Philosophy of Human Relationships

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Robert Frost ("The Secret Sits")

Robert Frost delves deep into every human relationship, whether it is filial, fraternal, marital or social. Every relationship is dealt with keeping the human psychology and the different facets of human behaviour in mind. One more thing that is worth taking a note of is that almost all his characters are universal; reading his poetry the reader is able to relate to it with his own life. It is while dealing with the different relationships that the actual human philosophy of life is truly felt. One gets a glimpse of it in “Into My Own”, “Ghost House”, “Mowing” whereas “Mending Wall”, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, “Fire and Ice” are, to name a few, that are totally drenched in it. Every happening, every incident in life has some human philosophy to it and Frost being Frost has done justice to his philosophy of human relationships in every poem that he has written. He read, re-read, improvised, and polished every poem before serving it to his readers.

Lawrance Thompson simplifies when he says that the secret in the poem is God. There is “a secret inside things,” Frost wrote in his notebook in 1910 and he never lost patience with this secret, or with the human incapacity to know what the point of life might be. Frost in a true sense is a lover of wisdom. In the study of his poems we encounter a poet who was not only a superb writer, but also an intellectual, deeply engaged with the larger scientific, social, political, educational and religious issues of his time, and the recipient of 26 honorary doctorates. Unlike other modern contemporary poets like Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats and T.S Eliot, to name a few, Frost refrained from self-commentary. He did not produce any criticism that
invited the interpretation of his beliefs. “I write no prose and am scared blue at any
demand on me for prose,” he tells John Freeman in an undated letter from the mid-
1920s. A year before his death, he denied the request to write an article about the cold
war saying that, “articles seem nothing I can undertake . . . My limits seem to be verse
and talk.” He was a philosopher well versed in every field, since he had countered
ample exposure to diverse knowledge from his very childhood. It is actually during
that time he became interested in closely observing people. He recaptured those
memories, and what is most astonishing is that these memories remained so fresh in
his mind that on mere retrospection they came flashing back as he had kept them.
“New Hampshire”, “The Lockless Door”, “Ghost House” are good illustrations of
this. Here one is reminded of William Wordsworth’s “Daffodils”:

For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. (19-24)

However, Frost did write a number of essays, although they were occasional
like public addresses and prefaces for books. Although nourishing and enriched with
wit and deep insight into every kind of relationship, they are in no way didactic. They
do not speak of a personal mythology or develop a theory of imagination, or announce
a literary movement. They are universal in character, and would always have an
appeal for the masses. He believed it is as unwise as it is unmannerly to shamelessly
exhibit one’s deepest feelings, or strengthen one’s conviction in others. He is fully in
agreement with the protagonist of “The Generations of Men” who, in discussion with
his cousin regarding their common ancestors, is of the opinion, “But don’t you think we sometimes make too much / Of the old stock? What counts is the ideals, / And those will bear some keeping still about” (205-207). Every relationship could have different flavours; sweetness and sourness for Frost go hand in hand. Every relationship is peppered with nectar and poison, but yes, “What counts most in every relationship are the ideals”.

The kind of exposure that Frost got confirmed his belief that much in life is yet to be known. He was of the same opinion like Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville that nature itself avoids any kind of threat on its ultimate secrets. In “For Once, Then, Something” he harps on identifying a shiny object deep down beneath the water surface of the well – “. . . a something white, uncertain, / Something more of the depths –” (9-10) When a droplet of water falls in the pool, it blurs the clear surface of the pool as if it is trying to preserve its “modesty and privacy”: “Water came to rebuke the too clear water.” (11) A similar kind of remark is seen in “A Passing Glimpse”, where the poet says: “Heaven gives its glimpses only to those / Not in position to look too close” (11-12). Curiosity being one of his characteristic qualities, Frost made every endeavour to scrutinise and wring the last remnants of meaning from a relationship, an experience or a poem. Reading out to his audience in Berkeley in 1956, he insisted that one should not derive any more than one has to: “Don’t press it. Let it do it to you”. This is applicable to relationships also. Every relationship needs some space to grow in order to flourish; an example of this is “Mending Wall”: “Good Fences Make Good Neighbours” (27), “A Girl’s Garden”, where the father bought her a piece of land and gave her full liberty to grow whatever she wanted. Frost has no intention of being thorough with something as fragile as poetry. He only tries to get close, as close as he can get to it. This statement can also be contradicted
as in most of his poems Frost has squeezed and wrung out the last remnant of meaning from a relationship and laid it bare before his readers to judge and analyse for themselves.

Peter J. Stanlis believes Frost to be a dualist, and believes that he has been misunderstood and not been appreciated for the simple reason of this philosophical outlook of dualism, which is found in all his thinking and writings. According to him, “Dualism refers to the theory that reality is constituted of independent principles such as good and evil, spirit and matter, particularity and wholeness, whereas Monism posits that reality can only be explained in terms of a single principle – and this takes one of two forms, idealistic or materialistic”. Frost harps on point and counter-points which is necessary to understand any relationship. Every relationship can be good or bad, ideal or fake. Good and ideal as in “Not to Keep”, “The West Running Brook” or shallow like “The Fear”, “The Impulse” even the brother in “A Servant to Servants” or in “The Death of the Hired Man”.

Frost says in his introduction to Sarah Cleghorn’s Threescore that “things in pairs ordained to everlasting opposition”. We have point and counter-point in “After Apple-Picking” and “Birches” with claims of earth and heaven simultaneously. Let us take “The Death of the Hired Man” where Mary’s husband Warren argues in the name of justice that he and his wife are not obliged to give shelter to Silas, their farmhand, while Mary pleads that they should give him that in the name of mercy. This reflects on a fraternal relationship based on human grounds. “Love and a Question” a poem written by Frost talks of personal desire on one side and self-sacrifice on humanitarian ground on the other – an example again of fraternal relationship. “Mending Wall”,
debates of communal engagement with ‘protective isolation’, keeping in mind that every relationship needs some space to authenticate its presence.

Viewed in terms of rationality versus imagination, Frost’s themes are similar to the theme of duty in which the hardworking people whom Frost describes in his poetry are forced to choose between rationality and imagination; they cannot be juxtaposed. The adults in Frost’s poetry generally maintain their rationality as a burden of duty, but there are certain cases when the hint of imagination is almost too seductive to bear. For example, in “Birches” the narrator wishes that he could climb a birch tree as he did in his childhood and leave the rational world behind, if only for a moment. This ability to escape rationality and indulge in the liberation of the imagination is limited to the years of childhood. After reaching adulthood the traditions of New England life require strict rationality and an acceptance of responsibility. As a result of this conflict, Frost makes the poem “Out, Out –” even more tragic, describing a young boy who is forced to leave his childhood behind to work at a man's job and ultimately dies in the process. This is a direct glimpse of social relationships and class difference. It also reflects the apathy of the people who are totally detached to human suffering.

