Robert Frost has left for posterity indelible images of New England in all its variety. Most of his lyrical poems abound with pictures of the countryside and his experiences of the seasons and we see a greater focus on the depiction of the landscape of New England in such poems. This, no doubt, is the well-known aspect of the poet Robert Frost. His portrayal of New England life and population, on the other hand, is quite distinct from these nature descriptions. They are much more complex and receive greater attention in the present study.
Frost's dramatic poetry is a pageant of humankind in its best assortment. For the numerous portraits in the narrative poems he drew models from his native New England. While discussing *North of Boston* in *American Poetry since 1900*, Untermeyer remarks:

It is a book of a people, of the folk of New England, of New England itself with its hard hills and harder certainties, its repressions, its cold humor, and inverted tendencies. Against this background, Frost has placed some of the most poignant and dramatic poems that the age has produced, perhaps the most authentic and powerful that have ever come out of America (Untermeyer, 20).

In these dramatic poems we come across life like sketches of characters and they become living and active through the conflicts that become the life blood of these dramas. As we focus our attention on the narratives, two important elements of the background of the characters and conflicts in the poems of Frost gain importance: his treatment of nature in relation to characters and
the social situation in which Frost treats these individuals. Nature and culture thus form the backdrop against which Frost’s dramatis personae enact the drama of life.

The familiar face of Frost is surely that of a serene lover of nature, who draws inspiration from the ordinary things around and sublimates these findings to lofty philosophical discoveries. This aspect of the poet is most evident in Frost’s nature descriptions and personal narratives.

A famous example of this approach is “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening,” a vivid portrayal of the author’s serenity and creative ease in the proximity of nature that is characteristic of Frost’s personal reminiscences. On “The darkest evening of the year” (8), the poet stops on his way, to take a look at the woods of one of his acquaintances. The whole setting is full of serenity and enchantment so that the poet is hard pressed between his eagerness to watch the “woods fill up with snow” (4) and the thought that he has “promises to keep” (15) travelling great distances. The poem in this way begins with a joyful
companionship with nature, but ends in profound wisdom.

In the treatment of nature, there is surely a marked difference between Frost's lyrics and personal narratives on the one hand and his monologues, dramatic narratives and third person narratives on the other. Whereas in the former we see numerous instances of beautiful descriptions of nature and impressive word pictures of man in harmony with his surroundings, his other narratives seldom present scenes of this peaceful coexistence.

Another great narrative genius Hardy, famous for his nature descriptions and superb skill for the dramatic, is similar to Frost in many aspects. Cornelius Weygant remarks that in many of the excellent poems of Frost "there is a power of condensed story-telling equal to that of Hardy" (Weygant, 245). As in the case of Frost, drama has a very special place in the narratives of Hardy. While in Frost narratives drama arises out of the break down of communication between individuals, in the works of Hardy it arises out of "a struggle
between man and his environment. More specifically, it is a struggle between eternal, quiescent, inanimate nature. . .and the aspiring travailing human spirit” (McCullough, 234).

In Hardy’s novels, as in the personal narratives of Frost, we find the characters blend with the moods of nature, as Bruce McCullough remarks about *The Return of the Native*, “Characters, action and setting blend in close union and fuse with the underlying dramatic idea.” (McCullough, 248). The presence of nature in Hardy’s novels, contrary to the practice of Frost, assumes great significance as the novelist uses these nature portrayals as an important ingredient in characterisation. In the prose narratives of Hardy, nature is an ever present complement of character. Arthur Compton-Rickett comments:

Interesting as Hardy’s stories always are, arresting, even exciting as they are sometimes, the appeal to the reader does not lie in any skilful manipulation for incident. It lies in a treatment of character - as the inevitable outcome of a special environment. .
The immutability of Nature, the mutability of human life; the bigness of Nature, the littleness of man; the inexorable character of natural laws, the puny struggles of human personalities trying to evade them (Compton-Rickett, 542).

In this respect Frost is quite distinct from Hardy. Mother Nature, the provider and solace and at times the terrifying monstrosity, is almost entirely absent in some of the best narratives of Robert Frost. While Hardy magnifies character using the moods of nature, Frost primarily uses dialogues and personal conflicts to bring out the characteristic responses of the dramatis personae. While the personal narratives portray characters hand-in-glove with nature, in his dramatic narratives Frost seems to turn away from the outer world and focus entirely on inter and intra personal conflicts of humans. An echo of this diversion of focus we hear in his poem “Desert Places,” which describes the narrator’s sense of loneliness on a winter nightfall:

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars-on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.
("Desert Places," 13-16.)

