Chapter 1

NARRATIVE POEMS OF ROBERT FROST

New England locale gave Robert Frost enough raw material for his creative endeavour. The major portion of his poetic work deals with this geographic area with its appealing natural beauty and peculiar local population. Both the nature and society of New England became the subject of his creative enterprise giving birth to his exquisite range of lyric and narrative. We find the presence of New England nature in Frost's lyrics and the society we meet in his dramatic narratives. It is to the people he portrayed, especially in his
dramatic poems, that we turn our attention in the present study.

"Everything written is as good as it is dramatic," declared Frost in the preface to his one-act play *The Way Out*, "A least lyric alone may have a hard time" (13). The author was conscious of the challenge of the dramatic and tried his hand on the various forms related to it. He wrote a number of short plays and a couple of masques; but his fame rests "not on his plays and masques, but on his dramatic lyrics, his monologues and little playlet-like scenes set within a narrative framework" (Lynen, 109).

What is the dramatic? Roland Barthes while discussing the language of the narrative cites a possible typology of discourse. "Three broad types can be recognized provisionally: metonymic (narrative), metaphoric (lyric, poetry, sapiential discourse), enthymematic (intellectual discourse)" (Barthes, 256). The third kind of discourse, that is the intellectual exposition of a prosaic kind can be ruled out from the purview of the present discussion at the very onset. Coming to poetry,
though various critics differ in their focus concerning classification of the types of poems, there is general agreement on the demarcation between the lyric and the narrative.

The traditional grouping of poems into the lyric, the narrative and the dramatic is further explained in *Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. In the case of the first group, the poems "look almost anonymous, perhaps sincerely naive, as though the author expressed only his direct perception" (Preminger, 200). A lyric has to do with ideas and feelings; inspirations and hopes. In the poetry of Robert Frost we come across a vast array of lyrical pieces in all its variety. This may be a reflection on some natural phenomenon like the one we see in Frost’s "To the Thawing Wind," in which he calls upon the "loud Southwester" to bring in the Spring with all its beautiful images; or the lyrical presentation of poet’s ideas as in "The Trial by Existence," where Frost talks about courage that “reign, /Even as on earth, in paradise” (11. 3,4). Whether it be a thought, a reflection or reliving of an experience, "lyric attributes stay
predominant” (Preminger, 200) in a poem of this category.

In the narrative mode there is the telling of some story. The introductory piece of Frost’s famous narrative collection, North of Boston is a narration by poet’s own persona describing his farmland experience of everything “that doesn’t love a wall” (Mending Wall, 1). The other major character in his story is his neighbour who believes in the saying that “Good fences make good neighbors” (1.27). As in a typical narrative here also the writer “speaks in his own person while setting the scene or giving exposition, but puts on varied personalities and adopts different voices as the episodes require” (Preminger, 200).

Finally, in the dramatic the reader comes directly in touch with the characters and the narrator almost disappears. “Home Burial” is a good example of a dramatic poem. The poem itself is a high pitched conflict between a husband and wife, who lost their only child in recent times. In the first half a dozen lines, the poet tells us how the man sees his wife looking out into the nearby grave
yard. From then on the characters take over with their conversation, and the listeners learn everything directly from the dramatis personae, with minimum intervention from the part of the author. In a pure dramatic poem, then, "the bare narrative fades away, and a group of characters embodied by actors remains" (Preminger, 200).

These various groupings of poems cannot be looked upon as water tight divisions, but rather as various points of a continuum. As in the words of Frost, lyric "can make a beginning" ("Preface to A Way Out," 13). Later it will have to be "heard as sung or spoken by a person in a scene - in character, in setting" (13). Frost is of the opinion that a narrative is born when the lyric answers the questions like by whom, where and when. As a result in a narrative the naive, anonymous nature of lyric is contextualised specially through the agent of a narrator. In a clearer dramatic poem the role of the narrator dwindles and the character acquires a seeming autonomy.
The present study has its focus on the dramatic narratives of Robert Frost, distinct from pure lyric but partaking the wide narrative umbrella covering the dramatic and other narrative forms of poetry. The dramatic narratives of Frost are generally presentations of excellent dramatic conflicts, and as such these dramas and their players come under observation in the present study. A further focus on the various aspects of the narrative will facilitate a better appreciation of the dramatic output of Robert Frost. The following discussion will be on the elements of the narrative and their relationship with one another.

