FILIAL RELATIONSHIP

You don’t have to deserve your mother’s love
But you have to deserve your father’s love.

He’s more particular . . . The father is always a Republican towards his son,
and his mother’s always a Democrat.

Robert Frost
Interview in Writers at Work (1963)

Filius, originated from a Latin word which means son or daughter. Filial, in
English according to The Compact Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus and Word Power
Guide means “having to do with a son or daughter, of or expected from a son or
daughter: filial duty”. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English
quotes filial (usually before noun) (formal) “connected with the way children behave
towards the parents: filial affection / duty”. When it comes to dealing with human
relationships, an important aspect of life, it is Frost’s forte. In a simple yet unique
style, he deals with this sensitive issue in his own vernacular style with such ease,
touching on every human emotion that the reader relates to it. Filial relationship is the
quintessence of life. The child gets its identity from his parents and the parents too
give meaning to their own life because of their children. The pride on bringing new
life on earth and contributing in its evolution is in fact the most memorable moment
that every woman looks forward to.

The relationship between mother and child, father and child, is of utmost
importance as it is they that introduce him to the world. It is generally seen that the
child is closer to the mother and confides in her more, leaving all inhibitions, whereas
with his father he has some reservations. The family background, the healthy bonding
between the family members, the space that each one gets for his personal growth, the 
faith and trust one has in the other, the commitment towards the family are some of 
the aspects that cater to the holistic development of the child. Parents being the first 
teachers play a pivotal role in this. Their conduct and behaviour is paramount in 
grooming the child.

Childhood experiences and memories have a great impact on one’s mind and 
tend to carve the initial years. Fond recollections are always cherished, whereas sad 
memories take a backseat emerging now and then in the form of a nightmare to scare 
and spoil the mood of the individual. As Jay Parini puts it, “It would be hard to 
overestimate the impact that the first eleven years of Frost’s life in California had in 
his development.” (18) One’s early experience is of course essential in the formation 
of character. Parini further says, “Frost absorbed from his father a great deal, 
including a feral drive to make something of himself, to exercise influence, to feel the 
world bending to his will. Frost’s lifelong love of competitive sports and his passion 
to excel and win in whatever he did were also a legacy from his father.” (19) But 
besides this, Frost also learned the price of failure from his father Will Frost: how 
easily one’s ambitions may be crushed, and easily shaken by others and oneself. In 
later years, Frost himself would swing between the poles of brash self-confidence (“I 
expect to do something to the present state of literature in America”) and deep self-
doubt. (“I have been bad and a bad artist”). (Parini, 19) Frost here subconsciously 
idealised his parents and seeing them as his role models does exactly as they did.

The poem “Spring Pools” is symbolic of this: “The trees that have it in their 
pent up buds” (7) are a symbol of fertility and energy heralding new life. The buds 
will spring into flowers from which will emerge a new fruit. This fruit will give rise to
a new seed and the process of fertility will again start. “These flowery waters and these watery flowers / From snow that melted only yesterday” (11-12). The flow of water that turns into pools shows the cyclic process at work because during the spring the snow begins to melt and with that water new life in the forest is generated. This is how new life emerges in humans too. It is pure, sacred and vibrant like the spring pool with a rare radiance, purity and innocence about it which is easily inclined to the immediate environment. It is like wet clay that takes the shape of the mould it’s put into. In the words of Dr. Haim Ginott, “Children are like wet cement. Whatever falls on them makes an impression.”

Over the years things develop, the future is a natural development that takes place. Just as a seed sprouts into a new sapling when sown in the soil and soon turns into a plant which in turn becomes a flower, then a fruit. In other words, new life springs out. The past lays foundation for a new growth. Every season marks a new beginning. In “Blueberries” the mystery of rebirth is unveiled.

There may not have been the ghost of a sign
Of them anywhere under the shade of the pine,
But get the pine out of the way, you may burn
The pasture all over until not a fern
Or grass blade is left, not to mention a stick,
And presto, they’re up all round you as thick,
And hard to explain as a conjuror’s trick. (15-21)
There are changes taking place all around him at a quick pace just like the conjuror’s trick. With the emergence of new life the mother, the guardian angel to the child, is the closest as she nurses the new born who then is helpless. She is his first teacher who teaches him to sit, stand, walk, talk and so on. She attends from the smallest to the most essential needs of the child. She nurtures it and makes it capable to one day stand on its own feet. The house brims with joy in the presence of a child. The whole house goes buzzing with so much to do, so much so that there are times when the lady of the house is so caught up with the household chores that she answers with her back turned. There are times she craves for privacy with her spouse which is lost to both of them till the time the children grow up and can make a difference to themselves ready to embark on their own future. A very picturesque and graphic image to this effect is reflected “In the Home Stretch”, where the woman is so overburdened with her everyday chores and other social commitments that she barely finds time for her offspring or spouse. From the reading of the poem a kind of familiarity builds up. It is a carbon picture of not one but every life. What Frost depicted through the poem aptly suits its title, “In the Home Stretch” which metaphorically relates to the steady stream of household chores that never seem to end, no matter how laboriously one works. Though sources say that this poem was written before 1909 (dated by Lawrance Thompson), it was first published in Century Magazine (July 1916, 383-391) and later became a part of The Mountain Interval (1916). This poem speaks of life at Derry, and the farm experiences of Frost and his wife Elinor, the tired lady in the poem. The lady tells Joe “Dumped down in Paradise we are and happy” (176). Very soon this so-called Paradise seems to envelope like a demon all set to devour her. The woman speaks of the New Moon: “A wire she is of silver, as new as we / To everything. Her light won’t last us long.” (77-78) Insecurity
in her is clearly evident. Though she is aware of the fact that the moon is going to grow bigger and bigger each day, she feels this happiness of living together with spouse is no real happiness, it’s only transitory. Real happiness and a feeling of completeness in truth are living with the family as a whole, including the children as well. Only then does one feel satisfied. “In the Home Stretch”, Frost has clearly brought this out.

