39-40). (Deirdre Fagan 2007, Robert Frost. 39)

In “A Hundred Collars” fear serves a reason of alienation between men. It dramatises a familiar human conflict – the need for companionship struggles against
the fear of the unfamiliar. A nervous professor, stuck overnight in a one-hotel town, is
given an option to share the last half bed with an unfamiliar person. The poor
professor’s apprehension is stimulated on knowing the guest has refused to share by
virtue of fear “of being robbed or murdered.” (34) His apprehension is overcome by
his greater need for rest. Confronted by his new roommate Lafayette, his fear mounts,
for the man is huge. He wears a size eighteen collar to the professor’s own fourteen.
Lafayette, hulking collector for the Weekly News, is at first amused by the little man’s
fright, but later gets angry on knowing that “mistrust” is the root cause of the fear for,
Lafayette had ninety dollars in his wallet as compared to the professor’s only five.
Sarcastically, Lafayette advises his roommate, “You’d better tuck your money under
you / And sleep on it the way I always do / When I’m with people I don’t trust at
night.” (101-103) Later, he storms out with his bottle of liquor in hand leaving the
professor tossing and turning and tells him that when he returns and knocks at the
door the professor should ask for his identity. “There’s nothing I’m afraid of like
scared people. / I don’t want you should shoot me in the head.” (189-190) Man is
always in need of companionship, but here he is afraid. When suspicion taints his
fellowship, he’s left even more unsheltered and insecure. Such people are more to be
feared as sometimes in a state of panic they do things that are unpredictable. (Gerber,
Philip L. 126)

Aloneness is the final reality of life; therefore man must suffice on his own.
Like the drumlin woodchuck, he must ensure his own “crevices and burrow” (“A
Drumlin Woodchuck” 32) keeping in mind both: his security and escape. Of course, a
kind of inferior friendship could be bought like any other commodity. The fallen
movie star in “Provide Provide” does exactly this, and she deserves praise for
ensuring for herself at least half a loaf instead of none. Nowhere is Frost didactic: he
gives examples from real life situations as he sees them and leaves the reader to analyse for himself. Anything is better than being wholly isolated. “On the Heart’s Beginning to Cloud the Mind” is concerned with the suffering of those living in the desert, the atrocities of nature they undergo. (Parini, 273) Looking out of his lower berth at night, he spots a single light on the landscape:

A flickering, human pathetic light,
That was maintained against the night,
It seemed to me by the people there,
With a God-forsaken brute despair.
It would flutter and fall in half an hour
Like the last petal off a flower. (7-12)

This morose thought is countered by the poet realising that the “pathetic” flickering of the light is an illusion that is brought about by the rapid movement of the train through the landscape. The light, he assumes, burns in a home where husband and wife provide for each other. Here, light is indicative of the warmth and hope shared in a relationship. Though it is a sheer futile effort of doing things that are trivial, still it is the small things put together that count. In relationships especially, the trivial things one does for the other goes a long way and are remembered. Small gestures, understanding each other well, warmth and affection shared – that is why over the years the bonding becomes stronger and stronger. In “Gathering Leaves”, Frost says, “But a crop is a crop, / And who’s to say where / The harvest shall stop?” (22-24) Labour does not go waste. Hard work pays. The very leaves buried in soil act as manure for the plant, thus bringing a new life on earth just as in a relationship whatever one does, whatever effort put in to strengthen the ties does not go futile but
emerges with a new energy bringing about stability in that relationship. Every
endeavour put in to strengthen the bond lasts for an eternity.

Over the years things develop, the future is a natural development that takes
place. The seasons herald the message of the “new” sprouting out of the “old”.
“Blueberries” unveils the mystery of rebirth. It is a firm belief of the poet that man is
helpless in today’s ever changing world. He has to face the changes that take place
around him within the limited period of his existence. This natural cycle of life
preaches to him that he is not different and this is what shatters all his hopes and
dreams. He realises the truth that in spite of his amiable socialisation he is still single
and alone with his destiny. For him life has both – all the possibilities of terror as well
as beauty. A man should understand himself and his place in this world and this is
possible only through introspection.