“Birches” is but “the motion of swinging.” The force behind it comes from contrary pulls – truth and imagination, earth and heaven, control and abandon, flight and return, the concrete world and the life of the spirit. The entire upward thrust of the poem is towards imagination, escape and transcendence taking one away from the reality of life and truth, away from any kind of commitment, any social obligation or commitment. The downward pull is back to the earth. Human relationships are just the same. No matter how one wishes to get away from them, one is pulled back. Not only in structure are they dualistic, but even in spirit. Instead of raising and resolving
questions they explore problems which most of us face, but fail to find an answer that is true or just under every circumstance. It is this that appeals more to Frost’s readers as it caters to the mindsets of different people. Such poems of Frost with dualism find an alternative instead of taking sides. Though they dramatize conflicts between different opinions and outlooks that are sharply opposed, at the same time they are equally valid, and both opinions stand out – this being the main attraction to all his poems.

In his *Paris Review* interview he objected to critics who, citing lines from his poetry, mistook the provisional statements for expressions of ‘absolute belief’. He speaks of critics who consider him as anti-New Deal, regarding the definition of home that Warren gives in “The Death of the Hired Man”: “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in.” (131-132) Frost immediately balances it by Mary’s balmy definition: “I should have called it / Something you somehow haven’t to deserve” (133-134) This is what Frost says of Mary’s statement, “That’s the New Deal, the feminine way of it. Very few have noticed that second thing. They have always noticed the sarcasm, the hardness of the male one.” In the dualistic context, the statement more frequently misunderstood is “Good fences make good neighbours.” A striking instance of this was provided by the United States Senator Jeff Sessions who used this statement to advocate the construction of a colossal barrier along the border between Mexico and United States. It is true that good fences promote neighbourliness, but it would have been appreciated if the Senator had given it a deeper thought, like the narrator of the “Mending Wall” recommends, to what he intended to wall in or wall out. Walling in and walling out could have many implications. Many have, Stanlis says, failed to perceive his dualism for the very obvious reason that few of them are philosophically trained in the reading
of poetry. However, there is another answer to this question. The reader usually considers a poet to be a monist believing in one principle, and firmly holding on to it.

The modern aesthetics and the Romantics are monistic, so much so that they derive their inspiration from transcendental idealism. We also receive the tradition from the poetic theory of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who propagates the spiritual unity of all creation. Our literature has produced an incisive critic of monistic philosophy in general and monistic idealism in particular. This is William James, who was a great inspiration for Frost. As a thinker, he believed mankind has divided itself into two sects, Materialists and Idealists. Frost has either been regarded as a transcendental (idealistic) monist or a materialist monist. In the initial years of his career, he was considered idealist, but later this opinion changed as many realised he was more complicated than his public image suggested. Currents of grief, anguish, loneliness and self-doubt ran below the surface of his poems making them more and more ambivalent in nature. With this in mind, critics listed him as a materialist monist, “a poet acquainted with desert places and desolate nights devoid of spiritual presence or transcendence” (Stanlis, Introduction vi) This reinterpretation was emphasised by Lionel Trilling, an American critic, author and teacher, in his famous address on the occasion of the poet’s eighty-fifth birthday celebration. “The universe that he conceives,” Trilling said “is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called ‘Design’ and see if you sleep the better for it. Read “Neither Out Far Nor In Deep” which often seems to me the most perfect poem of our time, and see if you are warmed by anything in it except the energy with which emptiness is perceived.” Stanlis says that Frost countered these monistic interpretations to assert his dualism. Although a great admirer of Emerson’s poems he considered Emerson’s transcendentalism to be “ethically naive”. According to him, Emerson was “a cheerful Monist, for whom evil
did not exist, or if it does exist, needn’t last forever.” He further adds, “A melancholy dualism is the only soundness.” A balance is always good. Frost rejected the materialist as well as the idealist interpretations of his work. This rejection is clear in a letter he wrote to Lawrance Thompson, his official biographer in response to Trilling’s address. Citing an example from one of the favourite poems of Emerson, “Uriel”, Frost says,

Did Trilling have something the other night? . . . At least he seemed to see that I am as strong on badness as I am on goodness. Emerson’s defect was that he was of the great tradition of Monists. He could see the “good of evil born” but he couldn’t bring himself to say the evil of good born. He was an Abominable Snowman of the top-lofty peaks. . . . I couldn’t go as far as that because I am a Dualist.

However, it is said that Thompson could not absorb the poet’s interpretation of his philosophical course. Reading Thompson’s biography today, one notices his misunderstanding of Frost’s thought and work. Thanks to the critical scholarships of other scholars, the misinterpretations of Frost have been set right. In a letter to Bernard De Voto (October 20, 1938), Frost wrote, “My philosophy, non-Platonic but none-the-less a tenable one, I hold more or less unbroken from youth to age.” It is important to note that between the publication of A Boy’s Will (1912) and A Further Range (1937), no attention was paid to Frost’s dualism by any biographer or critics of his poetry. This initiative was taken by Richard H. Thornton’s edition of fifty-two essays, Recognition of Robert Frost (1937). Gorham B. Munson’s essay “Against the World in General” appeared in a slightly different form in The Saturday Review of Literature (March 28, 1925) and was reprinted from his book Robert Frost: A Study
In his essay, Munson noted that “in Frost’s poetry we are consistently struck by his acceptance of the dualistic world.” The title of Munson’s essay, “Against the World in General,” was borrowed from “New Hampshire” the two lines that read: “I may as well confess myself the author / Of several books against the world in general.” It was Munson’s thesis that, “the purest classical poet of America today is Robert Frost,” that his classicism set him apart from Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot and the “New Poetry” of the free verse movement. As a biographical approach to Frost’s poetry, in his chapter “How About Being a Good Greek?” Munson identified Emerson’s lines about the human law and the law for things:

There are two laws discrete
Not reconciled, –
Law for man, and law for thing;
The last builds town and fleet,
But it runs wild,
And doth the man unking.  (Ralph Waldo Emerson 1847)

The doctrine drawn from these lines is called dualism. It is a twofold view of man and the world. Dualism, in the words of Peter J. Stanlis, is also called “pluralism” (p. 2), which indicates the belief that reality consists of matter and mind, or as preferred by Frost as matter and spirit. Monism, on the other hand, asserts that reality consists of only one element. All monistic philosophy, whether materialist or idealist holds that “existence in all its infinite parts and aspects is absolutely one and indivisible. All realities and processes in existence are organically interconnected, interrelated and interdependent.” The sole purpose of the monistic philosophy is to
harmonise, reconcile, integrate and amalgamate these opposites and unify them into an organic whole. This, in Frost’s view, is impossible.