As Perry D. Westbrook succinctly talks of in her essay, “Robert Frost’s New England,” there is an hint towards industrialization, here, when the lady of the house says, “To lighted city streets we, too, have known, / But now we are giving up for country darkness.” (65, 66) Darkness here is symbolic of the country-side that is now forsaken as more and more are moving towards the city. People were forsaking the country-side and becoming urban dwellers; the easy money in the form of daily wages coming in by working in factories, the superficiality and the glitter of city life was luring the youngsters. In 1900 Rural New England, was both culturally and economically in a state of ruin. Many farms and villages had been abandoned during the past century as the inhabitants had emigrated to the west or the industrial towns where they were earning well. Articles describing the plight of the countryside were appearing in The Atlanta Monthly, The New England Magazine and The Century. Being a fond reader, Frost read the dismal state of the countryside that was deserted and the plight of people who remained below the poverty line. “Conditions were at their worst back in the remote regions especially the hills and mountains, but no region was unaffected” Derry being close to the Industrial town was not deeply affected. (Westbrook, Frost: Centennial Essays, 1974, 239) There were many who did not succumb to hopelessness but decided to stay, for they had a firm belief in the Almighty, the saviour, and considered all atrocities of life as a test where they were
being tried and tested. This has been hinted in not one but many of his poems. In fact, Frost himself bought a farm at Derry and settled in for farming. He would have continued doing so, had it not been the call of responsibility. Thus, necessity drove him to become a teacher.

Coming back to “In the Home Stretch”, there is a subtle hint that the lady, the chief protagonist, has an apprehension that her son, too, will be lured towards the city. Eventually this did happen. “Have we a piece of candle if the lamp / And oil are buried out of reach?” (88, 89) One can sense a feeling of insecurity as darkness envelopes her room. This is metaphorically used for the darkness that comes in the life of parents when their children desert them and go away. The parents, on the other hand, try to lure and convince their children so that they stay back.

Joe said: “You big boys ought to find a farm,
And make good farmers, and leave other fellows
The city work to do. There’s not enough
For everybody as it is in there.” (104-107)

Joe tries to convince his son Ed that there is plenty of work there at the farm for them. The parents want him to stay and not leave them, but Ed wishes to leave as there is more scope, more opportunities in the city. Suddenly fear loomed large in that very house where she had found no time to herself. Fear of loneliness, desolation, forlornness and being deserted. The emptiness of the house seemed to scare her.

“Did they make something lonesome go through you?
It would take more than them to sicken you –
Us of our bargain. But they left us so
As to our fate, like fools past reasoning with.
They almost shook me.” (130-135)

She becomes almost hysterical, is out of her wits, she cannot overcome the fact that her son had decided to leave them. The very thought of their son leaving them made them “lonesome”, it would be “sickening” and they would be left to their fate like fools trying to reason out, or justify their logic. The very idea seems to haunt her and hit her hard like a hammer. Frost has sensitized these lines to such an extent that one can actually relate to the scene when children leave their parents, to the feelings of the parents who are left to the mercy of their fate. “It’s nothing; it’s their leaving us at dusk” (140) symbolic of the dusk of their life, when parents look with tired and craving eyes for approval and acceptance, but are deserted. Ed, their son had left them and gone. Joe and his wife were desperately waiting for his return. “He’ll plan for us and plan / To help us, but he’ll take it out in planning.” (163,164) All hopes are pent up and the decision of their son in matters of trivial importance is accredited. Joe’s statement, “I like chairs occupying other chairs”(167) clearly indicates that he does not like being left alone and that dreariness looms around him with the mere thought of being deserted. Joe goes into depression as he hates to be left alone.

Blake Morrison in his essay titled “The Filial Art: A Reading of Contemporary British Poetry” has noticed something peculiar about the younger generation of the British poets. The relationship that greatly influences them is with their parents. Some of these young poets are Tony Harrison, Seamus Heaney, Hugo Williams, Craig Raine and a few more. In the works of these poets the parents occupy an “unusual centrality” with fathers playing a more prominent role than the mothers. This not only exposes us to know a lot about their generation, but also the different ways in which
they write about their parents. Some of these sentiments are dealt with in Tony Harrison’s poem “Illuminations”. The family intimacy in it is beautiful, thrilling but at the same time dangerous and fatal. In an interview for The Guardian Harrison said, “I wanted to write poetry that people like my parents might respond to.” (The Guardian, 2007) It’s about a boy going to the fair with his parents. The boy’s father in the poem wasn’t impressed with the money that the boy was spending. Time has lapsed. This child has grown and has changed since he got back from the war. He is now narrating it 40 years later about how now he understands his father. The last line touches the very core of the heart, “the penny drops in time, wish you were here.” (16) As Harrison puts it in his Confessional Poetry, where he confesses that he is guilty and this initiates not just from “abandoning” his parents, but by practicing an art which fails to communicate with them. In the first half of this book Harrison dramatises himself as a poet easily moved to tears. Self conscious here is an important element. The first half of the poem talks of the poet’s mind; his schooling, how he gained eloquence, made to recognise the limits of classical education. The second half “Book Ends”. Harrison struggles to supply an epitaph for his mother’s gravestone. By the middle of his writing of the sequence, he writes about his father’s death. By now, he himself, after gaining maturity, had learnt the language of the heart. As compared to Harrison, Frost had learnt the language of the heart long back, as his father died when Robbie, as he was then called, was a minor. Responsibility of the family, his mother and younger sister Jeanie Florence, who was two years his junior, fell on his tender shoulders.