The poet is tempted to stay longer in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy
Evening” but, acknowledging the pull of obligations and the considerable distance yet
to be travelled. Before he can rest, he is forced to leave. Like the wood it describes,
the poem is lovely but entices us with dark depths – of interpretation. The last two
lines make a strong claim to be the most celebrated instances of repetition in English
poetry. The first “And miles to go before I sleep” (15) stays within the literalness set
forth by the rest of the poem. Then comes the second line, “And miles to go before I
sleep” (16) like a soft penetrating gong that can neither be ignored nor forgotten. For
the last, “miles to go” seems like life, the last “sleep” seems like death. The basic
conflict in the poem is between an attraction towards the woods and the pull of
responsibility outside of the woods. Woods are a symbol of wilderness, madness, and
the irrational, but here the woods belong to someone who lives in the village, so what
would any sensible person do on such a cold night. Village here symbolises society,
civilization, duty, sensibility, responsibility. The woods symbolise the seeds of the irrational and they are at night – dark, with all the varied connotations of darkness.

The force behind “Birches” is synonyms to “the motion of swinging” that comes from contrary pulls – truth and imagination, earth and heaven, control and abandonment, flight and return, the concrete earth and the spirit. The whole upward thrust of the poem is towards imagination, escape and transcendence – in other words, away from truth or the reality of life. The downward pull is back to earth. Everybody desires “to get away from the earth awhile” (48). Who does not like to climb trees and leave below the difficulties and the drudgery of everyday life, especially when one is “weary of considerations, / And life is too much like a pathless wood.” (44) For the boy, climbing is a kind of play whereas, for a man it’s a transcendental escape. Climbing birches is synonymous with imagination and the imaginative act, a push towards heaven and even the contemplation of death. But the speaker does not want his wish half fulfilled. If climbing trees is a sort of push towards transcendence, he does not want complete transcendence, for he wishes to come back. “Earth is the right place for love” (52), however imperfect; though his “face burns” (45) and “one eye is weeping” (46), he must escape to keep his sanity, yet must return. Frost’s speaker wants to climb towards heaven, but then dip back to earth, to seek and then get back. Similarly, “Into My Own” talks of the desire to get away from life combined with a desire for one’s family. The opening line of the sonnet “The Vantage Point” says “If tired of trees I seek again mankind.” (1) The poet wants to be one with nature, but at the same time he says that if by noon he has too much of these then he shall turn back. In the last two lines he clarifies “I smell the earth, I smell the bruised plant, / I look into the crater of the ant.” (13-14) In spite of such minute observations, he will seek mankind again because deep down in his heart he realises that mankind matters the
most to him. Frost here is not like Thoreau; he would not like to turn his back to Nature, instead he’d like to embrace it. But, when he is fed up he would again like to turn and again embrace the earth.

Another dramatic monologue, “Love and a Question” reflects a very common feature present in Frost’s poems – point and counter point. It is a representation of the external and internal conflict of man. Where “Home Burial” displays a conflict between the mother and father, here it is the conflict that the man undergoes when he has to choose between two of his emotions: one towards his spouse and the other towards the stranger caught in the thick of night with all doors closed on him. The last stanza is very sensitive. The bridegroom is faced with a dilemma, with his love on one side and the stranger who he considers as “the harbouring woe” (31), asking shelter for the night. This depicts the picture of a person torn between his duty towards humanity, helping a person who is in dire need of shelter, or tending to his love and satiating his desire.

“Mowing” enlightens us with the fact that the real, the common voice, the realities of love and labour are sweet. It is from here that poetry originates. It need not be created through wilful imagination, fanciful ideas or an abandonment of the everyday. The gist of the poem is, “the fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows.” (13) This line seems to have conveyed everything that the poet wishes to say. “The Woodpile”, on the other hand, talks of decay, something about the human effort, something that hints at despair, “To warm the frozen swamp as best it could / With the slow smokeless burning of decay.” (39-40) The source of despair could be that life decays after death or the ultimate fate of human effort – no matter how much you put in it is futile, its fruits are bound to decay one day, or it could be something tragic. “I thought that only / Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks / Could so forget his
“handiwork” (35-36) perhaps what the speaker really speaks goes unspoken and is for the reader to understand. One explanation for abandoning such hard work is that he “lived in turning to fresh tasks” (35), the other could be a tragedy relating to his death.