Frost being a dualist sees man as made of two elements – spirit and matter. As a dualist Frost believed that evil existed and would probably always exist. He was also slightly sceptical about the utopian movements that took place in the first half of the twentieth century although he was a staunch believer in liberty. Most of his work contains some of the most sympathetic portraits of the working poor. Since he’s a dualist he was of the opinion that liberty is meaningless, vicious, without stability and order of statutes and institutions. His politics, a blend of liberal and conservative elements is best suggested in the second stanza of Katherine Lee Bates’s hymn “America the Beautiful”:

America, America,
God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law. (9-12)

Frost like Edmund Burke was very assertive of the fact that with effort we need to grip our hold on the planet. He also had doubts whether collective action could ever eradicate the ills that are so deep rooted within his race. In fact, he felt radical changes that were coming in the society would further aggravate these ills. With a pinch of subtle satire he rebuked Red-tapism and openly criticised departmentalisation that brings out the shallowness of human behaviour, for it is here that he scorns the so called fraternal ties:

Ants are a curious race;
One crossing with hurried tread
The body of one of their dead

Isn’t given a moment’s arrest –

Seems not even impressed. (Departmental, 13-17)

Frost’s keen interest in and knowledge of science prevented him from reflecting on the fact that it conflicted with the fundamental concerns of religion. He never considered dismissing religion merely because this was his upbringing. He pondered affectionately and with a lot of gravity over matters concerning life, human relationships, the universe, and nature. He seriously observed the story of the Incarnation and spoke about the strange, miraculous co-existence of spirit and flesh, of consciousness and matter. While equally respecting both sides, he tried to harmonise the differences he perceived and justify them, thus again giving a deep insight into human relationships and exposing them in their true form, for his readers to analyse for themselves. In the final stanza of “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” he points out that there are times in life when trying to reconcile with the conflicting claims we land up into the mysterious duality of time and eternity which is the penultimate truth and philosophy of life:

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)
How true! True justice can only be done when love and need are one. Only then can one be totally committed to one’s work. Dualism is the sole basis of Frost’s philosophy and the foremost single element that scholars and literary critics need to consider in any study of his life and thought, including the themes of his poetry. This dualism is inclusive of his philosophy of knowledge, his logical and analogical method of reasoning, his psychology, his emotional preferences and choices regarding ideas and events in conflict, his conception of what is true or false, ugly or beautiful, good or evil.

In other words, his dualism accounts for his view of God, his view of human behaviour, relationships and his view of nature. It permeates much that he said about science, religion, art, poetry, society, politics, and education. Most significantly it provides the characteristic qualities so very rare in his brilliant, lively and witty conversation. No biographies of Frost so far, have dealt directly with his philosophical dualism. The few that have, have failed to ascertain its particular nature. They have neglected to deal with his dualism on his own terms, or to consider it of supreme importance in order to have a better understanding of Frost as a man, as a poet, and as a writer. One could also say that this would lead to a better understanding of Frost as a father, as a husband and above all as a human.

The first word that would appear to a reader's mind while dealing with the poem “Birches” is ‘longing’, a craving for something one desires in life. Every picture in the poem reflects the longing of the speaker for something which he missed somewhere, in his childhood; maybe, his near and dear ones, his dreams, his hopes, expectations or perhaps his aspirations. Each and every image in this poem is a part of this longing. The image of the child playing with the Birch, the image of the joyful swinging movements that move forward and backward, the image of the snow
painting the trees white, all images mirror the nostalgic longing of the speaker. Here we find a note of longing “So was I once myself a swinger of birches. / And so I dream of going back to be” (41-42). Here we find the poet longing for the simpler and happier days of his childhood. This reveals his frustration about the adult world. He describes the adult life as “pathless wood” (44) and expresses his desire to return to the world of his childhood. The act of swinging on birches expresses the poet’s desire to escape from the tough realities and hard rationalities of the adult world, at least for a brief moment. The poet longs to go back to his carefree childhood days. As the boy is climbing the tree, he is climbing towards heaven, which is the world of free imagination. A swinger is still grounded to the earth through the roots of the tree as he climbs; at the same time he is able to reach beyond his life on earth to a higher plane of existence. The poet also includes the speaker’s longing and says that swinging on birches is no longer bringing him peace. Here the speaker feels that his longing for childhood will never be satiated as he cannot escape the real world of his adulthood. Being an adult he can never withdraw from his responsibilities and climb to heaven. The speaker understands that he cannot become a child unless he starts a fresh life on earth. He is not able to enjoy the image of the boy who is swinging in the birches. He is forced to acknowledge the reality concerning the birches that are bending because of winter storms, not because of the climbing of the boy. The speaker longs to leave the rational world and enter an imaginative world. He desires to climb to heaven as a young boy, while he wants to return to the earth as well. He desires to go and come back. The speaker has a strong desire to enter the imaginative world, but the truths of the real world are not letting him go. The freedom of imagination is certainly alluring and appealing, but he is helpless to free himself from the realities of his earthly life. His responsibilities in the world are making him stick to the real world even though
he desires to escape to the imaginary world. The speaker understands the painful reality that his escape to the imaginary world is just a temporary one. The poem thus expresses the poet’s longing for the past which would never come back. The poet gets so exhausted finally that he desires to lay down his life. This is evident in the end of the poem, “It’s when I’m weary of considerations, / And life is too much like a pathless wood” (43-44). “I’d like to get away from Earth for awhile / And then come back to it and begin over (48-49).” The poet desires to escape from the world and at the same time desires to return to it. This is how relationships bind a person. It is difficult to break all ties and get away. The bond of every relationship is firm.

The symbolic image of aging birch trees illustrates the images of a child who is growing to his adulthood. The depiction of these images enables the reader to view the reality of the world which is compared to the carefree childhood. Initially in the poem we find the image of life replenished with all kinds of atrocities. Later we find the use of images to present the speaker’s longing to revert to the cheery times of his childhood. The language of the poem is enriched and made expressive through the use of images. Frost makes use of natural symbolism to express the longing of the speaker who desired to escape the trouble-filled world and enter a heavenly dwelling. In the beginning of the poem we find images of life, aging and death. The first three lines of the poem give the image of childhood and adulthood. “When I see birches bend to left and right across the lines of straighter darker trees, I like to think some boy’s been swinging them” (1-3). Childhood is symbolically represented as the speaker believes that the swinging of the branches is caused by a boy climbing them. Adulthood is symbolically explained through the image of the straighter, darker trees. The speaker was once a birch swinger and cherishes those memories. The birch trees symbolically show life and it is used as the speaker’s means to escape from the world of harsh
realities and truths. The concept of bent birch trees symbolises life and the speaker’s denial of the real world. He desires to escape to an imaginary world and at the same time likes to return to the real world.

Frost’s speaker does not want his wish half fulfilled. If climbing trees is a kind of push towards transcendence, he does not want complete transcendence, instead 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 down to earth to seek and then get back like the drumlin woodchuck that is endlessly alert ready to attack if necessary, but preferring to retreat to protect its flanks. In spite of all this, if still the bird feels it will live for another day or another year it will be all because it has been instinctively thorough about its crevices and burrow. This world, as Frost says, believes in survival of the fittest. In order to survive one need not indulge or initiate a fight, but can definitely protect oneself by being cautious against every move taken in his direction.

Metaphorically, this is applicable to Frost’s philosophy. The drumlin woodchuck perfectly blends with his character. Frost’s philosophy of dualism is very prominent here. It is the truth about life. (Parini, 135, 136, 294) Frost has delved deep into the human psychology. The woodchuck has a direct appeal to the reader. He can relate to it.