In the poems of Robert Frost, a continuum of development is discernible with respect to his treatment of nature vis-à-vis the characters. At one end is the lyrical poems, in which the nature is ever present and often the depiction borders excellent personification of natural phenomena as in "Clear and Colder": "Wind, the season-climate mixer,/ In my Witches' Weather Primer/ Says . . ." (1 - 3). These poems, in the exclusive realm of nature, are a world apart from Frost's people poems.

In the second category, the personal narratives, the narrator or the poet himself is present in close proximity with nature. The persona comments on nature and often derives great inspiration and learns important lessons from it. Frost's reminiscences are a fine mix of nature description and personal introspection. They are, at the same time, candid statements of narrator's
dreams, whims and fancies. Personal narratives like "Birches," "After Apple-Picking," "The Wood-Pile," "Good Hours" and "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" are all examples of this sort.

The third group with respect to Frost's presentation of nature, is his dramatic narratives. In these people poems the poet, so to say, focuses on characters and turns his gaze away from refreshing nature. A few of the dramatic narratives like "The Death of the Hired man" or "Home Burial" contain scanty references to nature, but the character or the central action does not closely relate to any natural phenomena. A poem like "Snow" or "Maple" may evoke expectations of closeness with nature, but they turn out to be dramatic narratives with central concern about people and their relationships. In some of them, like "Vanishing Red" or "The Witch of Coos" Frost blinds out nature altogether. Frost's narratives, thus, make use of nature with varying importance and among them dramatic narratives make very limited use of the background description of nature.
The second major factor in the background of Frost dramas, the social situation, gains importance as the theme of most of these poems is a reaction of a number of individuals to a volatile cultural setting. Frost narratives are, generally, poems of restlessness, conflict and uneasiness, with a changing society and its ways as its background. The paradise-like existence of the nature poems is no longer present here. In these narratives we find only the fallen human nature with all the sufferings that accompany it. There is the story of the disappearing generation of Red Indians in "The Vanishing Red"; we meet a sample of wandering job-seekers in "Two Tramps in Mud Time"; lonely homes left behind by the migrants in "The Black Cottage"; a sign of rapid social change, migrants we meet in "Ax-Helve." There is utter loneliness, psychic abnormality and marital discord ever present in these dramatic poems, of course, with a sprinkling of concern and companionship.

The New England of Frost’s times was undergoing a significant cultural change. The old world of peace and quietude was passing away; and a
new world was not yet born. The traditional innocence and faith of the old lady in "The Black Cottage" was disappearing. Instead, a band of 'liberal youth' in whose hands those old beliefs "suffered from a general onslaught" ("The Black Cottage," 96) was emerging. In the dramatic narratives of Frost this tension between the old and the new is an ever present reality.

Talking about North of Boston Amy Lowell comments on the treatment of New England by Robert Frost:

Mr. Frost has reproduced both people and scenery with a vividness which is extraordinary . . . Mr. Frost’s is not the kindly New England of Whittier, or the humorous and sensible one of Lowell; it is a latterday New England, where a civilization is decaying to give place to another and a very different one" (Lowell, 23)

In these narratives Frost seems to refer to a time of great social change and the resultant degeneration in the day-to-day living conditions.
In New England society, what modern sociologists would call ‘anomie’ was setting in. Sociologists Emile Durkheim and Merton made in depth observation regarding this phenomenon. Robert K. Merton noted that at the time of great social change all the people in a society would not have a chance to achieve the socially approved goals of success, health, happiness and wealth. “This lack of opportunity creates an anomic or normless situation in which people disagree on the rules. . .” (Denisoff, 372)

Sudden changes upset the societal scale instantly but a new scale cannot be immediately improvised. The result is a confusion at all levels of society. Collective conscience requires time to reclassify men and things. People react to this in different ways. “The state of deregulation or anomaly is thus further heightened by passions being less disciplined, precisely when they need more disciplining” (Abraham, 177, 78). Revolutions, growing violence, suicide and various other symptoms of restlessness and loneliness manifest itself in society during such a time.
The New England society that we see in Frost’s narratives is one in which the changing times have already taken the toll. The ever present streak of abnormality in many of these poems is indicative of the cultural degeneration that was setting in on New England. This aspect in Frost’s poems is a favourite theme of Amy Lowell:

Mr. Frost does not deal with the changed population, with the Canadians and Finns who are taking up the deserted farms. His people are leftovers of the old stock, morbid, pursued by phantoms, slowly sinking to insanity. In “The Black Cottage” we have the pathos of the abandoned house, after the death of the stern, narrow woman who had lived in it. In “A Servant to Servants” we have a woman already insane once and drifting there again, with the consciousness that her drab, monotonous life is bringing it upon her. “Home Burial” gives the morbidness of death in these remote places; a woman unable to take up her life again when her only child had died.