In “The Impulse” the emptiness, the depression and the frustration one goes through in the absence of a child is well depicted. It is the child that gives meaning to a woman’s life. The woman here in the poem adopted all means in order to make
herself happy and contended. She even accompanied her husband to the farm so that she could while away her time, but this did not help. The second stanza portrays it well, “And work was little in the house, / She was free,” (5-6) the absence of a child added to her frustration. She felt incomplete, discontented, devoid of enthusiasm, as if a vacuum had been created, so much so that living with her husband or the moments spent in his company became pathetic and intolerable. She wanted to run away from him, and one day she did finally run away leaving him alone to fight his destiny.

She walked quietly at first . . . even when he called out to her; she hid herself in fear of being found out and then ran as fast as she could never to come back again.

Sudden and swift and light as that

The ties gave,

And he learned of finalities

Besides the grave. (25-28)

It was then that he realized that one could part even before death. It is love that matters most. The relationship that was meant to last till the last breath gave way in a split second. The poor husband had been living under a false delusion that the ties would never give way. This also brings to our attention the fact that marital relationship is very fragile and the child holds utmost priority in this relationship.

However, there are some parents who give high regard to the independence of their children. They have no desire to suppress or dictate any move in their child’s life. “A Girl’s Garden” gives an insight into the father’s understanding of the child’s need for independence. Wanting to give enough space to his daughter and hoping it will strengthen her for her future, the father in the poem found a suitable place for her
garden which was neither too big nor too small, just enough to serve the purpose. He basically wanted to give her, her own ‘space’. The father here is a very understanding parent, so unlike the parent who asserts his authority and interferes in every activity of the child.

As recorded by Jay Parini, Frost recalls an incidence, when his mother Belle Frost and Aunt Blanche would teach him and his sister in the mornings and then they were left free to roam about the streets in the afternoon. Their little apartment was tiny and cramped, but there was a small garden at the back with a shed that Frost converted into a chicken coop. This further developed his interest in animals and farming. This probably was on Frost’s mind when he wrote “A Girl’s Garden”.

A child keeps craving for freedom so that he can do what he wants, and once he gets it he loves to experiment, which at times is fruitful, sometimes disastrous, but during this experience his personality has evolved. He has had some good as well as some bad experiences the memory of which will remain with him forever. This is what happens in “A Girl’s Garden”. The girl here has grown. Seeing others, she recollects her youth when she herself was desperate for independence. It talks about a girl who takes care of her own garden personalized for her by her father. She does it in her own manner and does not listen to her father. It relates the experiences of the girl and what she learns from it. The father doesn’t tell her to plough it. In fact, there is not enough land to plough, but just enough for her to get stronger and become independent. At first, excitement takes over with the mere thought of having it to herself. She desires to exhibit full liberty over it, experimenting in her own way. She’s eager, doesn’t mind working with her hands, but then very soon this excitement fades and she leaves it midway, going on to do something else that involves more of fun.
The poet also goes on to show how the little girl refused to take her father’s advice on how to plant and maintain the garden. The girl, unwilling to take any advice, sows a miscellaneous variety of seeds. Her crop is to the same effect. She doesn’t stick to one thing; it’s all over the place. She admits she’s planted one of all things but weeds, even a fruit tree. She has got a bunch of plants, but no actual “fruit”. The last line says, “And she never sins by telling the tale / To the same person twice.”

(48) Why does she do that? Maybe she feels her doing so, will be giving advice which she refrained from for a simple reason. The little girl had a “set ideal” in her mind, to do and learn from her own mistakes which surprisingly she did and got good results. She has learnt something: to stick to a thing and do it well. Although she messed up, she still learnt a lesson. It is rightly said, “Experiences ground beliefs.” Firstly, they create a broader base of knowledge and secondly, they operate as tests for our beliefs. These beliefs are stranded deep into the mind of the believer. Even “the wildest dreams” are confined to what they have experienced. In short, experiences create a far broader base for understanding. Any new experience will expand everything about life including their imagination and since it is the belief that is ultimately rooted in the mind, it is reasonable. Experience changes the manner in which one approaches beliefs. This is exactly what happened with Frost. “A Girl’s Garden”, is in fact an autobiographical portrait of Frost. Experience and struggle taught him a lot. In his later years, when he lost three of his children and his wife, who was a source of inspiration to him, it was this experience and struggle that helped pave a path for him. Though totally shattered within, he kept a bold front. Initially a pessimist, he was now no longer that coy, shy boy whose voice constantly quivered; instead, a precursor and paragon of optimism to the hilt.
The family background and the behaviour of the parents play a dominant role in the personality development of the child. Living in a society where being a male is held glorious and it is he who plays a dominant role in the family, things happen only with his permission. In “Storm Fear” Frost personifies weather itself turning into a beast. “When the wind works against us in the dark,” (1) This is a reminiscence of the anger and rage found in his father Will Frost, “who would erupt before the household lamps were finally extinguished on any given night.” Will Frost’s rebellious nature being contagious was bound to have an impact on young Robert, and he soon “learned to live by his fists” (Parini, 17). His mother was paranoid about his attitude, but his father took this attitude as a sign of his “inherent toughness and character” (Parini, 17). “A brawler himself, he did not want to raise a son afraid to stand his own ground.”