There comes a phase in life when adversities hit us, nerve-breaking hurdles upset us. The human soul is bent with the atrocities in life, so much so that one feels uprooted, totally finished, and too much of it causes a loss to life and property. A live witness to this is seen in “In Time of Cloudburst”. However, in stanza 5 the poet is
very optimistic and hopeful towards life “And on tracts laid new to the sun, / Begin all
ever to hope.” (19-20) If human relationship is deep-rooted at such a time, in life it
becomes easy to row one’s boat across. The last stanza speaks it all:

May my application so close

To so endless a repetition

Not make me tired and morose

And resentful of man’s condition. (25-28)

There is always a bright side to darkness. Similar to this, using the
metaphor of the storm in “Storm Fear,” the poet reminds us of how life ebbs away
from the body. He feels helpless, the visuals of past memories fly past, and
everything seems to be coming loose. Words like, “against us in the dark” (1), “pelts
with snow” (2), “stifled bark” (4), “the beast” (5) all seem as though the storm is
conspiring against mankind. The real fear is when one moves from “Two and a child”
(10) to “How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length” (12) relates to the heat and
warmth that is essential for life. In other words, it is survival he is talking about.
Somewhere it also means the end of a relationship, when there is no warmth, “fire
dies and cold creeps in” meaning the relationship has frozen. Only a philosopher of
Frost’s insightfulness could have made such an apt analysis. This also brings to mind
how stealthily death comes and takes us away. God gives and he also takes. Glimpses
of this are seen in “In a Vale,” a dramatic monologue, where the spectrum of God’s
creation is everywhere, “Where bird and flower were one and the same / And thus it is
I know so well / Why the flower has odour, the bird has song” (20-22). The flower
has the fragrance; Frost says, to tell us about the beauty, the freshness, and the
tenderness of his creation. Similarly, the bird has been blessed with a sweet voice so
that it can sing in its melodious voice to provide rich nourishment to the ears and also
to delight the human soul and make it feel that life is worth living. Just like the
relationship between the song of the bird and nature’s beauty, if the human
relationship in life is good, it will give out the fruit of nectar, the sweetness of life
making life worth living. Later in the poem, Frost talks about the recycling power of
the world and life. The leaves of the tree which fall to the ground and eventually
decay thus become nutrients that supply the roots. The tree then uses these nutrients to
produce new leaves during spring. This is symbolic of the leaves of our life. We
discard old ideas, worries and problems, in fact even relationships every year that
have been part of our very existence. Not only do we discard, but we let them lie
embedded under our feet to remind us of our triumphs and failures. We thus learn
from our failures and are inspired to work harder from our achievements. A good and
healthy relationship, may it be filial, fraternal, marital or, for that matter, social also
nourishes itself thereby making its roots firm in the soil.

Just as Frost’s “Hardwood Groves” uses its old decaying parts to nourish
continuing life, we too, Frost says, with sound human relationships recycle our “old
leaves” to nurture our own lives, but the narrator’s travels in “Reluctance,” have
finally led him back home. He is unhappy to find nothing left but the dead leaves of
the winter season, hinting here at the decaying or end of a relationship. He, however,
is not willing to accept such an ending to his adventures and refuses “to yield” (22) or
“go with the drift of things” (21) simply because the season proclaims it so. His
travels may have come to an end, and the season ended, but that does not mean that he
has to accept the turn of events without emotions. “The flowers of the witch- hazel
wither, / The heart is still aching to seek, / But the feet question ‘Whither?’ (16-18).
This clearly hints at the transience of life. It could also mean the irresistible yearning
of the heart that is never satisfied. No matter how much one tries to resist, Frost says, one has to bow and accept the end, may it be one’s love or a season. This poem has an autobiographical note.

Frost’s biographer Jay Parini is of the opinion that this poem stems from Frost’s life. He wrote this poem while he was living with his mother and sister in Lawrence, Massachusetts, before he had convinced his future wife Elinor to marry him. After being rejected by her during his visit to her school, he was broken-heartedly and totally shattered. In this dejected mood, he tried to commit suicide, thus becoming a part of the “last lone aster” (15) and “dead leaves” (13). He eventually found courage and decided not to go, as Jay Parini puts it in his biography, Robert Frost – A Life “with the drift of things” (21) and accept Elinor’s rejection. Such an admittance of failure would have been treason to his heart and his love.

Frost is interested in the activities of everyday life, because it is this side of human behaviour that is the most ‘real’ to him. Even the most basic act in a normal day can have numerous hidden meanings that need only to be explored by a poetic mind. For example, in the poem "Mowing," the simple act of mowing hay with a scythe is transformed into a discussion of the value of hard work and the traditions of the New England countryside. Frost argues by focusing on ‘reality’, the real actions of real people rather than the unnecessary elements of fantasy and discovers "Truth". Moreover, Frost believes that the emphasis on everyday life allows him to communicate with his readers more clearly. They can empathise with the struggles and emotions that are expressed in his poems and come to a greater understanding of human relationships as "truth" itself. A similar such incident of truth is realised when the speaker in “The Tuft of Flowers” feels lonely on seeing the grass all mown. Just
then he catches sight of a butterfly flying towards a tuft of flowers that the mower had left standing. This lit up the very spirit of the speaker and he experienced the same joy that the mower must have felt on leaving the tuft of flowers blooming. His loneliness instantly vanishes, giving birth to a new energy. A kind of comradeship is developed with the mower. There is a lot of truth, he realised, in the fact that men work together from the heart, whether they work together or apart. (Gerber, Philip L. 27) This thought process is very close to life. In a world of reconciled opposites, ‘love’ and ‘truth’ are faced with a ‘fact’ which too is a ‘dream’ like in “Mowing”, “the fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows,”(13) a philosophical thought to be pondered on, for it is the truth. He has worked, therefore he derives the maximum joy to see it fructify. The contentment on seeing his labour, his hard work justified gives him maximum joy. Similarly, a ladder which joins the heaven and the earth is symbolic of the magical sphere of half-sleep in which vision, dream and reality are camouflaged, as in “After Apple Picking”. Frost admitted that the illuminating moments during the time he wrote “Going for Water”, “Two Look at Two” and “Iris by Night” were not just moments forgotten with the passing of time. He explains this in one of his Bread-Loaf lectures in 1960. He probably meant more in the phrase “momentary stay against confusion”, what he actually meant was that they are the accumulation of those momentary stays that have survived. In spite of the innumerable changes and other activities of life, such images leave an everlasting impact; they get stored in the unconscious mind and reflect when required. This same theme occurs however, in his “Happiness Makes up in Height What It Lacks in Length”, a poem from *A Witness Tree*. The very title is an epithet, condensed with a lot of meaning. Despite all the unrest in the universe, and the intense ignorance of its inhabitants, Frost says, “I can but wonder whence / I get the lasting sense / Of so much warmth and light.” (9-11)
Not relying on the evidence, he says, “It may be altogether / From one day’s perfect weather.” (13-14) Thus happiness lacks nothing in “length.” It endures and sustains. If sadness was not there how would one realise the importance of happiness. This impression came to the mind of the poet under familiar circumstances when the speaker and his companion “went from house to wood” (23) just like the couple in “Going for Water” “for a change of solitude” (24). Such experiences for Frost acted as the staying power for that “one day’s perfect weather” (14). Such moments contain some kind of omnipresence and omnipotence. Frost is of the opinion that certain experiences leave an everlasting impression on the mind, very similar to Wordsworth’s view who, in “Tintern Abbey” says that it is not only pleasure but, “tranquil restoration”(31) and moral nourishment he receives from such memories. In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth describes the journey down a ‘rough and stony moor’, like the journey of the couple in “Two Look at Two,” which took place after he had lost his “guide” (112). Petrified, stumbling on through the field, he came to the bottom, where he caught sight of a murderer being hanged on the gibbet. The little boy was so terrified that he ran and while running came across a pool of water under the moon and a girl walking against the wind carrying a pitcher. He could not enjoy the beauty of the scene then as he was disturbed. Years later, when he returned to the place with his loved one, he saw, like the couple in “Going for Water,” the pool and the moon seemed illuminated by the contentment and joy of their heart. The scene was the same, but today the scene was illuminated with the charged energy of youth. He was content with life and could enjoy himself. It is truly said, Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder.