(Lowell, 23)
The core unit of a society is the family and this in turn is affected mostly by any change in the wider community. The end result of anomie likewise is its upsetting impact on the family. Sociologists speak of the total break down of domestic life as a result of the phenomenon:

Sudden upward changes in the standard of living or the breakup of a marriage throw life out of gear and put norms in a flux. Like economic anomie, domestic anomie resulting from the death of a husband or wife is also the result of a catastrophe that upsets the scale of life (Abraham, 178).

"Home Burial" is a clear description of such a domestic anomie resulting out of the death of the only child. In "Hill Wife" we meet a woman driven away from home and also from normalcy due to childlessness coupled with chronic neglect by a workaholic husband. Industrial mishaps often result in death or permanent disablement, completely upsetting normal family life. "Out, Out-" and "The Self Seeker" throw light into such tragedy resulting out of factory accidents.
It is a troubled New England generation that we meet in Frost’s dramatic poems. The life and culture are undergoing a rapid change and in this societal transformation the age old values are fast eroding, giving rise to xenophobia and mistrust. There appear on the horizon migrants, new sects and licentious living. Mistrust, fear and loneliness reign supreme in the lives of many and as a result families crumble and individuals become all the more isolated. The old agricultural set up has gone; a new industrial society is getting ushered in. This is the background in which Frost depicts many of the characters in the dramatic poems.

The societal reality of fluidity and complexity provided the poet with inexhaustible models for character depiction. Frost made use of the rich array of the people of New England to present a sample gallery of humanity, with variety and depth. Commenting on the erstwhile Hollywood beauty Abishag portrayed in “Provide, Provide” John Robert Doyle compares Frost with the literary portrait painters of old:
During the Middle Ages and through Renaissance, one of the most popular forms of literature was the portrait, or usually collection of portraits, of princes and men of high position who had fallen from power, lost their wealth, or for some reason come into disgrace. These sketches were supposed to serve as a warning to the great. The best known of these collections was The Mirror for Magistrates (1559-1563). “Provide Provide” is Frost’s Mirror for Moderns, his reminder of what the world has to offer and of what can be done to make the best out of the worst if it comes, and it is likely to come (Doyle, 223).

Though such a didactic purpose is not apparent in the portrayal of characters, their universality makes them relevant to the world at large. These characters are not only representatives of New England life, but a sample specimen of the humanity as a whole. Frost’s poems portray characters in a wide range of careers having diverse temperaments. We meet farmers and farm labourers; mill owners and factory workers;
professors and students; science enthusiasts, tax collectors, travelling sales men, house wives, and people affected with various psychological illnesses; Frost poems are truly a wide spectrum of people and professions.

The life-like portrayal of characters in some of the poems of Frost is superb. Frost's narrative poems contain excellent slices of life, and, as such, they are the best by way of character depiction. Talking about Frost's fidelity in portrayal, Amy Lowell remarks: “It is photographic. The pictures, the characters, are reproduced directly from life, they are burnt into his mind as though it were a sensitive plate” (Lowell, 24). His dialogue poems like “The Death of the Hired Man,” “A Hundred Collars,” “Home Burial” and “Snow” contain some of the best character sketches of Frost. The dramatic monologues such as “A Servant to Servants” and “Mending Wall” also provide fine psychological portrayal of special people. Cornelius Weygandt, after a detailed discussion on Frost's narratives, remarks:
In these tales, long and short, involved or simple, the people are never put before you minutely. Their appearance is never clearly pictured. Their personalities, their temperaments, their codes, however, you are never in doubt about. Nor are you ever in doubt about the faithfulness of character portrayal. . . . What a gallery there is of them! (Weygandt, 246)

The characters in Frost’s poems have a universality that transcends the boundaries of culture and race. These are the people we meet daily in life everywhere and they come before us full of life and true to reality. John Robert Doyle remarks on Frost's characterisation:

The author says in the beginning of *North of Boston* that it is a book of people, and critics often have added, of New England people. . . . The significance of the sectional characteristics in the poem lies in the fact that Frost has not betrayed his readers by falsifying either his people in relation to their environment or their
environment in relation to the people. Because of this fidelity, Frost's individuals assume universal significance (Doyle, 103)

How does the poet achieve this feat of convincing characterisation in these poems? Rimmon-Kenan, discussing portrayal of character traits in narratives, mentions direct and indirect presentation as the major tools. Direct presentation is narrator's own comment in the narrative. "A presentation is indirect when rather than mentioning a trait, it displays and exemplifies it in various ways" (Rimmon-Kenan, 61). Among these character indicators, she mentions action, speech, external appearance and environment. Stephen Minot, while discussing characterisation in fiction speaks of direct analysis of character; use of significant action; use of dialogue and thoughts; and use of physical details as vehicles of depiction (Minot, 172-178). Frost poems present his own choice tools of character portrayal, and they are: (1) dialogue, (2) action, (3) crisis, and (4) narrator's comments. Frost changes his preference for these
tools from poem to poem. In some poems he uses one of these extensively, but in another set of poems he opts for another mode of character portrayal.