In retrospect Frost’s mind often travels to the Pacific coastline of his childhood, the traumatic experience he went through in San Francisco. One day during a walk along a popular beach, his parents had accidently left him behind, and Frost, a little boy then, found himself alone and insecure facing the threatening storm coming towards the land. This nerve-racking event of being left alone was further deepened when his father would leave him all alone on the beach while he went for long distant swims. The poor boy, already apprehensive regarding his parents, was convinced that his father had abandoned him. Helplessly he waited in a state of anxiety for almost an eternity only to rejoice seeing his father reappearing in the waves (Parini, 14). With this moment being his most priced moment, Frost not only incorporated this childhood terror into a poem but also made the threat more prominent and outrageous by describing the destructive rage of the ocean against mankind. In “Once by the Pacific” he mentions, “Great waves looked over others
coming in, / And thought of doing something to the shore / That water never did to land before.” (2-4) It seems as though they were conspiring against the little boy. In this tussle between the rising water and land one can clearly visualise a terrified little boy trapped between the two – the ocean on one side and the land on the other, unable to escape and doomed to destruction by one of the two forces. The waves were furious, as though full of vengeance and malevolence, fully charged to destroy anything they touched. The shore and the cliff needed to be supported by the entire continent in order to challenge the malignant waters of that “unconquerable foe”. Here the “unconquerable foe” is symbolic of the fear and the apprehensions buried deep in the heart of this little child, so deep that it took him quite some time to get over them. In “Once by the Pacific” he recalls a scene,

The shore was lucky in being backed by cliff,

The cliff in being backed by continent;

It looked as if a night of dark intent

Was coming, and not only a night, an age.

Someone had better be prepared for rage. (8-12)

The waves were hitting the shore with venomous animosity, as though, warning him to be ready for the worst challenges in life. This very shade of terror and insecurity is again strongly reflected in “Bereft,” where it seemed as though, the entire cosmos is conspiring against him. He notably uses words like “deeper roar”, (2) “Sombre clouds in the west were marred,” (7) “Leaves got up in a coil and hissed / Blindly struck at my knee and missed.” (9-10) The traumatised little boy felt as if the entire world was conspiring against him.
“The Lockless Door” throws light on an autobiographical event that also occurred in Frost’s life. Throughout his childhood he had developed paranoia for darkness, to the point that he slept in his mother’s room throughout his High School years. Frost recollects the time in 1895, during his High School years, staying alone in a cottage on Ossipee Mountain when he heard a knock on the door, the old lockless door. Petrified, he jumped out through the window and then called “Come in” from the outside. Next morning when he returned to the cottage, to his utter amazement he found one of his neighbours fast asleep on the floor in a drunken state of mind.” Frost took this comic event and created a more threatening force outside the lockless door in order to create a threatening effect. He uses the term “whatever” instead of “whoever” in order to express the unknown and threatening origin of the knock, as well as to acquaint the readers with the fear that the narrator was brooding with in his unconscious mind. The use of short, crisp lines with the stress placed on the final syllable highlights the narrator’s terror. The forewarning, that the child goes through in his infancy tag on to his soul, turning every night into a nightmare.

Home is a haven for everyone, especially a child. A feeling of contentment, gratification and relaxation is there when one is secure within the four walls of his home. “Acceptance” boasts of this. When it gets dark the birds begin their flight to their nest,

Hurrying low above the grove, some waif

Swoops just in time to his remembered tree.

At most he thinks or twitters softly, ‘Safe!

Now let the night be dark for all of me. (9-12)
How very innocently apt! It is the same with humans. Once one is within the safe grounds then it does not matter how dark it is outside. On warm Sundays in spring, little Robbie would often go to the botanical displays at Woodward’s Garden in the old mission district – the setting for “At Woodward’s Garden,” which Frost published in 1936. Memories of these excursions stayed with Frost in later years, and some of them were moulded into poetry, such as the beautiful “Auspex” from _In the Clearing_, which opens like this:

Once in a California Sierra

I was swooped down upon when I was small,

And measured, but not taken after all,

By a great eagle bird in all its terror. (1-4)

“Auspex” or “All about Eagles”, a strange poem about a child who was attacked and nearly been carried away by an eagle. “Ganymede” in Roman mythology was a young handsome boy, who attracted the eye of Jove, the chief God of the Romans. Mesmerised by the look of the boy, Jove sent one of his eagles flying down the Mount Olympus to kidnap Ganymede. The eagle successfully carried off the mission. Jove, on seeing the boy, was in total ecstasy. He made Ganymede his personal cupbearer, thus keeping him always by his side, and assigning him the task of serving nectar and wine as beverages to Jove and the other gods. According to Frost Ganymede was “a barkeep unto Jove”. “A California Sierra”, is one of the peaks in the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range. It is very natural on Frost’s part to have mentioned it since he was born in San Francisco and lived in California until he was
eleven years old. In the early 1880’s the Sierra Nevadas were filled with spectacular birds such as eagles and the California Condor. Thus this myth of Ganymede was true. A seven or eight year old Robbie, while visiting the Sierra Nevada was “swooped down upon” by an eagle which measured or sized up the lad as a possible meal and then flew away. Ganymede, we must take note was chosen by Jove’s eagle whereas, here Frost was “rejected”.