In “Prelude,” Wordsworth quoted an experience that occurred a few days before his father died. Restless and exhausted, he “went forth / Into the fields” (48-49)
on an unusually dark and stormy day. Climbing the summit, he looked out into the mist with longing as though he wished to absorb the beauty and store it forever as if it was the last that he was seeing. Later in the poem he counters his own point, “all the business of the elements” and wood, water and mist, “were kindred spectacles and sound” to which he often returned. This reminds one of “Birches” where Frost says, “I’d like to get away from earth awhile / And then come back to it and begin over” (48-49) for, “Earth’s the right place for love.” (52) If one wishes to nurture and flourish a relationship then earth is the right place. Similar understanding is seen in his “Mowing,” “The fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows.” (13-14) Similarly, “Into my Own,” has words like “dark trees” (1), “old and firm” (2), “mask of gloom” (3), “edge of doom” (4) that symbolise death. The poet talks of stealing away into the vastness of the forest. He does not regret the idea of his mental retreat, but wants his loved ones to pursue him and find out if he missed them. Point and counter-point is predominant which gives the necessary essence to the poem.

“In a Vale” talks about a childhood experience. Frost recalls the time “when I was young” (1) and flowers spoke to him “Of things of moment” (13), “And thus it is I know so well / Why the flower has odour, the bird has song. / You have only to ask me, and I can tell.” (21-23) Here again the poem deals with a ‘mere’ moment, but one that was there in the memory on retrospection. The flowers speaking to him display his innocence. Due to the recurring changes in the joy and grief Frost says by way of summary in, “I Could Give All to Time” that some things remain:

I could give all to Time except – except
What I myself have held. But why declare
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There,
And what I would not part with I have kept. (11-15)

This implies that the speaker has not only “crossed to Safety” (14) in the past but also now, as he announces his former triumphs over the constraints of “Time,” beyond joy and grief: “I am There.” (14) Why brood over the past when it has been taken care of? Move ahead in life, for that is all that matters. It is futile brooding over lost and withered relationships. Best is, as Frost says, bury the past, there is no point dragging it. One needs to move ahead in life.

In “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Frost talks of the “forbidden” things that he has stored within him. He refuses to yield to “Time”. Very likely, those timeless moments of “beliefs” are “the long lost” memories that he remembers with “delight” when he begins to write a poem, things he “didn’t know he knew”. He is of the belief that an immediate impression connects with some past impressions. One gets an impression of Déjà-vu, then step by step the undiscovered and unexpected supply piles up. In other words, “lost memories are summoned” (“The Figure a Poem Makes”). The impressions, Frost says, that are most useful to his purpose are those he was unaware of when taken. Frost further says, “All I would keep for myself is the freedom of my material . . . to summon aptly from the vast chaos of all I have lived through”.

“Mending Wall” talks of barriers between people that disrupt the human relationships. It talks of communication, kinship and also the feeling of security that people gain from barriers. Being a philosophical poet Frost has cleverly intertwined the literal and metaphorical meaning into the poem using the wall as a symbolic representation of barriers that separate neighbours in their friendship.
The poem tells the story of two neighbours who disagree on the need for a wall. For the neighbour with the pine tree, the wall is of great significance as it provides a sense of security and privacy. He is of the belief that although two people could be friends, some kind of barrier is needed to separate them in order to ‘wall in’ the personal space and privacy of the individual. He makes a firm assertion by saying, “Good fences make good neighbours.” (27) The wall is symbolic of a barrier against intrusion. Here, behind the literal representation of building walls is a deeper metaphoric meaning – the people’s attitude towards others, which needs to be mended from time to time. It demarcates the social barriers built to provide a feeling of security and comfort in the hope that such barriers ease the apprehension in people regarding their security. By the mere use of the “I”, the voice that questions the need for a barrier, Frost has very strongly communicated his ideas. Through the conversation, the poet has very carefully portrayed his own views. In lines 30-35, the narrator questions the utility of the wall. He does not like the idea or the suggestion of “walling in” or “walling out” (33) anything.

Frost has here created a graphic imagery in conveying his ideas. The initial lines create a disapproval of the wall creating a visual image. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” (1) The first line emphasises “something.” This something appears alive. Qualities have been attributed to this “something” through the use of words “love”, “sends”, “spills” and “makes gaps” (1-4), creating a vivid impression of the deterioration of the wall. Nature, in the form of cold weather, frost and activities of small creatures slowly and gradually destroy the wall. The narrator, on the other hand, suggests that nature does not like walls. This is highlighted through the phrase, “sends the frozen ground swell under it” (2). It also describes nature making holes in the wall large enough that, “even two can pass abreast” (4). This in a literal sense
indicates the size of the holes. This can also be interpreted to suggest that nature wishes men to ‘walk together’ living in harmony where there is nothing between their friendship to separate them. (Parini, 138) “Activities of small creatures” could also indicate the external interventions that pose a threat to the internal peace and harmony.

Figurative expressions in the poem describe the relationship between the neighbours. Many phrases contain both the literal and metaphoric meaning, for instance, “to walk the line” (13) and “set the wall between us” (13-14). Here the narrator refers to the building of a solid wall that marks the boundary of the neighbour’s property. These phrases are also figurative, for they represent the setting of a barrier in the neighbour’s friendship. When they meet to repair the wall, it could be interpreted as repairing their friendship and resolving disputes. “To each the boulders have fallen to each” (16) points out that faults lie on the side of both neighbours.

The metaphor in line 17 compares their disputes to loaves and balls some are small whereas, some are huge. Thus the meaning and significance of building the wall is brought home by the use of such figurative language. “Stay where you are until our backs are turned” (19) and the metaphor “spring is mischief in me” (28) show the neighbours having fun in mending the wall together, creating a cheerful and light-hearted atmosphere. Ironically, the mending of the wall brings the neighbours together and builds up their friendship. It is in this process of repairing that the two come together, ties are strengthened, and more time is spent in each other’s company thus, boosting their communication with each other. While mending the wall the narrator observes the grim and stubborn attitude of the neighbour and uses a simile “like an old stone-savage” (40) to compare him to a stone age man who “moves in
darkness” (40-41) that is deeply set in his mind and is reluctant to change his views. The line, “something there is that doesn’t love a wall” (1) has been repeated in line thirty-five with a new meaning. It refers to the attitude of the narrator towards the wall. The narrator does not “love the wall” (35) and “wants it down” (36), whereas something mentioned in the first line refers to nature. Another example of significant repetition is the statement “good fences make good neighbours.” (45) This reflects the idea and opinion society adopts. Although people can be good friends there will always be a barrier between them, acting as a boundary that separates their social relations from their personal privacy, “walling in” (33) what they do not wish to share with others. To be more precise, the narrator has communicated his opinion regarding the ideas of boundaries between people, communication, friendship and the sense of security people gain from barriers.