Among the four tools of characterisation, special attention should be paid to conversation. Dialogue between the characters in the dramatic poems becomes a major device of portrayal, since the poet, in many of his well known poems, allows the dramatis personae to come alive and interact, with least intervention from the narrator. The direct comments by the author is entirely missing in such poems, but through the dialogues we can arrive at the character attributes from the leads that the conversations offer.

John Oliver Perry in his essay “The Dialogue of Voices in Robert Frost’s Poems” lists five types of dialogue techniques in Frost’s poems, giving us a wide perspective of the use of different voices. The first type of dialogue is by presenting two characters in a poem, like in “Home Burial” or “The Death of the Hired Man.” The dialogue between “an occasionally exploited distance between the overt speaker and the implied Poet” (Perry, 222) in the
dramatic monologues is another device. "The third type of dialogue arises from Frost’s extensive use of irony, the interplay between two meanings being understood analytically and even apprehended experientially as a struggle between two voices or selves" (Perry, 223). Illustrations of this are "The Ovenbird" and "Provide, Provide." Dualistic allegories in poems like "The Road Not Taken" and "The Grindstone" form the next category and "the fifth and final kind of dialogue permits Frost’s more broadly imaginative, highly sensitive self to surface and be identified as a distinctly poetic voice" (Perry, 226). In poems like "Birches" and "Once By the Pacific" this dialogue between poet’s every day self and a broadly imaginative persona is evident.

Among the five types of dialogues listed by Perry only the first two are relevant in a discussion concerning character depiction by Frost. The most important one with regard to characterisation is, no doubt, the first one: the dialogue of voices in which two distinct characters speak. The greatest advantage of this mode is that
“overt dramatic dialogues provide Frost with the realistic situations he prefers for his poems” (Perry, 221). The poet makes use of the technique of dialogue to portray the complexity of the situation and at the same time depicts the characters involved, with all vividness possible.

Commenting on the characterisation of Robert Frost, Lawrence Thompson compares him with Robert Browning:

Whereas Browning’s dramatic monologues imply a listener whose presence has an effect on the speaker, Frost’s dramatic narratives go beyond this single method by permitting the psychological studies to develop through the give-and-take of dialogue. Furthermore, Browning’s monologues frequently become apologies for the action, past and present, of his actors. His interest in soul-history is often the interest in post-mortem. Frost on the other hand, seems to find more pleasure in the step-by-step unfolding of a psychological crisis at the immediate moment . . . . (Thompson, 107).
It is this step-by-step unfolding of conflict through dialogue that gives Frost narratives its special quality. Characters talk and through their conversation the reader is drawn into the present action. The reader also learns of the character and his or her special traits through this characterising dialogue.

In a dialogue poem the overt participation of the poet or the narrator of the events is limited. The main body of such a narrative poem will be the conversation that goes on between the characters. At least in a few poems like "Blueberries" in *North of Boston* the narrator never interrupts, not even to tell us who it is that speaks. The poem begins abruptly: "You ought to have seen what I saw on my way / To the village, through Patterson's pasture today: / Blueberries as big as the end of your thumb" (1-3). Till the end of the poem we never get to know who this 'you' and 'I' are, because the conversation is broken not even once to introduce either of the speakers. We are left with the question whether it is the poet himself talking or reporting the words of someone else.
Frost's typical conversational poem is one in which the poet gives the stage setting in a few lines, very often he gives some clues concerning the dramatis personae, and then the characters take over with mutual dialogue. In the few opening observations Frost prepares us for the big drama that is to come. "The Code" is an excellent example of such a dramatic opening:

There were three in the meadow by the brook
Gathering up windrows, piling cocks of hay,
With an eye always lifted toward the west
Where an irregular sun-bordered cloud
Darkly advanced with a perpetual dagger
Flickering across its bosom. Suddenly
One helper, thrusting pitchfork in the ground,
Marched himself off the field and home. One stayed
The town-bred farmer failed to understand.
"What is there wrong?" . . . (1-10)

We learn that there are three persons working in the field: 'the town-bred' farmer and his two helpers. The background of piles of hay, the gathering clouds and the urgency expressed by the lifting of an eye toward the west, all prepare the
readers for the enactment of ensuing drama by the characters portrayed mainly through the conversation between them.