While commencing her exhaustive discussion on narrative fiction Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines this literary category as “the narration of a succession of fictional events” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2). It is fictional in the sense that we don’t approach it like a factual report in the news paper or a personal testimony. Explaining the term narration she highlights,

(1) a Communication process in which the narrative as message is transmitted by
addresser to addressee and (2) the verbal nature of the medium used to transmit the message. It is this that distinguishes the narrative fiction from narratives in other media, such as film, dance, or pantomime. (Rimon-Kenan, 2)

The presentation of a succession of events distinguishes narrative fiction from other literary texts like lyrical poetry or expository prose.

Rimon-Kenan further demarcates the basic aspects of narrative fiction as: (1) the events (story), (2) their verbal presentation (text), and (3) the act of telling or writing (narration). The ‘Story’ is made up of the succession of events together with the participants that can be abstracted from the text. While the story can be reconstructed in chronological sequence, the ‘text’, the spoken or written discourse, does not always appear in such order. The attributes of the participants or characters are found scattered through the text. ‘Narration,’ the third aspect of the narrative, refers to the process of production
of the text and as such the presence of a speaker is implied.

Of these three that which is available to the reader directly is only the text, from which one learns about the story and the narration. On the other hand, the text itself is limited by the other two elements. The events and the characters are important because "unless it told a story it would not be a narrative" (Rimon-Kenan, 4). The process of narration with the narrator behind it is important because, "without being narrated or written it would not be a text" (Rimon-Kenan, 4). In the present analysis of the various characters in the poems of Robert Frost, the events and the key players in those stories receive greater attention.

After a comprehensive study on the "various forms of action in Frost's dramatic verse," John F. Lynen concludes that the poet's "art is essentially narrative" and "his dramatic writing is an outgrowth of his most characteristic work" (125). Frost's own belief was that his writings are not far from the dramatic mode. Concluding the preface
to *A Way Out*, one of his not so famous short plays, Frost remarks: "I have always come as near the dramatic as I could this side of actually writing a play. Here for once I have written a play without (as I should like to believe) having gone very far from where I have spent my life" (Preface, 14).

Though Frost tried his hands at writing plays, none of them became much popular. His attempts at the dramatic poetry, on the other hand, was successful and his productive period extended from the beginning of the century to the early sixties. He, in fact, authored some of the most memorable narrative poems in English. Before a discussion on the various types of Frost narratives, let us have a stock-taking of his dramatic output. This could be achieved by taking a look at the distribution of dramatic and narrative poems in the various collections of Robert Frost.

All the nine principal collections of Robert Frost’s poems have an uneven share of narratives. Frost’s first published collection *A Boy’s Will*, published in England by David Nutt in 1913, is predominantly a collection of lyrics. Out of the
thirty poems in this early collection, about a half are in the first person, mostly lyrical, reflections on rural, everyday life. The only poem that can be classified as a narrative in the sense of fictional events and characters is “Love and a Question,” in which the poet presents the dilemma of a bridegroom who has to decide whether to invite the worn out stranger into the bridal house and “mar the love of the two” (30), or to send him away into a weary road “without a window light” (8).

That Frost intended a narrative presentation even for this lyrical collection is evident from the table of contents of A Boy’s Will in its original form. It specified a division of the book into Part I, II and III with a gloss for each of the poems except two. The entry for the first poem in Part I read: “Into My Own: The youth is persuaded that he will be rather more than less himself for having forsworn the world” (Frost. Collected Poems, 529). The table of contents, in this vein, locates each of these poems in the context of the life and activities of the youth,
who becomes the main player. Of course, this appendage was abandoned in the later publications of *A Boy's Will* by the author himself.

From the point of view of the presence of dramatic narratives, Frost's second collection, *North of Boston* ranks uppermost among the collections of Frost's Poems. The profile of the collection is clear from the Dedication. It reads: "Dedication: To E. M. F. This Book of the People" (Notes, *The Collected Poems*, 534). The second collection, with its excellent personality sketches and a number of remarkable depictions of New England domestic life, is truly the book of the people. *North of Boston* remains unrivalled as a collection of dramatic narratives not only among the poetic collections of the poet, but in the whole literary scene of modern times.

Excluding "The Pasture," which was originally used as the introductory poem, out of the sixteen, only three are not poems of the people. The first one of these three lyrics, "After Apple-Picking," is the inebriated impressions of the narrator at the culmination of the autumnal apple-picking.