Talking of Frost’s philosophy, every poem of Frost is philosophical in nature. It’s so because he was so well read, so well versed in all spheres of life and deeply reflective. Being shy and an introvert, Frost confined himself and loved to be in solitude. It was during this time, having an interest in every field of knowledge, Latin, Greek, Astronomy, Sociology or Politics, he acquired an in-depth knowledge in every field. It is this multi-dimensional knowledge enriched with his own wisdom that informs his poetry.

His “Fire and Ice,” was marvelled at for its compactness. There is a parallel between Frost’s discussion of desire and hate with Dante’s outlook on sins of passion and reason with sensuous desire, loosely recalling the characters Dante met in the upper rings of Hell. “Taste” (recalling Glutton), “hold” (recalling the adulterous lovers), and “favour” (recalling the hoarders). In contrast to this, hate is discussed with verbs of reason and thought, (“I think, I know . . . / To know . . .”).
This poem signalled for Frost “a new style, tone, manner and form.” Its casual tone marks the serious question it poses to the reader. In an article in 1999, John N. Serio claimed that the poem was a compression of Dante’s Inferno. According to him, Frost has drawn a parallel between the nine lines of the poem with the nine rings of Hell. He also notes that like the downward funnel of the rings of Hell, this poem also narrows considerably in the last two lines.

This poem discusses the end of the world. Here fire is symbolic of the emotions of desire and ice is symbolic of hate. Fagan, Deirdre J. (2007) in his Critical Companion to Robert Frost: A Literary Reference to his Life and Work has called it one of the most anthologized poems. According to Frost’s biographers “Fire and Ice” was inspired by a passage in Canto 32 of Dante’s Inferno, in which the most hideous offenders of hell, the traitors are submerged while in a fiery hell up to their necks in ice, “a lake so bound with ice, / it did not look like water, but like a glass . . . right clear / I saw, where sinners are preserved in ice. “Science and Arts,” a presentation on an anecdote he recalled in 1960 a prominent astronomer Harlow Shapley claimed to have inspired “Fire and Ice” Shapley describes an encounter he had with Frost a year before the poem was published in which Frost, realising that Shapley was the astronomer of great repute asked him how the world would end. Shapley’s response was either the sun would explode and reduce the Earth to ashes, or if it somehow manages to escape this fate, it will end up slowly freezing in deep space. This astronomer was surprised on seeing “Fire and Ice” in print a year later and referred to the poem as an example of how Science can influence the creation of art, or how well Science can clarify its meaning. Fire not only stands for passion, desire and greed but also for jealousy. This poem definitely relates to a relationship. To love is to desire, to burn, to yearn. It also has taints of jealousy, greed and hunger for power.
Hate is cold as ice and could freeze a person’s soul and make him indifferent and insensitive to pain. The end of the world could also mean death, the end of a relationship or the cooling down in relations.

Ice could be equally destructive. Besides hatred, it could stand for the cool head of reasoning. One comes across people who have a cool head for reason. They sin because of reason, which is worse because since the time of Aristotle, reason is considered as God’s supreme gift to man. Therefore, to sin due to reason is a greater sin. Ice also symbolises people devoid of emotions, feelings, a relationship that has frozen with no warmth left is equally destructive.

The poet prefers fire if the world has to end because according to him fire stands for purity, it burns away all negativity. Ice could be equally effective as hate in a relationship is subtle and numbing, the reason why he cautions his readers, “Ice is also great and would suffice” (8-9). (Fagan, Deirdre J. (2007) 115-116)

In many of his poems the losses brought about by the fall are experienced in winter as a kind of spiritual death. In poems like “Stars”, “Design”, “Once by the Pacific”, the universe is portrayed as indifferent to human needs and destructive to human life. The world of human beings too as shown in “The Vanishing Red” is replenished with evidence of vanity and violence. The miscommunication or the lack of communication, the fears that separate men from women, the loneliness that makes the hatred harden into hostility are well documented in the dramatic narratives of The North of Boston and throughout his poetry.

In the above poems, the realm of the real and the ideal are separated by a barrier which cannot be penetrated. Moments of joy, though transitory, remain occasions for celebration. The most trivial incident could alter the poet’s mood by
suggesting to him the possibilities of communication and an everlasting communion between people and God, people and people, people and things. The stars in Frost’s poetry are not always signs of cosmic meaninglessness, as they are in “Stars”, and “Bond and Free”, they are also images of; steadfastness and dependability in a relationship as in “I Will Sing You One – O” there are intimations of eternity. Similarly, the mowed fields that signify a change of seasons are not merely indications that the pleasures of summer are gone and the sorrows of autumn are ahead. “The Tuft of Flowers” serves as an occasion for communion and induces a feeling of brotherhood. In “Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter” the poet laments the passing of summer into winter and realises that “A bird with an angelic gift” (7) he saw has abandoned the tree and left, only “a single leaf” (10) behind is symbolic of the relationships that are seasonal and will fade away.

“The Secret Sits” of Frost is a pithy, aphoristic epithet celebrated for its wonderful ability to pack layers and layers of meaning and imagery into a few words. “A Question,” is an epithet with a question, unique of its kind, which could only be asked by one who had innate wisdom. Simple expression, put forth with a poetic fervour:

A voice said, Look me in the stars
And tell me truly, men of earth,
If all the soul-and-body scars
Were not too much to pay for birth.   (1-4)

Frost is known for his genius of capturing a scene in a few, well picked details. In “A Patch of Old Snow,” there is a wonderful overlaying of graphic imagery, the purity of snow well contrasted with “It is speckled with grime” (5). The
poem talks of the passage of time and its effect on newsprint and memory alike. In spite of this, the poem has all the quiet timeless stillness of a winter’s morning, an air of frozen time that reminds one of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”.

However, in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” there was a constant echo of the passing of time and the narrator ultimately failed to snatch for himself a moment. Here, it is just the opposite. Time, in the shape of an old newspaper, fails to assert itself on the narrator’s consciousness – the insignificance of the past is beautifully summed up in the last two lines: “The news of a day I’ve forgotten – / If I ever read it” (7-8). The surface imagery of the poem is beautiful, the interesting association of newsprint with grime and the images that prop up by the word “overspread” (6). The use of “corner” (1) suggests a secluded refuge from the passage of time.