Auspex is a term which deals with birds. In ancient Rome there were prophets and sages, and one of them was called an “auspex”. The prophet was assigned the task of doing a complete research on birds especially eagles. By studying the flight of the auspex, he could predict future success and failure. These predictions were known as auspicial. By naming the poem “Auspex” it is an attempt to divine the future by studying the behaviour of the California eagle which “rejected” him. The story further goes on. Frost went with his parents at the age of seven or eight, on a visit to the Sierra Nevada Mountain Ranges, where a huge petrifying eagle flew down close to him, measured him as a meal, but then probably changed its mind thus leaving him there. The significance of such omens regarding the behaviour of the birds is difficult to find, but when Robbie went to his parents they just waved it off saying that he probably wasn’t worth being carried away. It’s a good omen indicating that he is “safe”. Little Robbie was too small to know the implications of the word “safe”. He was disheartened at not being good enough to fetch drinks for the gods. He was annoyed on being rejected (essays/auspex.html). Even though Frost wrote “Auspex” towards the end of his life, it has the same independence and enthusiastic spirit of “The Road Not Taken”, where Frost chooses the “Road less travelled by” as an assertion of his having an independent mind. His “Auspex” is again a clear indication
that he will interpret the meaning of events in his life as per his interpretation and discretion. He will be his own “auspex” and do as he wishes.

In “The Death of the Hired Man” Silas returns to Warren and Mary’s farm to work for them, but actually he knew death was approaching him and wanted to be on a safe ground. Although he was not their blood, a feeling of belonging was there. He could have gone to his brother’s place which was rightfully his, but there he felt like a stranger. Mary defines home as, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” Here we have the true definition of home. Warren follows this by stating, “I should have called it something you somehow haven’t to deserve.” (121-124) When a child is in trouble, no matter how self-sufficient he is, home is the first thing that will come to his mind. The very thought of home brings a feeling of security in him and once he is within the confinement of his home he feels content, well-equipped, ready to face anything that comes his way.

Similarly, when Warren says that Silas had never intended to hurt anybody, Mary points out that it is she who is hurt. “No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay / And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair back.” (163,164) and makes it clear that hurt does not necessarily come from deliberate or malevolent intent. It could also come from a person witnessing human suffering. The mother’s heart is very vulnerable and she is very sensitive to any kind of suffering that her child undergoes. Mary was a mother to Silas and was deeply touched by the condition he was in. The mother wishes and craves that any and every atrocity that her child is destined to face should pass through her, be well adulterated, with all its impact nullified, before it reaches her child. Being his foster-mother, Mary had an intuition that the moment the cloud touches the moon Silas would breathe his last and this is exactly what
happened. The moment the cloud touched the moon Warren entered with the news of Silas’s death. (Vogel, *Frost: Centennial Essays*, 1974, 201)

If mothers are not materialistic, so are the children, there are some who are very sensitive, like the children in “The Black Cottage.” Doing well for themselves they could even have sold the house, but they wanted to keep it as it was a storehouse of their childhood memories. It had witnessed them grow, it had the loving memories of their parents. Frost here has very subtly tried to point out the other side of the picture. The poor lady died. First it was her husband who left her and went into war, then her two sons. She wretched soul, felt abandoned, a very common scenario in New England where every house contributed its male members to war and left the lady of the house to her destiny. Being a mother she must have also dreamt that her sons will look after her in her old age; she will get them married and live to see her grand-children playing in the same compound as her children did.

The mother’s heart is very sensitive when her child is in question. What can be a better example of this than “Home Burial” which brings us abreast with a mother’s feelings and how both the parents react differently to the same situation? The father feels that is what life is!! Accepts it, and throws himself into the horrible task of digging his son’s grave in order to keep himself occupied. He too loved his son a lot, but wanted to do this last ritual himself. His wife on the other hand was of a different opinion. She considered this action of her husband as brutal: how could a father dig his own son’s grave? She instead wanted to cling on to her grief, keep lamenting it, never allowing it to become less as she felt that not doing so she would be betraying her son.

Friends make pretence of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned

And making the best of their way back to life

And living people, and things they understand

But the world’s evil. (106-110)

She considers the world to be evil, very much like Frost’s wife Elinor did when she lost her son Elliot, who was barely three and half. Elinor slipped into deep depression, saying if there was God he was malevolent, whereas Frost felt that heaven was simply indifferent to human suffering. (Pack, Robert. 104) This has been referred to in “Stars”, “Those stars like some snow white / Minerva’s snow white marble eyes / without the gift of sight.” (10-12) He accepted it as God’s will and spent his time writing poetry, indulging in some work or the other. He also talks of the people’s indifference to others’ sufferings. The last four lines “In the Home Stretch” indicate the vulnerability of the situation:

When there was no more lantern in the kitchen

The fire got out through crannies in the stove

And danced in yellow wrigglers on the ceiling,

As much at home as if they’d always danced there. (223-226)

The fire from the stove was not sensitised to the suffering and anguish of the parents. It showed no difference and danced as always. The plight that a person goes through is best understood by him alone. Frost felt that “to be forever faithful to the dead is to betray the living by rejecting life itself. Mourning can only succeed if it
dispels itself through its own expression and then allows the griever to return to his everyday activities”. “The failure to allow mourning to be transformed into catharsis leads not only to melancholy and gloom, but also, in Frost’s poem, to misanthropy.” An insight into “Home Burial” gives one a clear picture to this effect. There was a feeling of antipathy that had developed between the two, the husband and the wife where each is undergoing the same suffering, but are unable to understand each other due to lack of conversation.