The
final two poems, "The Wood-Pile" and "Good Hours," are also lyrical in vein, both being accounts of sights and impressions of the narrator during his winter outdoor ramblings. The remaining poetic pieces in North of Boston are a wide gallery of characters and events, and it includes some of the best creative output by the author. Starting with "Mending Wall," the book contains some very famous dramatic poems of Frost like "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," "The Black Cottage" and the monologue "A Servant to Servants."

Published in 1916, the next collection, Mountain Interval includes a few well known lyrics like "The Road Not Taken" and "Birches." In this collection of 34 poems, about a dozen are narratives. The gripping story of the Coles and the eccentric preacher Meserve on a snowy evening, "Snow"; the unforgettable tale of xenophobia, "The Vanishing Red"; the heartbreaking picture of the tragic death of an innocent child in "Out, Out--" are some of the outstanding dramatic narratives in Mountain Interval. A group of five short Lyrics entitled, "The Hill Wife" is a class by itself. In

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it Frost, through this special technique of literary mosaic art, presents the utter loneliness, estrangement and the final disappearance of the hapless victim of a tragic marital relationship.

“Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening,” with its famous ending is without doubt the most celebrated poem of the forty-five poem collection, *New Hampshire*. Of the twelve full fledged Narratives, the poems grouped as “Two Witches” deserve special mention. “The Witch of Coös” and “The Pauper Witch of Grafton” introduce the inner dynamics of two women that would be of gripping interest even to a professional psychoanalyst. The next collection in the series is *West-Running Brook*. The traveller’s experience with railroad engine and turtle track in “The Egg and the Machine” and the mysterious voices and the twenty-year, seven-level experience of “her” in “The lovely Shall be Choosers” are two borderline poems in the collection that may be difficult to be grouped along with the other narratives. The title poem of the book, perhaps the only full-fledged narrative in the forty-two poem collection,
suffers from an overdose of philosophical ideas that submerge dramatic elements.

The number of narratives in the fifty strong collection, *A Further Range*, is only a handful. "Alone Striker" with its day dreaming latecomer, the slender epic "The Bearer of Evil Tidings" and the story of the foolish boy who is outwitted by a monkey in "The Woodward's Gardens" are some of the passable narratives in this collection. There are, of course, some lyrics of enduring value that have found their place in the collection. "Design," "Provide, Provide" and "Desert Places" are a few among them. The best known poem in *A Witness Tree* is a lyric "The Gift Outright," later appended to "For John F. Kennedy His Inauguration". A steady decrease of dramatic component is evident in this collection as well. "The Discovery of the Madeiras," a tragic love story and "The Subverted Flower," the account of a short lived temptation of two youngsters are two not so well known narratives of the collection. The description of child-patriot in "Not of School Age" is the only other narrative of any worth among these poems. The
conversational poem of Pike and Dick, "From Plane to Plane" and the longer tale "How Hard It is to Keep From Being King..." are the only Two Narratives worth naming from the post 1947 publications, Steeple Bush and In the Clearing.

The two famous masques by the author, A Masque of Reason and A Masque of Mercy should attract special attention in any discussion regarding the narratives of Robert Frost. These two long dialogue poems with its numerous Biblical allusions and familiar scriptural characters including God, fail to reach the level of the other fine narratives of the poet. Though they too suffer, like most of his later works, from the paucity of his early richness in dramatic elements and the overdose of philosophic discussions, the Masques remain to be excellent dramatic illustrations of some of the very fine ideas of the poet.

In addition to the two masques, there are fifty-odd well discernible narrative poems in the nine principal collections of Robert Frost. As the preceding discussion shows there is a steady decline in the dramatic output from the time of the
publication of Frost’s “Book of the People,” North of Boston. His later collections include very few narratives and Steeple Bush, the 1947 publication has no single dramatic narrative of any worth. The decline was not only with respect to the number of dramatic poems; as the years passed by there was deterioration in the dramatic quality as well. In Human Values in the Poetry of Robert Frost, Nitchie differentiates between the dramatic poems in North of Boston and those in the later works, West-Running Brook, New Hampshire and other collections. The fine dramatic poems of the former collection, in the opinion of Nitchie, depict moving presentation of character. But in the latter collections it is a moving presentation of character’s philosophy (Nitchie, 199). It is this difference that makes the earlier poems so very memorable.