After this initial stage setting, the characters come alive with dialogue and there is no more interruptions by the narrator. The farmer is oblivious of the unwritten code of the country workers, that "The hand that knows his business won't be told/ To do work better or faster" ((22, 23). The helper who stays back comes out with a story of his own to illustrate his delicate point. The portrayal that emerges is a contrast and resultant conflict between two types: one bred in an urban culture who is simple, untutored in the finesse of relationship and having an eye on the immediate profit and the another coming from a rural set up with characteristic sensitivity and depth of feeling. Whereas the former is talkative and demanding yet unsure of himself, the latter is quiet but obstinate. The contrast is true, not only of the character in the principal story, the town-bred farmer and James, but also of actors in the story-in-story, the other helper and the former
boss, Sanders. These data that conversations provide, are essential building blocks in character depiction.

The speech style of each of the speakers is significant ingredient of character description. Talking of the significance of the method of dialogue in revealing character, Stephen Minot remarks: "In fact, every line should be 'in character,' which is to say it should appear appropriate for that speaker" (Minot, 174). Frost's dramatic poetry is a store house of a rich variety of characterising dialogue. The distinctness of men and women is evident from the way they talk. Frost "allows his actors to talk in a language that is rich and living. No one since Synge has put so much of the sharp tang of country life into dramatic poetry" (Untermeyer, 20).

Frost understood each character well and he represented each of them with sympathy and realism. This became possible because of his keen observation. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant reports the words of an early companion of Frost:
"Rob was always interested in queer characters, he always wanted to stop and listen, when we walked," one of the companions of his early Lawrence youth told me. The truth is Frost was born with an ear -- the best gift a poet can have -- . . . . Later Rob said that he had liked people for their voice tones before he liked them for themselves (Sergeant. Robert Frost, 424).

In the dialogues the characters come alive through expressions of feelings. The fears, yearnings, joys and sorrows articulated by the characters are notable elements of the conversations, which add to the uniqueness of portrayal. "A Servant to Servants" begins with the words, "I didn't make you know how glad I was/ To have you come and camp here on our land" (1, 2). In "The Death of the Hired Man" the poet presents the sensitive nature of Mary expressed through her remark concerning the pitiable sight of the destitute worker, "he hurt my heart the way he lay/ And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back" (147, 148), contrasted with the animosity and
arrogance of her husband Warren, "When was I ever anything but kind to him? But I'll not have the fellow back... What good is he? Who else will harbor him? At his age for the little he can do?" (11, 12, 15, 16). The heart rending cry of the boy in "Out, Out-," "Don't let him cut my hand off--/ The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!" (25, 26), portrays the helplessness and mortal fear of the character as well as the utter confusion in the situation portrayed in the poem.

Dialogue of the character is not only the words that he or she speaks but even more the way in which it is spoken. As a result sometimes silence and refusal of the character to speak out can be strong indicators of character. "The disintegration of character under psychological stress results in the failure of language," remarks Floyd Watkins (Watkins, 86). The woman in "A Servant to Servants" speaks sentences that trail off into ellipses and incoherence. Amy, the wife in "Home Burial" is overcome by grief as she thinks of her lost child. The greatness of Frost's depiction of character is that through a realistic
presentation of the speech of the people under deep emotional distress the poet achieves an excellent portrayal of character as well as the accompanying situation.

The innumerable clues these dialogues provide furnish us with clear indicators for the experiences the characters go through in these dramas. Brower’s remarks clearly demonstrate the excellence of his characterisation through dialogue:

Frost is more certainly a dramatic writer..., and he demonstrates everywhere in his eclogues an awareness that characters live not by the poet telling us anything or by characters telling us what they are, but by self-characterizing dialogue....The mastery of dramatic dialogue in these eclogues has not been matched by either of Pound’s then disciples, Yeats or Eliot. Perhaps his reading of Shakespeare, perhaps his practice in directing plays, he had mastered James’s lesson: “Dramatize it, dramatize it” (Brower, 176).
While discussing characterisation in drama Stephen Minot remarks, "Characterization in a play is based almost entirely on action and dialogue" (Minot, 258). Though this is not wholly true of dramatic poetry, next to dialogue, action by the character gives important clues regarding characterisation. Every movement of the character, whether it be conscious or unconscious, incorporated in a poem gives us an inkling into the different traits. The husband in "Home Burial" turns to work and comments on weather which enrages his wife. Concerning this William Pritchard remarks:

In "Home Burial" it was exactly the husbands ability so to turn which maddened his wife, when only a few moments after having dug the grave of their dead child, he sat in the kitchen and remarked on the inability of birch fences to stand up against the rigors of New England weather. This moving on to something else, rather than staying fixed in grief, prompts her to deplore all human grief as sporadic rather than lasting (Pritchard, 153).
In his poems Frost incorporates actions by the characters, leaving a deep impression of each personality he portrays. In ”The Death of the Hired Man,” next to what Mary and Warren speak, it is the actions of the characters, especially that of Mary, that achieves a convincing portrayal.