To the speaker the woodpile is a visual, decaying reminder of an unknown tragedy which is slowly unfolding. This is just the opposite of “The Tuft of Flowers” where the work of human endeavour brings joy. The words, “as best it could” (39), as if the warming of the frozen swamp has become a worthwhile task, which the woodpile strives to accomplish to the best of its ability. The presence of human is felt. The narrator says, “If warmth is in the mind of the beholder, perhaps the woodpile has indeed warmed the frozen swamp – by adding features to the unwelcoming landscape, being an awkward spectacle in that lonely surrounding and by turning the speaker’s thoughts to human presence in such a place. The sight of the decaying woodpile perhaps conveys to the speaker the depth of nature’s unconcern.

“Two Tramps in Mud Time”, is a remarkable poem based on an incident that happened several years before on the farm in Franconia. It has an almost mythic opening. There were successful economic times, and trams were everywhere – honest men, usually in search of a meagre living (Parini, 183, 288). Frost’s narrator, as the second stanza makes clear is enjoying his work. He is so adept in chopping that his axe is striking with full accuracy. Very few poets of English verse have written so well about work or the pleasure of doing work. The fifth stanza speaks of the malevolence of Nature, how harsh it can be. “The lurking frost in the earth beneath / That will steal forth after the sun is set / And show on the water its crystal teeth” (38-40) Looking at the tramps the narrator immediately knew what they were thinking and the very thought that they wanted his job for the pay made him love his task more. “And smooth and moist in vernal heat.” (48) Then comes the essence that puts the
matter frankly. “My right might be love but theirs was need” (62) and when it came down to love against need, it was need that was more important. This is the final political and moral point but Frost’s speaker does not leave off there; he concludes believing in Darwin’s theory of “Survival of the fittest” and says:

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done

For Heaven and the future’s sakes. (65-72)

In the words of Jay Parini, “The poet takes away with one hand what he has given with the other,” suggesting that with his head he knows that need overrides love in situations such as that posed in this poem. Yet he refuses to let it rest there. He wants to make a generalisation about how, ideally, “love and need are one”. It is pointless to complain, as Malcolm Cowley does (Parini, 289), that the speaker in the poem should have offered these homeless men some other work if he was so selfish as not to want to give up the chopping himself. “A Drumlin Woodchuck” comes from the mouth of a woodchuck (a colloquial way of referring to a local person in Vermont) that lives in an oval hill that has been carved out by glacial drifting (a drumlin) here. Frost talks about his own retreat from politics. Being a political loner Frost worried about being attacked and the Drumlin Woodchuck seems just as concerned about protecting himself from his enemies, although it shrewdly pretends
that he and the world are friends. But, he and the world are not friends, the poet feels. The woodchuck is endlessly alert, ready to attack if necessary, but preferring to retreat to protect its flanks and so the clever woodchuck takes the occasion to think. If still it feels it will live for another day or another year, it will all be because it is so careful about its crevices. This world believes in survival of the fittest; in order to survive one need not indulge in or initiate a fight but can definitely protect oneself by being cautious against every move taken in by others towards one.

The poet sarcastically chides the bureaucratic efficiency in “Departmental”. Darwin’s theory of “Survival of the fittest” fits aptly here. It boasts of how everybody is so self-obsessed, self-centred, egoistic, and the last two lines justify it. “It couldn’t be called ungentle / But how thoroughly departmental.” (41-42) The death of the ant had no effect on anyone. The moth was the least surprised; he went his way. The ants, also considered as the curious race, seeing the body of one of their dead reported to the other with whom he crosses antennae and this report was carried higher up till this message reached Janizary whose office is to bury and do all the rituals. He seized the dead by the middle and raising it high in the air carried it out of there with no one to stand and stare, as it was nobody’s affair. This poem is an open attack on red-tapeism which is a universal issue.

There is a lot of contrast between the urban dwellers and the rural simpletons. “A Roadside Stand” draws a comparison and contrast in the lives of people who live in cities and those in the countryside. A poor farmer builds a vegetable stand at the edge of the highway outside his house in hope that the passing cars would buy his product. He does not beg, but with dignity sells vegetables as he wishes to make it his source of living. However, the cars never stop and to add to his agony, if they do its only, “. . . to plow up grass / In using the yard to back and turn around” (39-40) or to
ask the way to where it was bound or to ask if gas was available, thus trying to bring out the callousness and apathy of the rich. In spite of the peaceful ambience of the place “the requisite lift of spirit has never been found.” (45) Their eyes seem to be always searching in the hope that someone will buy their product.