Frost’s father Will Frost, as Parini puts it, “during the Civil War, ran away to fight under General Lee, his hero (and after who, he named his son) although he got only as far as Philadelphia before the police found him and packed him home to his angry parents.” Maybe he felt the name had something to do with the future of the child. Frost’s “Maple” is from a different perspective altogether. It is an invitation to parenthood, instilling some trust in “nature” despite the fact that life is full of struggle and challenges. Frost asserts a firm optimism of “happy chance”. Frost as a father rejects the choice to give a child a meaningful name as an attempt to control that child’s life. “. . . Other names, / As Lesley, Carol, Irma, Marjorie, / Signified nothing. . . .” (47-49) although, “A name with meaning could bring up a child, / Taking a child out of the parents’ hands.” (171-172) “Your mother named you. You and she just saw / Each other in passing in the room upstairs” (12-13). The conversation that the father has with his daughter is very intimate and touching. But the mother has a better understanding and is the closest to the child. The father gives the credit of the dimple on her cheek to her mother saying she probably put her finger in her cheek so hard and said MAPLE so lovingly, that it still remains there. The little one wishes to cling on to the name given by her mother, but the meaning of it was an enigma yet to be solved. The father tried to “let go of it” saying he would reveal it to her by and by,
thinking she would forget. But one day, "The flower was different from the parent seed," (41) meaning she had grown and it was not easy to convince or satisfy her. Trying to decode her name made her restless, of what she knew of her mother was very little except that she was lovely and good.

Sitting in her mother’s house one day, she came across “a maple leaf” used as a bookmark for the Bible. She envisaged it had been laid in wait for her. The two pages that she read were as if her mother was speaking to her, a kind of special intimacy was felt. She was so taken up with the sensation that she forgot to put the leaf in its proper place, thus losing the place never to find it again. Time has lapsed. Having now grown up and trying her hand at various odd jobs she is surprised when one day while taking notes, someone says to her that she reminded him of a tree, “a maple tree”. When she married this person, they both tried to decode the mystery but could not, so they clung to what one had seen in the other “By inspiration”:

They kept their thoughts away from when the maples

Stood uniform in buckets, and the steam

Of sap and snow rolled off the sugar house.

When they made her related to the maples,

It was the tree the autumn fire ran through

And swept of leathern leaves, but left the bark

Unscorched, unblackened, even by any smoke. (141-147)

In short, the human psychology is such that name sometime plays a very important role, the person tends to idealise and even imitate his name. Once in autumn
they came upon a maple tree in the open, “standing alone with smooth arms lifted
up.” (150) It made the forest feel its identity, standing up on its own in full spirit.
Who could say that this firm tree was a mere sapling twenty five years back? This was
symbolic of the name with a meaning given to her before her mother died. This had
given a new meaning, a new dimension, a new existence to her life. The poet
concludes by saying one should leave the meaning to “nature” and “happy chance”
(174) and let the children discover for themselves.

The father’s place after marriage is considered sacred, and is referred to as a
“pilgrimage” where no matter with what heavy heart one may go, he is bound to be
relieved of all his anxiety, grief and sorrow. There is going to be uplift in his spirit, a
cause to rejoice just like a pilgrim when he bows his head on a sacred shrine. Even
though the poet wants to leave it to nature and happy chance, one should not miss the
depth in the meaning when he cannot help saying, “It hardly could have been a two-
leaved seedling / The next cow might have licked up out at pasture. / Could it have
been another maple like it?” (155-157) The last line here speaks a lot. The bond
between the mother and the child is so strong that even when the mother dies the child
grows up with stories about her.

Her mother giving her the name had such a magical effect that she stood
strong and firm, totally committed to her roots. No matter how the child is, the
parents’ love is unconditional. “Hyla Brook,” written during Frost’s stay at Derry, is
about a brook on his old farm that dried up every summer. “The Hyla” he recalls, “is a
small frog that shouts like jingling bells in the marshes in the spring.” Frost reminds
the individual of being a part of the natural cycle. He motivates his readers to view
loving something or someone not for what they are in the present, but to think of their
contribution to life, the difference they made in the past or will make in the coming future. Here he comments on the nature of true love in all its forms. Although the things we love are not always the way we want them to be. The poet further says if we truly love them, we should love them unconditionally in all their forms.

In his “Spring Pools” he muses on the same theme. The things we love often seem to disappear, but they come up elsewhere. Frost here in “Hyla Brook” begins with a fetching line and ends with an aphorism which is not easy to connect. A question is raised in the reader’s mind, “Why should we love the things for what they are especially when they have gone underground, have deserted us?” The stream, acting on its own wilful impulse has “gone groping underground” (3) ruining both – the lovely Hyla Breed, that is the frogs and their music. The poem is all about the source of inspiration and what one does when it dries up. The frogs represent song or poetry, the voice “That shouted in the mist a month ago, / Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow” (5-6). The penultimate lines that come before the final aphorism: “This as it will be seen is other far / Than with brooks taken otherwhere in song.” (13-14) “The Brook” of Tennyson’s echoes the same, “For men may come and men may go, / But I go on forever.” Though hidden from view, the brook, providing poetic inspiration is eternal, goes on forever. The second last line, “Than with brooks taken otherwhere in song” suggests that the disappearance of brook and its underground life are quite different from the usual disappearing brook. The brook here, for instance, undergoes many unattractive forms like when it dries up, but still it is loved.

There is a subtle message for the youth of this modern world. No matter how old the parent is, the child is always indebted to them, for they owe their very existence to them. Today, because of age they may not be that active and are now
dependent on their child, but their love has not diminished. Not only this, what the child does for his parents he gets back in innumerable folds, for all their blessings are bestowed on him. It is here that the cosmos also gives in and showers in bountiful all its wealth in terms of good health and luck. The last line of the poem has a lot to say. “We love the things we love for what they are.” (15) The beauty of the relationship is not marred with age, but becomes more glorious.