Mary’s exquisite gestures in responding to the rays of moonlight reveal yet once again her tenderness and sympathetic reaching out, aspects of the traditional femininity Frost ascribes to her. Contrastingly, Warren’s mildly cacophonous stick breaking is as typically masculine as her gently apron spreading is feminine (Vogt, 536, 37).

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant’s observation, ”Frost illumines character not by comment or explanation but through crisis” (Sergeant. “Good Greek out of New England”, 85), is important as we consider the third aspect of characterisation in the dramatic narratives of Frost. Crisis assumes significance as it becomes an occasion to see something unique in the life of the individual.
The way in which the person reacts to a conflict and how he or she reorders personal life in relation to a crisis will have a great bearing on our assessment of that person. John Robert Doyle makes this observation on the crisis in “Home Burial”:

What a man becomes clear if one observes how he reacts to significant things in moments of great stress. For the husband though there is great grief, life must go on; for the wife because there is great grief, life, normal life, cannot go on. The husband forces grief beneath and fills the surface of life with everyday affairs; The wife spreads her grief over all and submerges the affairs of everyday existence (Doyle, 38).

The soul of drama is crisis and conflict, and Frost, well aware of this, makes use of it efficiently in his narratives. From the very start of a dramatic poem he prepares the readers for crisis and in his best works dialogues and actions effectively communicate this tension in interpersonal relations. In “The Death of the
"Hired Man" the opening lines foreshadow the imminent crisis:

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table, Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step, She ran on tiptoe down the darkened passage To meet him in the doorway with the news And put him on his guard. "Silas is back."

She pushed him outward with her through the door And shut it after her. "Be kind," she said (1-7).

In one of the earliest tributes to North of Boston, Edward Garnett wrote in August 1915 in The Atlantic Monthly:

Mr. Frost possesses a keen feeling for situation. And his fine, sure touch in clarifying our obscure instincts and clashing impulses, and in crystallizing them in sharp, precise images, -- for that we cannot be too grateful. Observe [in the opening lines of "The Death of the Hired Man"] the tense, simple dramatic action, foreshadowing conflict... (Garnett, 32, 33).
The remaining part of the dramatic poem, as is the case with most of the other similar ones, is the dialogue between the principal characters amplifying this tension that is already in the air in these few opening lines. More than anything else, it is through this mounting tension and the portrayal of the characteristic response of each person to this crisis that the poet achieves a most convincing portrayal. The circumstances of the incidents and causative factors of conflict vary from poem to poem. Gerber Philip remarks:

Anything will serve for a reason or for bricks. The death of a child, which should bind husband to wife closer in their common grief, may pry them apart instead. ... Alienation may spring from the fear of "A Hundred Collars," or it may rise from the slightest breach of respect - from the very way a thing is said without prior thought, as in "The Code" (128)

There are a variety of conflicts presented in these poems. Some of them are primarily of personal nature arising in the precincts of home leading to
estrangement in marital bond; and there are other inner conflicts of a moral or psychological nature that form the subject matter of some other poems. Frost has a knack of constructing a unique moment of crisis through a few pieces of dialogue and a couple of narrative comments here and there, leaving a lasting impression of human drama in the minds of readers.

In most of Frost poems the readers seldom come to know of the physical details of the characters. Even the inner strengths or weaknesses they come to know only through dialogues. It is surprising, then, that the poet has left for posterity such a wide range of character portraits of great depth and individuality. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's comment is pertinent here:

He is a dramatist rather than a story-teller. "Drama is all; a poem must create situation as much as a play"—and he lives up to it; even in a lyric of a butterfly. The diverse crises in marital relations summerized in "Home Burial," "The Death of the Hired Man," "The House-Keeper," "A Servant to Servants," might be
Yet another mode of character depiction, the interventions by the narrator or the poet himself in the form of a first person participant or a third person narrator, provide information regarding the characters, and form perhaps the most universal mode of character delineation, especially in fiction. In Frost poems, as a rule, narrator does not help much by way of character sketch. Louis Untermeyer in *American Poetry Since 1900* goes so far as to say that that which gives Frost poems "so potent an illusion of reality is the absence of the guiding hand of the creator; the figures live and breathe and move of their own desire and necessity" (Untermeyer, 21). Though this comment is true of some of the best narratives of Frost, not all his poems employ the same technique of restrained narrator intervention allowing the characters to live and breathe freely.

John C. Kemp in *Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist* has an extensive discussion on the narrative personae in the numerous poems of
Frost. He attempts to group the narratives based on the difference in the personae. The narrator in the masterpieces of Robert Frost like “The Ax-Helve,” “The Witch of Coös,” “Stopping by the Woods,” “The Hill Wife,” “The Death of the Hired Man,” “A Servant to Servants,” and “‘Out, Out—’” are “fundamentally different from the out spoken, almost arrogant speaker” of the other type of narratives. These dramatic poems focus on an experience and not a philosophy. “They convey tension, uneasiness, even a sense of distress and transgression” (Kemp, 181,82).