A few poems Frost has dedicated to the aftermath of war, making a candid criticism of society and very subtly, yet sarcastically, pointing out the drawback of the government. In “I Will Sing You One-O” he takes a note of the low and mean mentality of man. The last three lines are telling: “Since man began / To drag down man / And nation nation.” (77-79) The obsession with “self” cannot see anyone else or any other nation other than theirs thriving. After the blast of the atomic bomb Frost did not sit tight lipped, instead, he caustically blamed the government in “U.S. 1946 King’s X”. With utter simplicity, perfection of image, his superb and economical craftsmanship, Frost wishes to instruct, and he lays bare the message he chooses to convey. In his satirical poems one sees it clearly in his verses on the bomb following the atomic blast over Nagasaki and Hiroshima. On the one hand, the use of these weapons was defended pragmatically as the most direct and utilitarian means of victory and on the other hand, banishment of the bomb was called for on humanitarian grounds. In “Not to Keep” he talks about a young man injured in war. Seeing the havoc of war something within him is mutilated, He’d not been disfigured physically, but the mental trauma he had to go through was irreparable. The poem touches the heart of every man and makes one aware of the sentiments of a man and a woman.

She dared no more than ask him with her eyes
How was it with him for a second trial.
And with his eyes he asked her not to ask.
They had given him back to her but not to keep. (20-23)
This reminded Frost of his best friend Edward Thomas, who being a poet had joined the army, much to the annoyance of Frost. It was the war that was the cause of the death of this innocent soul. It so seems to Frost that when one is lonely one feels as if the entire cosmos is conspiring against him. Even the normal working of Nature holds accountability for the conspiracy. Frost was under a lot of depression, a feeling of loneliness when Elinor, his to be wife, had to return to St. Lawrence to complete her education. There was something sinister in the leaves, the clouds made him feel a sense of loss. He writes in “Bereft”, “Word I was in the house alone / Word I was in my life alone / Word I had no one left but God.” (13-16) More important than being in the house alone is the fact that he was in his “life” alone. This terrible secret that ‘he had no one left but God’ had caused the weather and the seemingly insensible nature to behave in a sinister fashion just because they could frighten and intimidate a lonely individual. His state of being bereft seemed to motivate nature to conspire against his state of mind. There was even a time when he thought of committing suicide as he felt life was not worth living without her (Parini, 40). Being a feminist and seeing his mother and his wife, Frost had a soft corner for the fairer sex. In “The Cocoon” he writes, “The inmates may be lonely women folk. / I want to tell them that with all this smoke / They prudently are spinning their cocoon.” (11-13) Here the speaker is trying to tell them to be out. One needs to take the initiative to come out of the cocoon that one has built around oneself, one needs to do away with the mental obscurity and help oneself out. We are all mortals, like “A Peck of Gold”, having emerged from the dust, will remain in it and be submerged in it.

Frost had undergone many shades of depression in his life; splashes and hues of it are more likely to be seen in many of his poems. Night is symbolic of darkness,
obscurity, gloom, oblivion whereas day is synonymous with happiness, sunlight, optimism, light, hope and joy. “Acquainted with the Night” depicts the narrator’s experience with depression, isolation being its main cause. The narrator’s inability to make an eye contact with the people he meets suggests that his depression has made him incapable of interacting in normal society. While normal people are associated with the day, the narrator is only associated with the night. Therefore he finds nothing in common with them. Being a recluse, he is unable to use the same sense of time as the other people in the city. Instead of the regular clock unlike the others, he relies on “One luminary clock” in the sky. Since night is the only time that he emerges from his solitude, he has even less opportunity to meet someone who could pull him from his depression. “The Door in the Dark” speaks about the obstacles in life which we tend to overlook before we are confronted by them. “So people and things don’t pair anymore / With what they used to pair with before.” (8-9)