The father in “How Hard It Is to Keep from Being King When It’s in You and the Situation” is ready to be auctioned in slavery so that his son could get some money to start his business or satisfy his aspiration to write verses. He wished to give liberty to his child. Such is the father’s love and concern. The parents’ life is full of sacrifices for their child. Firstly, the father leaves his kingdom so that his son could rule. Later, the son too gives up the kingdom and follows him not as a sacrifice, but because he was incompetent. He did not want to take any responsibility on his shoulders. The king, being a father, wanted to help him in spite of his shortcomings. In such dire conditions – of penury and being devoid of his kingdom, he still wished to help and was ready to give himself to slavery so that his son could settle down and invest that money into something that would take care of his bread and butter.

They say the importance of a person is felt the most in his absence. Ask an orphan what parents mean. The world follows a cyclic movement – the recycling power of the world and life. Just like the leaves of the tree fall to the ground and eventually decay, thus becoming nutrients that nourish the roots. This tree then uses these nutrients to produce new leaves in the spring. Like Frost’s “Hardwood Groves” uses its old parts to nourish continuing life, such is the role of parents. We too recycle our “old leaves” to nurture our own lives. Their very existence is a boon to us. The
humans have the same recycle movement as the plants. The fairer sex is always supposed to be weaker, but there is one quality in women that stands out. They are ready to face any kind of danger before it inflicts on their family. When it comes to the family security they make the first move. One perspective in “The Fear” highlights this fact, which Frost brings to our notice. The fear in the woman evaporates and her utmost priority in life is to protect and safeguard her family. “You’re not to come,” she said. “This is my business / If the time’s come to face it, I’m the one / To put it the right way.” (41-43) A feeling of protectiveness is seen here. The mother will not let any harm come to her child if it can be helped.

Frost makes a suggestion: he feels there is a strong need for an individual to introspect. Death is inevitable, there is no denying it. The poet in “Into My Own” talks of stealing away into the vastness of the forest. This is metaphorically used to indicate his death. He does not regret the idea of his mental retreat, but at the same he wants his loved ones to pursue him and find out if he missed them. This instance is very much like the youth of today who are very obsessed with their privacy and independence. They hate to answer when they are questioned by their parents. These very teenagers, on the other hand, feel frustrated and neglected when not asked. Everyone in the world craves for love and a feeling of security. The desire to get away from life is combined with the desire for one’s family.

Once the child grows up the responsibilities of the parents do not end, in fact they increase. On Frost’s personal front too there was a halo of sadness as Jay Parini puts it. Despite many happy experiences in the classroom, Frost had constantly to deal with family problems, which became increasingly intense. Marjorie, his daughter had been ill throughout the winter, and she stayed in Amherst with her parents at their
house on Amity Street, even though – as Elinor wrote to Edith Fobes on February 22, 1927 – “she really ought to have been in some warmer climate for the winter.”

The Frosts realised that their daughter’s illness was nothing but psychological, but the strain of handling her told on the parents. Frost would often go into depression. What kept him going were the public occasions. “I think he needed these obligations,” a friend recalled. “One could easily imagine him subsiding, never leaving his bedroom. But teaching and the public readings – these demands were crucial. They kept him from withdrawing. He knew that, of course. He was self-protective in this way. He used the demands of his public career to keep himself afloat”. “Again in 1955 when Irma was hospitalized, he avoided seeing her because each visit extracted too much of pain, yet her illness was like a hole in a tooth that keeps attracting the tongue.”

Belle Frost, Frost’s mother, realizing her son’s love for poetry would often read out to him, but he’d sometimes run off to go swimming. He recalls, “I liked to try myself out in a job – helping a man load a wagon, pile firewood, rake or hoe. It was all odd jobs in those days. I liked working with characters, listening to them, their stories, the way they had to tell a story – the country was full of characters.” During his early years he ran small errands in order to run the house, errands like – fetching groceries and mails, carried suitcases, painted woodwork and mowed lawns. This is why almost all his poems have live characters that speak directly to his readers.

In the works of many poets where the parents occupy an “unusual centrality” one gets an insight into their “distinctive achievements”. This particular generation that became prominent in 1970s and early 1980s was very obsessed with their parents. Their most common post- Freudian assumption was that their main tussle with their
parents was to win the space they felt was a “must” to be themselves. It was this filial revolution that gave the birth of their identity and true art. Yeats in *Autobiographies* spoke of freeing himself from his father’s influence. “Eliot and Pound crossed the Atlantic to be free of the family ties, they thought, would inhibit their art. Lawrence, liberated himself by writing, *Sons and Lovers* and eloping into exile.” However, it’s much later that Lawrence realized he had been rather unfair in his depiction of his father in the novel, but at that time this injustice was the need of the hour. The history of early twentieth century literature is of escape from the family ties and fatherland.

The firmness with which they undid the family ties heralded the true spirit of modernism. “We have to hate our immediate predecessors to get free of their authority,” Lawrence wrote to Edward Garnett in February 1913. (Morrison, Blake. p.180). More recently the criticism of Harold Bloom has based its theory of poetic development on the analogy of Oedipal struggle; poets become “strong” by fighting and “swerving away from” their predecessors: “To live, the poet must interpret the father, by a crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father.” There was truly an absence of the filial in the early 20th century poetry: both the “men of 1914” and the 1930s generation looked to the future not the past, to likeminded peers and pioneers, not to precursors.