The present study, with its singular focus on the characters and conflict in Frost poems, will find greater challenge in the early works of the poet and with those poems in which greater emphasis is on the presentation of a slice of life. In some
of these, Frost portrays the dramatis personae with great dynamism and a high degree of realism. These will surely attract greater attention during our scrutiny. The poet’s early collections, North of Boston, Mountain Interval and New Hampshire, with almost a dozen dramatic narratives in each, are veritable portrait galleries rich in variety, complexity and depth of depiction.

A unique achievement in the creative output of Robert Frost is the variety of narrative modes he has tried his hands on. Attempts have been made by many to look at these poems from diverse angles and classify them according to these different perspectives. Among the dramatic poems of Frost it is possible to discern a continuum extending from the most intensely impassioned speech and action to mere conversation, and from this in turn to anecdote and reminiscence. Lynen attempts a classification of Frost’s dramatic poems according to their essential form (111). He groups them into five different categories, namely, Dramatic Dialogues, Dramatic Monologues, Pastoral Dialogues, Philosophic Dialogues and Narrative Monologues.
This regrouping of poems surely throws greater light into the various aspects of Frost poems and help gain deeper insight into his narrative art.

Elaine Barry in his work entitled Robert Frost, attempts another classification of the dramatic works of the poet. He broadly categorises them into three broad groups such as 'static' dramas, dramatic monologues and dramas proper. The first of these, static dramas he outlines as those having just one scene "in which all the dramatic implications are inherent in the visual effect, rather than in dialogue or action" (Barry, 54). "An Old Man’s Winter Night," "Meeting and passing," "Two Look at Two," and even "The Most of It" are a few of such understated, undeveloped "dramas." The next type is the Dramatic Monologues in which "the single speaker takes the center of the stage, and the spotlight is wholly on her life story and her character" (Barry, 54). The last category of more obvious dramas are those which depict the interaction of several characters and present different voices. "The Death of the Hired Man,"
"Home Burial," "The Fear" and the like are illustrations of the category.

For a deeper appreciation of the narrative attempt of Robert Frost we will have to go beyond what Lynen, Barry and others have attempted and take a close look at not only the dramatic poems but the entire narrative output by the author. The present study attempts a fresh classification, with special reference to the narrative antecedents of these poems. On the basis of the narrative approaches, Frost narratives may be regrouped into i) personal narratives, ii) dramatic monologues, iii) third person accounts and iv) dramatic dialogues. These four categories of poems could be placed on a two dimensional frame of a) means of perception and b) narrative situation.

The horizontal dimension of the means of perception or point of view “refers to the agent through whose eyes a piece of fiction appears to be presented” (Minot, 145). Stephen Minot lists at some length the possible gradations from the most inward, limited and personal to the most external and impersonal points of view. In his momentous
work A Theory of Narrative, the prominent Austrian scholar Franz Karl Stanzel, using his typological circle\(^3\) discusses this gradation in detail:

We may assume that a continuum of narrative forms exists . . . at one end we find a narrator who belongs entirely to the characters' world (first-person narrative situation) and at the other end a narrator whose world is distinct from that of the characters (authorial narrative situation) (Stanzel, 17).

For the present analysis a simplification of the classification of the means of perception may be beneficial. "It is helpful to talk about the selection of first or third person as if it were a simple choice between two alternatives" (Minot, 151). Our typological frame will have, horizontally, on the one side the poems in the first person and on the other, third person narratives. Those in the first person such as personal narratives and dramatic monologues will be represented on the left side of the frame and the ones in authorial narrative situation like third-
person accounts and dramatic dialogues will be grouped on the other side.

On a separate dimension, based on the time-space orientation, the poems of Frost can be viewed as falling into different narrative situations. Though critics like John Lynen believe that many of the poems of Frost “occupy a borderland between dramatic and lyric” (Lynen, 110), it is possible to identify poems that can be categorised clearly into one or the other type. Among the various schemes of narrative situations put forward by critics, Stanzel’s division into strict narrative and dramatic is more appropriate for the present study:

Based on mediacy as the generic characteristic of narration, these elementary forms can be divided into two categories namely, specifically narrative forms (report, description, comment) and non-narrative or dramatic forms (speech, dramatized scene). Dramatized scene consists essentially of dialogue interspersed with narrative elements which function as stage directions and as brief reports of the action. Depending on the
predominance of narrative or non-narrative elements in it, the dramatized scene can be reckoned either to the narrative forms or the non-narrative ones. This division of the longitudinal profile of a narrative corresponds to the distinction known to us since Plato between diegesis and mimesis and definition of the epic poem as a hybrid of the two (Stanzel, 65).