A fine example of the former type of narrative personae is the one in “‘Out, Out—’” in Mountain Interval, the poem itself being a poignant story of the tragic death of a boy and the helplessness of his sister, who is a mute witness to the calamity. He toiled at a wood-cutting saw, “Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart” (24). His sister brought his supper. At her announcement the disaster strikes, cutting off the boy’s hand. The child bleeds to death, leaving his heart-rending wail resounding in our ears: “‘Don’t let him cut my
hand off— / The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him sister!'" (25,26). The reaction of the bystanders is all the more shocking: "And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs" (33,34).

The third person narrator in the poem, "'Out, Out—'" is a witness of few words, stunned by the brutality of the accident. This matter of fact narration, so crisp and soul stirring, leads the reader step after step into the traumatic experience that the narrator's persona goes through. There is no moralising, no lessons to be learned; but only the narration of a distressing drama with great detachment and the resultant impact.

The persona in the some other poems of Frost is quite unlike the tension-ridden uneasy narrator of the former type. The examples for the second type are "New Hampshire," "Christmas Trees," "A Time to Talk" and "Brown's Descent." In these poems Frost has become "little more than an extension of the conventional Yankee sage, the rustic bard, the renowned poet of New England who
knows where he stands and what he stands for” (Kemp, 182). This ‘Yankee persona’ has become the self-conscious spokesman for his region and as a result lacks the perplexity and naivété of the earlier self. The latter group of poems, in this way, suffers from insufficiency of dramatic component.

There is a continuum of narrator’s presence discernible in Frost poems, extending from the narrator centred personal narratives to the character as well as dialogue centred dramatic poems. Lynen recognises and comments on this varying presence of narrators:

The best of Frost’s drama comes to us through the mediation of a narrator. In some of these poems, only faint traces of narrative framework are discernible in stage directions or bits of description interspersed here and there through the dramatic speech. In others, however, the narrator intervenes frequently and at some length to set the mood of the scene and describe the shifting emotions of his characters (Lynen, 110).
"Mending Wall," "A Servant to Servants," "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," and such other poems, though they are in the first person narrative mode, present excellent character sketches of multiple characters. Most other poems in first person are limited to a soul study of narrator or narrator’s perspective. Dramatic narratives, on the other hand, present excellent multiple and interactive character portrayals and very often the brief interventions from the narrator sets the tone of the poem.

With regard to character depiction, there is a discernible difference between the various types of poems of Frost. In the personal narratives, the emphasis being on the bygone experiences of the narrator, characterisation is hardly attended to. These narratives abounding with reminiscences and nostalgia present certain of the emotions of the narrator in the context of some past incidents. These poems mostly in first person almost never present any character, but are memorable by way of narrator’s own experiences, wishes and dreams.
Frost's story poems are only occasions to narrate a sequence of events and hence the poet scarcely attends to the depiction of character. A typical story poem "The Bearer of Evil Tidings" narrates the story of a man who carries some evil news to the king, on his way decides not to go to the throne and bear the consequences of the news. Travelling on, he meets a girl of his age who takes him home in 'the land of Pamir' and instructs him in her tribe's religion. The tribe's origin becomes a subplot in the poem. In the process of this story telling the characters receive scant attention and hence they remain poorly developed.

In the third group of poems, the monologues, though the feelings of the speaker is revealed the picture of the character that emerges out of the poem is quite blurred. In many of the monologues there is the presence of the narrator who evokes the talkative mood of the speaker. The speaker comes out very much in the conversation and we get a clear picture in the end, but the narrator remains hidden and hardly anything is known about the first person narrator. In the monologues like
"A Servant to Servants" and "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" and in disclosure poems such as "The Witch of Coös," we get the inner dynamics of the speakers. What the reader gets to know is the subjective perception of the central character concerning his or her own life and surroundings. In "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" the 'witch' tells us how there were "Two towns fighting / To make a present of me to each other" (4, 5). In the subsequent account, with images full of sexual overtones, she narrates her exploits with her husband, Arthur Amy and the 'old man' Mallice Huse. The poem in effect turns out to be a psychological analysis rather than a character sketch with touch of realism.

In the final group of poems, the dramatic dialogues, with regard to the depiction of character, at least two approaches are obvious. Whereas the poems of personal conflict come out with clearer depiction of character, the philosophic poems or the poems that present conflict of ideas provide little information concerning the speakers as such. They deal with
philosophic ideas and the poet uses the characters only to voice his opinions. In the philosophic poems like, "West-Running Brook," "Build Soil" and "From Plane to Plane," character depiction is at its lowest. In the conversation between Pike and Dick in "From Plane to Plane," for instance, the two farm labourers wish they "could swap jobs with the Doctor" (28). The discussion continues on the relative merit of the various professions. The whole poem turns out to be a series of give and take in the light vein, during which they stumble upon different ideas. In this process there is hardly any focus on the speakers, nor any disclosure of the inner-self. We learn that Pike has been a farm worker for the past fifty years and Dick is fresh from college, and that is all that we learn about the characters.