A feeling of empathy towards the bird and not shirking one’s duties is the core lesson of “The Exposed Nest”. Even though the speaker is in doubt whether the mother bird will accept them in the changed scene they, the speaker and his little son did what was expected of them and moved away. This mentality is much the same as in “The Figure in the Doorway”, a small anecdote about the effect of a journey by train across the “scrub-oak” (3) mountains. Beside the railway track in a small chalet dwells a “gaunt figure” (7) who is self-sufficient with his oaks for light and heating. He has his own hen and pig, his own well and a “ten-by-twenty garden patch.” (18) It seems he is leading the life of a hermit, a recluse, stranded for miles and miles from men, but still his life is “evidently something he could bear.” (12) The passengers in the train feel a grim sense of separation, and this is caused not just by the glass pane that is there between him and them but by a single gesture of his uncurling his hand in
greeting as the train roaring past evaporates it. (Parini, 275) Sometimes it takes such small gestures to tell whether ‘men work together or apart’.

In most of Frost’s poems people live in such a manner that there is every possibility of them living together. Individuals offer a responsive hand like the cook in “A Servant to Servants,” who tells the nomadic camper, “I’d rather you’d not go unless you must” (177). This is just like the farmer in “A Time to Talk” who understands from his friend’s gesture and slows down his horse to a walk to seek companionship that is being asked.

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don’t stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven’t hoed,
And shout from where I am, “What is it?”
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I trust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit. (1-10)

Looking at today’s world one should enthusiastically respond to such invitations. So many self-created barriers and walls have already been built imposing a solitary existence for an individual. The walls that wall men in or wall them out are three as pointed out by Frost in “Triple Bronze.” Of the three the first constitutes ‘their hides, their homes, and their nations’ this being essential against the “too much”. Yet men sometimes cross all boundaries and erect rigid walls restricting the
entry of others. They isolate themselves from men and things, close or shut down the hand that gropes for help. It may not be just physical barriers; it could be a simple reason like the death of a child, and a thing that brings closeness in the marital relationship during the time of grief to render emotional support, may actually put them apart instead, as is seen in “Home Burial.”

Vengeance and justice are predominant in people who break faith like the woman in “The Fear” who is hiding away, certain she is being hunted, being spied on by her husband who is now preparing to take vengeance. The Witch of Coos, the widow, who narrates a story how forty years back, a skeleton locked in the cellar carried itself “like a pile of dishes”. She bolts up the attic door to restrain the sharp sound of “chalk-pile” bones of the man who her husband the late French-Canadian, Toffile Lajway had murdered and buried in the cellar. Her life as well as the life of her son was threatened by the thought of the ghostly skeleton from the past (Westbrook, Perry D., 248) The poems that run the possibility of communication are like the promise of spring. Company is only a hand away, one has to just stretch one’s arm and fellowship is there. In “The Mountain” the narrator comes across a villager who belonged to Lunenburg and was on his way. He tells him about Hor, the mountain, that is what they call it as well as the township that lays scattered like boulders that have broken and fallen from the mountain and spread around. It is this villager who tells him about the lake and spring that is there at the mountain top which is worth seeing. The unfortunate part is the villager himself had not seen all this because of his hectic schedule. He had been told this by somebody who had witnessed it.

In “Place for a Third” Laban, the protagonist, requests John’s sister for the empty space left near her brother’s grave, so that he could bury his wife Eliza there, as
it was his ardent desire that she laid her last near the one she loved the most. John’s sister, though she’d been very friendly with Eliza, when Eliza was happily married to John, needed time to think as being a sister it was a big responsibility to decide as to who was laid next to her brother. After contemplating a lot, she reached a decision that Eliza was not worth resting her last next to her brother as she “had too many other men.” (78) She had not been loyal and faithful to him, therefore, did not deserve to be placed near him. This is what society is, it does not spare any one. To live peacefully in society one has to obey its norms and regulations laid down by it, only then one can think of true happiness. We are born of the society, live in it, and once we cease to live, we perish in it.
An exception is Whittier’s “Among the Hills,” one of the first pieces of New England local-colour writing to admit that all was not well among the hill people.


_________. “A New England Nun and Other Stories”, (both tales are in Freeman).

Jefferson's use of the phrase “all men are created equal", in the Declaration of Independence.


_________. 191.


Umberson, Debra and Jennifer Karas Montez, “Social Relationships and Health: A Flashpoint for Health Policy”, Austin, University of Texas, Department of Sociology.

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