This spatio-temporal dimension of the work in question is represented on the vertical plane in the illustrative diagram. Frost’s strict narratives characteristically opt for the past tense and personal narratives and third-person stories come under this category. The dramatic pieces in the same manner use the present tense with dramatic monologues and dialogues forming that category. In the diagram the narrative and dramatic works occupy the top and bottom portions respectively.

With regard to the narrative situation or point of view, represented on the horizontal plane, the continuum extends from the first person to the
third person narrator. On the left side of the diagram we have the narratives in first person, comprising of the groups personal narratives and dramatic monologues. The personal narratives such as "The Road not Taken" and "Birches" are reminiscences of the narrator and are in the first person. In the dramatic monologues like "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" also the speaker comes out in the first person. On the other hand, a narration in the third person is employed in the story poems of Frost beginning with "Love and a Question" and "An Old Man's Winter Night" and dramatic dialogues like "The Fear," "The Telephone" and the like.

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<th>First Person Narration</th>
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<td>Dramatic Monologues</td>
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**Fig. 1: The Categories of Poems of Robert Frost**
The other dimension, the time continuum, extends vertically from the historic perspective of the past to the dramatic perspective of here and now. Thus the reminiscences of the narrator in the personal narratives like "Stopping by the Woods" and "The Wood Pile" characteristically take the past tense, so also the narrative stories such as "Place for a Third," "Range-Finding" and "Maple." On the other hand, with a view to bring out the immediacy of action narrated, present tense is made use of in dramatic monologues like "A Servant to Servants" and dramatic dialogues, "The Death of the Hired Man" and "A Hundred Collars".

The first of these categories, personal narratives, forms the largest among the four categories of Frost narratives. Most of these poems have rural New England as background with the farm and country side as the immediate setting. The name 'personal narrative' is, in a sense, misleading as it may imply that the poems in question are autobiographical. The term is used here only in the sense of narratives in first person. In the case of at least one poem it is
evident that the narrator and the person of the poet are not identical. "Wild Grapes" in *New Hampshire* is said to be the companion poem of one of the finest personal narratives of Frost, "Birches" in *Mountain Interval* and narrator is evidently a woman recalling her childhood adventures along with her brother at the age of five.

![Narrative Form (Past)](image)

**Fig. 2: Frost's Personal Narratives in Perspective**

The personal narratives are generally recitals with an internal perspective having a narrator in the first person singular. There are exceptions to this where we encounter an occasional 'we' as the
narrator, as in the case of "Going for Water" in A Boy's Will, one of the earliest personal narratives by the author. The poem is in a typical pastoral setting, with an abrupt beginning: "The well was dry beside the door,/ And so we went with pail and can" (ll. 1,2).

These poems are glimpses into the history of the narrator and hence there is an extensive use of the past tense. A few poems like "After Apple-Picking" in North of Boston and "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" in New Hampshire are the rare exceptions to this rule regarding the use of tense. Thus the latter poem begins in what narrative critics would call 'historical present' (Stanzel, 23) and sustains it till the end: "Whose woods these are I think I know. . . /He gives his harness bells a shake/ To ask if there is some mistake" (1, 9, 10).

William H. Pritchard in his study Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered differentiates between personal narratives in North of Boston like "After Apple-Picking" and "The Wood-Pile" on the one hand and tragic ones such as "Home Burial" and "A
Servant to Servants” on the other. “Nothing ‘terrible’ happens in the personal narratives, nor does some ominous secret lie behind them” (Pritchard, 100). On the contrary tragic poems are those in which something terrible happens with no one to blame. As a result the personal narratives are noted for the tranquil atmosphere they are able to create.