Dramatic dialogues that deal with personal conflicts, on the other hand, present distinct character sketches. "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," "The Fear," "In the Home Stretch," are all poems of this category. Meserve's visit to the Coles is the occasion for the poem "Snow," yet
another poem in this category. As the poem opens, Meserve is leaving the Coles and returning home, in spite of the protests by the Coles and also by his wife over the telephone. A suspense ridden waiting follows. After a long delay the preacher reaches home. Using the various pieces of conversation Frost paints the character of Meserve brush stroke after brush stroke, an out-going talkative person, follower of a new sect, one who works up miracles every minute. One after the other character details are piled up about him. Meanwhile, we learn a great deal about the Coles as well, their concern, complimentarity, gentleness and eagerness to be of help. The poem, in short, is a character sketch of these different persons.

Among these different types of dramatic poems of Robert Frost, more so those which portray serious conflicts between people, contain excellent depictions of character. Lawrance Thompson cites the poem “The Code” and comments that it “makes use of dramatic incident for the delineation of character” (Thompson (1942), 109). That Frost has done it excellently time and again is amply
demonstrated through the many dramatic poems and numerous character depictions he has sketched through his long career. The present study accords greater attention to these dramatic narratives dealing with personal conflicts in order to have a closer look at the actual portrayals Frost has attempted.

One question asked about Frost characters is whether they are static or they develop and change during the course of the events. Some of Frost's men and women definitely evolve as the stories progress. An example for this first category that change during the course of a narrative is Warren in "The Death of the Hired Man" who becomes more open to Mary's suggestion to be tolerant to Silas and gradually becomes more appreciative of the hired-man. We find the husband in "Home Burial" becoming more assertive towards the end of the tension-ridden dialogue.

In some cases it is ambiguous as to whether a change has come about or not. In "The Fear" the woman's suspicion of being followed gets disproved at the revelation of the stranger and she seems to
come out of her frenzy, but the final shattering of
the lantern remains dubious. In "A Servant to
Servants" though the monologist gives vent to much
steam it is doubtful whether she has experienced a
healing touch or not. The conclusions of the
monologues in general keep us wondering whether the
characters have gone through a cathartic experience
and resultant change due to the revelations.

Majority of the characters of Frost, on the
other hand, refuse to change and develop through
the encounter presented to us through the
narrative. Referring to the characterisation of
Robert Frost, Radcliff Squires comments: "They are
'accomplished' characters apparently, incapable of
change" (Squires, 78). Even at the end of a stormy
conversation and eventful exchange we find the
characters the same as they were at the start of
the poem. Meserve in "Snow" is perhaps an extreme
example of this. An inflexible adventurer, the
preacher refuses to be persuaded to abandon his
perilous journey in spite of all the persistent
efforts by his own wife and the Coles. The many
characters that appear in the pastoral and
philosophic dialogues refuse to budge from their opinionated stances throughout these narratives. Frost's dramatic dialogues and monologues, in the same manner, place before our view persons that never undergo any change of attitude or behaviour during the course of these poems.

Frost has a unique mode of achieving character depiction through the presentation of situations of conflict from day-to-day life. For this approach static characters are, surely, more effective. In such situations the changes in the characters during the course of the narrative is very much limited. This seeming obstinacy in the characters is true also with regard to the presentation of the characters' viewpoints in the dialogue poems. In the philosophic dialogues like "West-Running Brook," "Build Soil" and "From Plane to Plane" the speakers come out with their views and enter into strong argument, but we do not see any one converting the others in any significant manner. In short, the characters in Frost narratives do not undergo any basic change by way of character or opinions in the course of the events narrated in
the poems. Victor E. Vogt in his essay “Narrative and Drama in the Lyric: Robert Frost’s Strategic Withdrawal” comments on this aspect: “Such changes as Frost’s dramatis personae undergo are not of this fundamental kind and are usually limited to sharply contained shifts in moods, attitudes, and awareness” (Vogt, 549).

Static or evolving, the characters that the poet has created have excelled in depth and fidelity and have withstood the test of time. The literary portraits that Frost has painted are interesting material for psychological analysis. Viewed in the background of a changing society with its curious eccentricities and vivid unrest, they become quite useful and relevant for the modern mind. That they are static portraits painted with great vividness using literary tools of dialogue and depiction of crisis make them all the more suitable for an analysis of the present kind.
WORKS CITED