Another such poem is, “The Need of Being Versed in Country Things”, here he has drawn a perfect picture of the countryside, this was a common sight in late 19th and early 20th century due to industrialisation people had started deserting the country life and migrating to urban dwellings. Often his poems are dark and searching, his work is abounding in ambiguity and irony. Simplicity is Frost’s strength. He has the potential to show the hidden drama in ordinary things. This poem goes a long way into understanding life and death as the poet has very cleverly used New Hampshire as a backdrop. The poem relates how life goes on in the country. The scene of course is static, yet Frost makes it relate a story, a story, in spite of being simple touches the heart. Besides vivid imagery, Frost has made use of good similes that are picturesque, like, “Now the chimney was all of the house that stood, / Like a pistil after the petals go.” (3-4) A picture of the house that is in a state of ruins on being abandoned flashes before our eyes, the chimney standing aloft in the midst of the debris is similar to the
pistil that stands erect while all the petals fall off. The birds flew in and out of the broken windows, “Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh.” (15) The reason behind their flying in and out was the uninhabited house. Their murmur was more like a sigh like we sigh on losing everything. This kind of imagery and abandonment brings to mind the lost and withering relationships, the children who have immigrated to the city leaving their old parents alone.

Another poem that is the most captivating and highlights his philosophical front is “The Road Not Taken,” the title itself is metaphorically used to mean the choices of life, taking a right decision at the right time and never regretting the decision taken. It is believed that paths in the woods and forks in roads are ancient and deep rooted metaphors for the lifeline, its crisis and decisions. Identical forks symbolise the choice of free will and fate. Frost here has dedicated this poem to his best friend Edward Thomas, who took decisions and later regretted them. One day as Frost came to the fork end of the road where the road had diverged. He could travel only one, so he took the other that perhaps had a better claim over the other as it was grassy and needed wear. Though, in the wee hours of the morning both the paths looked just as fair, the freshly fallen leaves that had not yet been trodden on, he chose to go on the other path. It’s basically making your own way in life and that is what will make the difference. It could also be interpreted as a metaphor for women or relationships. Someone with very few friends could be the road he chose as perhaps he saw something in them that no one had seen. It could also be the decisions taken to try a new way of doing something that has always existed but no one believed it. Being a true masterpiece it could also mean making a choice no one makes because of misconceptions.
The ladder of success they say is always crowded at the bottom, but there is ample of space at the top. However, if one reads the poem carefully one realises at the conclusion of the poem where he claims he took the road less travelled, he says it with a sigh, meaning thereby that ultimately he can’t be sure of his fate. Maybe he is anticipating his own regret that may result from the chosen path. As Frost says, one can never be sure of how our choices will pay off as much as we wish to believe that we are in full control of our future. Every decision made, results in a careful combination of both chance and choice. No matter what decisions we make we will always wonder what might have happened had we made a different decision. Somewhere at the back of his mind will remain the image of the yellow woods and two equally leafy paths. The very title of the poem is not “The Road Less Travelled,” but “The Road Not Taken,” this itself infuses an anticipation of sadness.

Even as he makes a choice, the speaker knows that he will always contemplate somewhere down the lane as what he has lost, the impossible, the unknowable other path. But what is most ironical, the poet says is that there is no RIGHT PATH – just the chosen path and the other path. What are sighed for ages and ages are not so much the wrong decisions as the moments of decisions themselves that mark the passing of a life. The theme of the poem thus could be “Carpe Diem,” a Latin word which means “seize the day.” Being a great visionary the subject that Frost has picked up applies today and will apply in times to come.

In the words of Frank Lentricchia, the moment “boughten friendship” (20) in “Provide, Provide” is uttered, we step into an ugly world making one realise the value of money and power. The poet is trying to mock when he says, “Die early and avoid the fate” (7), “Make the whole stock exchange your own.” (10) The poet here is not
didactic at all, he’s merely analysing the situation, counselling the value of money and power, and how they command fear. Frost here is actually addressing the masses as he says, “what worked for them, might work for you” (15) in a cynical and contemptuous manner. The penultimate stanza, the triplet rhyme of which condenses the entire poem: “No memory of having starred / Atones for later disregard / Or keep the end from being hard.” (17-18)

Such a valuable message of life and so conveniently conveyed. The narrator in “Two Tramps in Mud Time” is adept at chopping and his axe is falling with full accuracy. Looking at the tramps the narrator immediately knew what they were thinking and the very thought that they wanted his job for pay, made him love his task more. “And smooth and moist in vernal heat” (48) Then comes the climax – the last two stanzas that put the matter straight, “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 here, he believes in Darwin’s theory of “Survival of the fittest,” so he 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 when 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 Parini, “the poet takes away with one hand what he has given with the other.” With his intelligence he was aware that need overrides love in situations like the one posed in the poem. He refuses to let go, instead, makes a generalisation how, “love and need are one,” even though the situation in the poem demanded it. It is pointless to complain, as Malcolm Cowley does, that the speaker in the poem should have offered these homeless men some work if he was too selfish to give up the chopping himself.

Frost was of the opinion that the literal truth of any poem is subordinate to its imaginative truth, therefore it’s pointless to discuss what should have happened. “You never know where a poem comes from,” Frost said, “but where it’s gone, that you can tell” (Parini, 289). You can see the tail, the trace of the comet, after it’s gone.” Darwin’s theory is once again emphasised in “A Drumlin Woodchuck” where towards the end he admits, “I have been so instinctively thorough / About my crevice and burrow. (31-32) In order to survive one need not indulge or initiate a fight, but can definitely protect oneself by being cautious against every move taken in his direction.

Some of Frost’s poems are ambivalent in nature, so much so that in “Design” he has left his readers to answer, whether it was by mere chance or fluke that the spider, the flower and the moth were united in this circle of life and death. According to Frost, it is nothing but design that brought these three entities together. However Frost feels there is something negative about the word “design.” The flower, the spider and the moth, visualised as ingredients of a witch’s broth are terrifying and evil as we normally associate witches with devils. Somehow, the witch’s broth also hints at the ‘greater power’ which is not benevolent but malicious, who is all out to lure, trap and then destroy. What here makes the concept of death most distressing is that
death has come to the moth with “satin” (5) and ‘paper wings’. The image that these two create is of beauty and fragility, in spite of its beauty, this fragile insect has been killed because some higher authority wanted it. The poet asserts that it is “right” (5) which make one analyse that if “darkness” (13) of “night” (12) had ended any other way, the whole balance of life would have been ruined.

Talking of nature, “The Woodpile” is a visual, decaying reminder of an unknown tragedy which is slowly disintegrating. This is in total contrast to “The Tuft of Flowers” where the human endeavour brings joy. The key line, “To warm the frozen swamp 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 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, by being an awkward spectacle in that lonely surrounding and by turning the speaker’s thoughts to human presence in such a place. The site of the decaying woodpile perhaps conveys to the speaker the depth of nature’s unconcern, “Minerva’s snow-white marble eyes / Without the gift of sight.” (Stars, 11-12) But this is not all. If one is optimistic, has hope then they say the cosmos also conspires. In “The Black Cottage,” for the old lady, it was war and not God that decided the fate of man.