“The Wood-Pile” describes poet's leisurely walk “in the frozen swamp one gray day” (l). The all engulfing snow, ‘tall slim trees’ and finally a small flying bird, all these scattered glimpses came into his view. No event of any import takes place, but the poet is able to fill the heart of the reader with the serene joy that he has experienced in the company of Mother Nature. In short, the personal narratives are colourful pictures of the contented rustic existence of the poet. Frost’s well known dictum that a poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom” is best applicable in the analysis of his personal narratives. In “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” for instance, we are told how two strangers come “out
of the woods" and confront the narrator who is busy splitting logs. They think chopping wood is their right. This everyday experience leads the poet into a string of reflections:

My right might be love but theirs was need...
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(62, 69-72).

The poetic style of Robert Frost is often identified with such a progression from enjoyment of natural phenomena to serendipitous discovery of some life principle. Such a movement of inner discovery is evident in a number of poems like "Stopping by the Woods," "A Considerable Speck," "Provide, Provide," and "Lost in Heaven".

One of the best known prose pieces of Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes" dwells at length on this particular characteristic of his Personal Narratives:

The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as
for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion (18).

The second type of Frost narratives, dramatic monologues is the smallest group among the four categories. It is dramatic in the sense that its spatio-temporal orientation is here and now. Through this particular mode of narration the speaker becomes immediately present, enabling the reader to view the events and surroundings from this limited perspective. The point of view of dramatic monologue is internal and hence first person. In other words the narrator is speaking from the characters' world, giving an immediate feel of the situation to the reader. Narrative situation in this type is dramatic with the use of present tense indicating the current time.
In the dramatic monologue, the action is primarily psychological. It is an analysis, especially in the case of Frost, of a deviant mind with its bizarre eccentricities, arresting the attention of any reader. In "A Servant to Servants" and "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" there is the drama of self revelation. Frost's monologues are excellent testimonies to the poet's listening and perceptive skills as well as his dexterity in character depiction. In these monologues the narrator is present as a quiet listener who reports the speaker's verbal ramblings verbatim in the text of the poem.

Narrative Form (Past)

First Person Narration

Dramatic Form (Present)

Third Person Narration

Dramatic Monologues

Dramatic Dialogues

Fig. 3: Frost's Dramatic Monologues in Perspective
"The Pauper Witch of Grafton" is the story of an eccentric woman over whom two towns were fighting "to make a present . . . to each other" (5), in order to get rid of her. The woman's narration of her escapades with Arthur Amy, to whom she was married to, is a quarry of rich images bordering obscenity and insanity. "A Servant to Servants" is another account of the strange ways of the human psyche. Both the poems attest to the fact that as a narrative tool dramatic monologue is an effective technique for the depiction of psychological derangement. Whereas in a dialogue poem the relations between two or more persons affect the life of the individuals involved, in a monologue the revelations result in some kind of psychological change or self-realisation within the single major character.

The next category of poems, third person accounts are purest in the sense of narrative fiction. Thirty odd poems by the author falls in this group of story poems. "The Bearer of Evil Tidings" in A Further Range, for instance, begins
abruptly and plunges into the action part like any typical story:

The bearer of evil tidings,
When he was halfway there,
Remembered that evil tidings
Were a dangerous thing to bear (1-4).

With the arresting opening made the poem proceeds with the story of adventure and love recounting a mighty story in nutshell of a mountain race of a strange land. The poems of this sort have the characteristics that place them together with great ballads of old.

Narrative Form (Past)

First Person Narration

Third Person accounts

Authorial Narration

Dramatic Form (Present)

Dramatic Monologue

Dramatic Dialogue

Fig. 4: Frost's Third Person Narratives in Perspective
Third person narratives have viewpoints that are external and impersonal. By employing third person narration an objective reporting style is achieved in these poems. These being narratives in the true sense, past tense is used extensively. The only deviations from this mode are "The Line Gang" in Mountain Interval; "A Blue Ribbon at Amesbury" in A Further Range and "The Hill Wife" poems in Mountain Interval. These poems, though they narrate stories of days gone by, employ present tense, as in "The Line-Gang" which begins: "Here come the line-gang pioneering by. / They throw a forest down less cut than broken" (11.1,2).

The final group of narratives called the dramatic dialogues is the most acclaimed lot among Frost narratives. Famous Frost poems like "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," "The Code," "The Fear," all come under this grouping. Stanzel's description of the dramatic form of narratives is apt for this genre: "Dramatized scene consists essentially of dialogue interspersed with narrative elements which function as stage direction and as brief reports of the action"
(Stanzel, 65). Extensive use of the present tense and third person authorial narration makes these poems highly evocative.