In the poets of the present generation the attitude has completely changed, that is one reason why they’ve been called ‘anti-modernist’ and ‘post-modernist’. Though their work recognizes the fifth commandment, it also recognizes Lawrence’s point about getting free of authority. In modernism, where there is a rebellion against the elders, poetry does the honour to grant that parents have a life beyond that of being parents. This makes one realise that such an attitude children can afford only when
they themselves have grown up and are in their parent’s shoes or when their parents are dead. (Harrison, Tony.) *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* were *Loci classici* for Freud and the modernists of the disastrous destructiveness of parents and children. For the present generation, they are nothing but symbols of the feelings of filial guilt and failure. Oedipus lives in an agonizing world of self-accusation because of his guilt of killing his father and committing incest with his mother. With *Hamlet*, it was not so much of his anger with Gertrude and Claudius, but his being suspicious and thus bringing about doom not only to the other but also himself. The current generation, Morrison says is respectful, but agrees that it undergoes a range of ‘negative’ (unofficial) emotions like anger, resentment, fear and guilt. Frost also tried his hand at a plethora of small chores but ultimately landed up writing and teaching thus taking up or living the profession of both his father and mother. Frost, like another such poet of the 1970s and early 1980s Seamus Heaney, inherits from his parents a set of opposed values, masculine / feminine. From their father they associate with politics and sly defiance, mother for them stands for religion and forbearance.

II

I will inherit his vest,

Its English rose, one petal

Darned, his boxing licence

With the rusty staples,

The silver plated cup

Presented by Ribbentrop
Which stands on the sideboard,
Confidently arms akimbo
But worn away by Duraglit
Touching their terror,
I gaze at them now,
Longer than someone in love.

(Craig Raine, “A Hungry Fighter”)

The emphasis on the ‘child like vision’ of Craig Raine, another contemporary poet has been misleading. Children, of course, hold a lot of importance in his works. In fact his poetic career began with the birth of his very first child. His parents, his home, his children are the important subjects of his work. (“A Hungry Fighter”) Both Craig Raine and Tony Harrison grew up in working class families, but, where Raine’s parents in “A Silver Plate” depict a colourful picture of small town life, Harrison treats his parents as the culturally underprivileged class with all the grudges of class discrimination and anger. His role is that of an avenger but he is conscious of the distance between himself and his parents. There is also a feeling of guilt in him which seemed to have heightened after their death. Some of these sentiments are dealt with in his poem “Illuminations.” Robert Frost, on the other hand, achieved the inner perfection by being very original and discarded the inhibition of becoming greater. In order to celebrate intense happiness he gave up the possibility of “absolute greatness”. Emerson has rightly said: “You shall have Joy, or you shall have power, said God, you shall not have both.” (Brahma) And Frost being Frost chose his “joy” unlike his nation America. Once gazing at the Pacific where he spent his childhood, he returned
to North England and wrote of it. In his poetry he returned just once to the Pacific and what he saw was drastic. “It looked as if a night of dark intent / Was coming, and not only a night, an age. / Someone had better be prepared for rage.” (10-12)

Someone else had better be prepared, not Frost, because Frost had chosen his path. Paris was the most human city we had,” recollects Wyndham Lewis’ Tarr and Hugo William was the most humane philosopher. He was committed to marriage and the family. He didn’t fancy himself surrounded by crying infants, so he took to spiritual refreshment when things got complicated. When William’s son Henry was born, William fled to the coast of Maine where he was “instantly visited by a tender feeling for those he had left behind. This reminds us of Frost’s “Into my Own” which suggests ‘introspection.’ The poet talks of stealing away into the vastness of the forest. He does not regret the idea of his mental retreat, but at the same time he wants his loved ones to pursue him and find out if he missed them. The desire to get away from life is combined with the desire for one’s family. The atrocities and harshness of life will cow down before his confidence and optimism. His will to strive, to win, to conquer, but not to give up, reminds one of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Ulysses”: “Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.” (69-70)

In the closing couplet of the sonnet, “Into my Own,” he asserts that he will remain unchanged in his thoughts and beliefs. The closing couplet has a highly optimistic note. “They would not find me changed from him they knew – / Only more sure of all I thought was true.” (13-14) If anyone follows him and wishes to know if he still holds them dear, they would only find him more confident and more experienced.
Jaenne, Frost’s sister, had once accused Frost of negligence when his mother wasn’t well, which, knowing Frost the way he was, one feels blaming him was doing injustice to him. He himself was a little child throughout his life that had to be taken care of. He did come to his mother’s help when she was unable to cope up with the children in school and set them right within a few days. He took up her job as a teacher, a thing that he never wanted to do. As for himself, he wasn’t doing very well on the financial front. He was fortunate enough to have received a bounty from his paternal grandfather. This enabled him to buy a farm house at Derry and take up farming as his career. Besides, his family life was not very happy. It so seems his children were a liability on him throughout his life.

To love, to cherish, and to care giving independence at the same time is a unique feature that prevails in every family where the bonding is strong. The parents can either mould or ruin the child’s life. Therefore, it is of prime importance that they are conscious of their every move and discourage any kind of unpleasantness, and bad habits that are bound to have an adverse effect on the child. Instead, they should be his ‘role models’ so that their children make this world a better and a homogeneous place to live in.


_________. 105.


_________“Once by the Pacific”, 17.

_________. “Once by the Pacific”, 05.

_________. “A Farm in Derry”, 85.
Elinor Frost to Edith Fobes, February 22, 1927. DCL. “Taken and Tossed” 244.

Interview with Victor Reichert, “Taken and Tossed”, 244.


271.