Yes, it was ‘survival of the fittest’ that prevailed in the society then. The phrase “her half asleep” (92) because of fear and anxiety, the actual words “descended into Hades” (94) seemed too heathen for their liberal youth but was the cause of paranoia for her that kept her awake unless, “As a child misses the unsaid Good-night, / And falls asleep with heartache –” (102-103) Hinting at the innocence of her heart the poet remarks:
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. (105-108)

A very sharp insight and a subtle remark regarding how people cling to beliefs so much that they appear to be true. One must accept things as they come that is the truth to life. What is commendable about Frost is how deep he has dealt into every relationship in life. Talking of every relationship he brings us abreast with the true philosophy of life.

Talking of the transience of life, “In a Vale” the poet admits the fact that everything is God gifted. He is the one that breathes life into every living organism. He gives and also takes. When we talk of the indifference and malevolence of nature, in “Storm Fear,” Frost has made an elaborate use of phrases to this effect, like, “against us in the dark” (1), “pelts with snow” (2), “Stifled bark” (4), “The beast” (5), all seem that that the storm is conspiring against mankind. The real fear is when one moves from “Two and a child” (10) to “How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length” (12) indicating thus, the heat and the warmth, essential for our survival. This also acts as a reminder, how stealthily death comes and takes us away. He could make such a justification because his family had close encounters with death.

Frost had an incredibly clear perception of life. He was able to capture the very essence of the spirit that lingered on in the desolate and half-deserted New England countryside. The old man in “An Old Man’s Winter Night” is not tragic, not heroic, and not pathetic either. He in fact 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 the most hostile condition is something one needs to ponder on. It is indeed the last lesson learnt that, “every individual is endowed with an immortal soul that is fated on this earth to endure a pilgrimage to salvation or damnation. Each soul must go their solitary way, irrespective of the circumstances living up to the test of strength and faith in God.” Morris Dickstein, in his journal “On Robert Frost” has aptly said, “The key to Frost’s power is not his dark vision but the voice he found to express it, the way he was able to ground it in a flow of speech like intonations at once accessible and memorable.”

Frost was of the belief that the world cannot be saved by knowledge; it can only be saved by daring, bravery, going ahead. He insisted that, “You should go ahead on insufficient information” and that “You’re always believing ahead of your evidence,” because “what fills up the knowing is believing.” He praised self belief, moral courage, and a strong will as the most admirable character traits in human nature which are the prime ingredients to a healthy and fruitful human relationship. He also connected these traits with great achievements. Milton’s greatness as a man and a poet, in Frost’s view rested on his faith in himself and his moral courage. In Paradise Lost Milton marvelled par excellence and proved his courage to the world. The two greatest epics in English Literature according to Frost were composed by poets who were blind. Homer and Milton are an exemplary to this incredible feat of courage.

On being told that talent supersedes courage because without it all the determination would not get him anywhere, Frost’s answer was simple: although talent was essential the reverse was also true – that talent without courage would not make a poet. All virtues, including our literary talents appear mere theoretical.
Writing a poem is an act of self-faith and courage. Writing the first line of a poem involves a commitment by the poet, and thereafter, every line is an act of disciplined will, of courage and faith that he can run the whole course to the finish line and believe the poem into existence. Frost was firm in his belief that when young poets quit, it is not a failure of talent, but it is a failure of nerve. Frost extended his argument on courage beyond literature to human relationships and how it moulds the whole life. Men he says should be firm and courageous in their commitments, may it be love and marriage, in religion, art, politics, and loyalty towards country and friends. Agnosticism, in his view paralysis the will and makes men cowards.

Frost quotes a classic example of how agnosticism paralysed the moral will and hampered decisive action in the face of public duty. The failure of George B. McClellan, the federal Civil War general is a live example to this. This man, even though he outnumbered his enemy forces by more than two-to-one, possessed superior equipment and an advantageous field position, was a spiritually hollow person and refused to engage the Confederate army. In contrast to this, Frost noted, General Ulysses S. Grant persisted in his attacks on enemy forces in spite of being at a huge disadvantage, and that kind of courageous decisiveness made him stand tall amongst his colleagues. This was why he proved to be a great military leader. Frost prophesised that the twentieth century will be remembered in history of having finally determined the true role of science in human affairs, and that man would find that science will fall far short of exact, absolute, and predictable knowledge, especially when applied to man.

Frost’s non-membership in a church has been mistaken to mean that he was a freethinker who held religion in contempt. Frost, on the contrary respected the
religious beliefs, but he did not wish to constrain himself to a particular theology. T.S. Eliot was “more churchy” whereas he was being more religious. Regarding his philosophical and metaphysical beliefs, an apt example is found on how literary critics differ in interpreting his poem “The Strong Are Saying Nothing,” especially the final lines, “There may be little or much beyond the grave, / But the strong are saying nothing until they see.” (15-16) As the young Puritan protagonist in “The Generation of Men” observed: “What counts is the ideals / And those will bear some keeping still about.” All of Frost’s remarks on the need of man of faith to “stay unassuming” are summarised in the final lines of “The Fear of God”: “Beware of coming too much to the surface, / And using for apparel what was meant / To be the curtain of the inmost soul”. Here the poet cautioned that if a person succeeds, he owes it all to the mercy of God. In light of Frost’s critique of agnosticism his final volume of poems, In the Clearing, and especially “Kitty Hawk,” could be regarded as a defence to his dualism of spirit and matter.

The birth of Christ was to Frost an historical event of the most profound religious importance. In Linda W. Wagner’s edited anthology of critical reviews, Robert Frost: The Critical Reception (1977), not a single one of the sixteen reviews of In the Clearing deals with Frost’s dualism, nor the religious theme in “Kitty Hawk”. The philosophical beliefs of Frost are totally ignored. The best published critical discussion of Frost’s final volume is Stephen D. Warner’s “Robert Frost in the Clearing: The Risk of Spirit in Substantiation” in Frost Centennial Essays (1974). Besides subject and form, Warner was concerned with the themes that characterised Frost’s poetry. Warner acknowledged that “Kitty Hawk” is the central poem in the volume, but he treated it as,” the record of Frost’s survival on the road through the dark wood.” Warner fell short of identifying the poet’s philosophical dualism as the
source of his beliefs regarding poetry, religion, science and the social order of the western world.

Some of the most discerning insights in Frost’s intellectual course are to be found in some unpublished letters by George Ray Elliot, Frost’s closest friend in spirit among his colleagues at Amherst College. Elliot made some important observations on Frost’s religious beliefs in five letters written to Lawrance Thompson, between April 11, 1947, and March 25, 1963. In the letter dated 11 April, 1947, he stated that Frost held to “a sort of theism along with disbelief in the Incarnation, i.e., a historically unique manifestation of God in Christ.” In a letter dated March 25, 1963, after Frost’s death, Eliott wrote that since Elinor’s death, RF has accepted more and more the Divinity of Christ just because RF was a brainy and insightful student of the New Testament. Frost’s last letter, dictated from his deathbed, was written to Eliott and his wife which gives evidence of his belief in God and his closeness in spirit to Eliott. An ignorance and denial of Frost’s philosophical orientation can result in a very limited and mistaken interpretation of those poems that deal with serious philosophical beliefs. With poetry as with sainthood and religious salvation, many are called but few are chosen and Frost being “God’s elect” was the honoured one.
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