![Narrative Form (Past)]

![Dramatic Form (Present)]

**Fig. 5: Frost's Dramatic Dialogues in perspective**

Frost’s best and most popular dramatic pieces that form this group of dramatic dialogues are little plays presenting a single and complete action. In “The Death of the Hired Man” the conversation between Mary and Warren unravels the story of the hired man, Silas. Amy and her husband in “Home Burial” have lost their child and the poem is a vivid portrayal of the divergent characters...
and their inability to communicate. The dialogue discloses how they have had a home burial for domestic peace as well.

Frost’s book of the people, North of Boston, is a leap forward in the domain of dramatic challenge. “The Fear” in this collection is illustrative of Frost’s narrative technique and the psychological impact it has on the reader. The poem begins as a third person narrative describing a night scene in front of a lonely farm house where a couple have alighted from a gig. With lantern light and lurking shadows the whole atmosphere is full of mystery and premonition. “The Woman,” the central character of the poem is quite jittery to the point of being neurotic and now she complains of a face she has seen among the shadows. Joel, her male companion tries to pacify, reassuring her that it is not yet too dark, and there is nothing to be afraid of. From the ongoing conversation we realise that she is running away from someone and they now suspect that he may have sent a man to keep an eye on her. The tension unwinds itself when the stranger comes into the lantern light and
reveals his identity. He is only a harmless passer-by taking his little son out for a walk in the dark, because he believes that “Every child should have the memory / Of at least one long-after-bedtime walk” (ll. 82,83).

From the initial stage setting, the poem swiftly plunges into the tension and conflict of drama. With a few brush strokes of lively pieces of conversation the poet deftly portrays the characters and the complex situation in which they find themselves. The characters come into direct contact, helping the reader to form one’s own attitude and assessment. As in a skilfully produced drama, the separation of the narrator disappears. The reader is put in the midst of the conflict and argument. Unconsciously the person is drawn into the vortex of action. These dramatic dialogues are, certainly, the cream of Frost’s narrative output. Rich in characterisation, brimming with dramatic moments and full of give and take of conversation, these poems present the most enduring facet of the creative endeavour of the poet.
Even though most of the Frost narratives fall squarely into one or the other of the types mentioned above a few of his poems refuse to yield to this attempt at strict classification. "Mending Wall" the opening piece in *North of Boston* is a first person narrative which on a first reading seems to be a personal narrative but on closer look it has the properties of a dramatic monologue as well. "The Black Cottage" has the properties of a personal narrative and a dramatic dialogue; "The Vanishing Red" and "Maple" can be looked upon as third person accounts and dramatic dialogues. Except for a few poems like these Frost narratives in general follow a pattern of means of perception and narrative situation which helps us to discern a clear classification.

The creative genius of Robert Frost has produced an excellent array of narrative poems. Whether it be personal narratives, story poems, monologues or dialogues the poet could treat the medium with dexterity and ease. He understood the challenge and the enduring value of each of these approaches quite well. In these modes he could
author works full of creative depth and of great excellence. In every collection of his, he has left for the future a handful of unforgettable poems, especially a handful of dramatic narratives. The most notable of all would be the excellent sketches of a number of memorable characters he has left for the posterity.
Notes

1 Barthes indicates three levels of description in a narrative work, also comparing it with the narrative elements mentioned by others in the field. There are (1) Functions that Propp defines as “an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of action,” (2) actions in the sense in which Greimas talks of characters as actants, and (3) narration referred to as ‘discourse’ by Todorov (Barthes, 260).

2 In Three Genres Stephen Minot refers to these gradations as 1) stream of consciousness, 2) first person as-if-spoken, 3) first person in neutral style, 4) third person, 5) first person plural style and 6) objective reporting or the reportorial style (Minot, 151).

3 Introducing the typological circle Stanzel writes: “Having demonstrated the structural significance of the three oppositions of person, perspective and mode which underlie the narrative situations, I shall proceed to the arrangement of
the narrative situations as illustrated by the diagram of the typological circle. As I have already stated, the points corresponding to the ideal types of the three axes of the typological circle which represent the three opposites (Stanzel, 60).

Three out of the five categories of dramatic poems listed by John Lynen in The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost come under this grouping. They are Dramatic Dialogues, Pastoral Dialogues and Philosophic Dialogues.
WORKS CITED


