CHARACTERS IN THE DRAMATIC NARRATIVES OF
ROBERT FROST: A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Narrative poems, especially the dramatic narratives occupy a unique place among the numerous poems written by Robert Frost. Most of these are placed in New England rural setting, but the characters and situations that are depicted in these poems and the conflicts that arise as these characters confront one another, surely have a universal appeal.

The main focus in these poems is not on the actions and adventures of the characters, nor on any dramatic incidents in their lives, but on some special personality traits, chiefly brought out through the conversation that goes on between them, and some of their characteristic responses. The
present study is an attempt to observe these characters closely as they express themselves in dialogue and action.

The first chapter begins with a discussion on the nature of the narrative in general and the dramatic narrative in particular. The elements of the dramatic is discussed with particular reference to characterisation. With the objective of analysing the characters in the poems of Robert Frost the study proceeds with a survey of the narrative poems of the poet. Almost all the poetic collections have some share of the narrative output of the poet, *North of Boston* having the highest concentration.

Discerning a continuum of the relative dramatic content and other narrative elements the study then attempts a classification of Frost's poetic works from diverse perspectives. The categorisation is with its footing on the narrative point of view on the one hand and the spatio-temporal dimension on the other: the former extending from the very internal, first person point of view to the external, third person; and
the latter stretching from the here and now of the
dramatic mode to somewhere else and long time ago
of the pure narrative. The resultant categorisation
classifies Frost narratives into four groups, the
first person recollections, as personal narratives;
the first person here and now poems, as dramatic
monologues; the third person poems in the past, as
third-person narratives or story narration; and,
finally, the poems with the external point of view
presenting events of here and now, as dramatic
narratives. The last group itself contains idea
centred dialogues of an intellectual nature called
philosophic dialogues and those with realistic
presentations of day-to-day life and conflicts,
namely, dramatic dialogues.

The second chapter begins with a discussion on
two important aspects of the narrative that form a
backdrop for characterisation, that is, the
treatment of nature and the social situation. The
serenity in fellowship with the marvels of the
outdoors and the accompanying optimism which are
distinguishing marks of Frost’s nature
descriptions, are conspicuous by their absence in
these people centred narratives. There is a progressive eclipsing of nature as the poet moves away from the lyric and personal narratives to the dramatic poems. On the cultural front, Frost’s people poems have the clear thread of some momentous societal change, especially pointers to a degeneration of the normal mechanics of civic life. Symptoms of ‘anomie’ are present not only on the wide horizons of the larger society, but even on the domestic front.

The representatives of the New England life that Frost presents include a fairly wide cross section of humanity. His character depiction, while it exudes precision and fidelity to his models, is notable for its universality. Frost uses his own choice devices of characterisation in a unique combination to achieve an accomplished style of trait depiction. Four preferred tools he employs are: dialogue, action, conflict and narrator’s presence. Preference for indirect tools, namely, the first three, in comparison to the direct method of narrator’s comments is evident in all dramatic dialogues of Robert Frost. A typical dramatic
narrative of the poet begins with a few lines of narrative comments introducing the setting and the characters, followed by almost uninterrupted give and take of dialogue by the participating characters.

The third chapter discusses the psychological tool used for the analysis of characters. Whereas there is hesitation in certain quarters regarding the feasibility of subjecting characters in narratives to a systematic analysis, there is also a growing consensus among narratologists to recognise the relative autonomy of the various elements of the narrative, including characterisation. The degree of focus accorded to individual ingredients of the narrative will vary from one genre to another. The character-centric approach of the present study is, hence, entirely legitimate especially in relation to the dramatic monologues and dialogues of Robert Frost.

Frost characters are more or less static. The characters that the poet depicts seldom change during the course of the action in these
narratives. Even when there is dynamism visible in characterisation this is restricted to very few portrayals. The dramatic narratives where multiple dialogue of voices is presented, in effect turn out to be fixed portrayals of assorted temperaments. The effectiveness of the tool of typology in the present study finds its singular relevance due to this characteristic trait portrayal in Frost narratives.

The instrument of analysis used for a close observation of literary characters will have to be different from other tools of literary as well as psychological investigation. Considering character in a narrative as a vertical assemblage of relatively stable personal qualities or traits, the field of psychology that focuses on trait analysis and the schools that study and classify character into types evoke our interest. Among these various attempts that of Carl Jung and the recent instrument of character grouping based on his insights called the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) come to be of particular use in the present investigation.
An individual, analysed under this instrument, can be classified on four different scales and the resultant description becomes fairly exhaustive and reliable. In the study the well delineated characters in the poems are put to this analysis under which, wherever feasible, each one is observed on Extraversion/ Introversion (E/I), Thinking/ Feeling (T/F), Sensing/ Intuitive (S/N) and Judging/ Perceptive (J/P) scales. Character indices are gleaned from the text and subjected to observation under the frame work of the typology. This sixteen type classification of MBTI is useful due to its methodical as well as lucid categorisation that accounts for a variety of individual differences and makes it possible to achieve an orderly description of the characters under study. Relationships are better understood and conflicts convincingly explained with the help of the instrument. Though MBTI is not primarily designed for the analysis of literary characters, this Psychological approach gets preference due to its effectiveness as an instrument of character description and conflict analyser.
The fourth chapter is a detailed observation and classification of the well delineated dramatis personae of the dramatic dialogues and monologues of Robert Frost. Looking for patterns of communication, the poem that attracts our prime attention is “The Death of the Hired Man”. Built around the central character of Mary, the poem deals with three situations of conflicts and four characters, two absent and the other two present.

Another well known dramatic narrative, “Home Burial” is the description of a fierce conflict between Amy and her husband, over the death and burial of their little son. In Frost’s most famous monologue, “A Servant to Servants”, there is another wife who suffers from serious psychological abnormality. “The House Keeper,” “The Fear,” “The Hill Wife,” “In the Home Stretch,” “Snow,” “A Hundred Collars” and “The Witch of Coös” are the other significant dramatic narratives that are taken for analysis in this section.

Each of these poems is individually taken and every important character analysed based on the
primary source and also taking into consideration the important critical observations. Using these trait indices gleaned from these various sources, the characters are then classified on the MBTI scale of character types. This in turn facilitates a better appreciation of the character itself and comparison and contrasting with other characters are made possible.

The final chapter is the analysis of the findings of the foregoing classification. The poet selects domestic setting for the depiction of his dramatic narratives and hence the significant conflict in these poems is between husbands and wives. As a rule Frost presents Feeling women and Thinking men in his dramatic narratives. The principal conflict in these dramas are, therefore, Thinking-Feeling collision. A Sensing-Intuitive conflict is surely the next preference of the poet. Whereas among the assortment of female characters there is a fine balancing between the Intuitive Feeling and Sensing Feeling types, the preferred male specimen in these poems is Extraverted Sensing Thinking character type.
The wide array of character sketches presented in the dramatic narratives of Robert Frost is a portrait gallery of a unique sort. The study discovers typical Frost patterns of dramatic mode as well as character depiction, and uncovers a distinct pattern of conflict in these people poems.