THE THEORY AND FUNCTION
OF ROBERT FROST'S
SENTENCE SOUNDS

by

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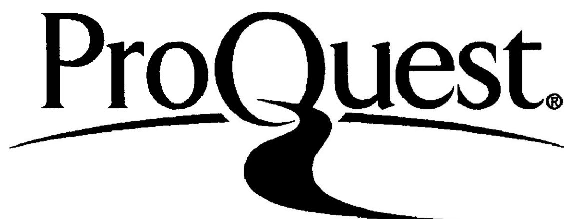

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Communication in the English language is to Frost more than dictionary definitions of words that comprise sentence and phrases. A sentence, which Frost defines as "a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung,"[1] suggests that the relationship of words evokes a sound or quality which is called speech. These individual sounds which are "as definite as words"[2] have their own entity and power to charge the whole poem with meaning and life. These individual sounds complete with their own "sound posture" function as a vehicle to convey meaning which Frost terms "the sound of sense."[3]

The source of words is extremely important to Frost; he states that primitive man used sounds to convey meaning before he employed words in communication. Frost envisages that a cardinal point in the writing of poetry is to utilize a diction which is rooted in experience and meaning. These primitive sentence sounds, which may be raw or wild, are only partially refined and tamed. As Frost states:

> I thank the Lord for crudity which is rawness, which is raw material, which is the part of life not yet worked up into form, or at least not worked all the way up.[4]

Creating a structured poem is a kind of editing for Frost and he terms this process of writing poetry as "the amplification and

sophistication of the proverbial turns of speech."[5] These "turns of speech" and tamed primitive sentence sounds can best be appreciated in their relationship with the metre, rhythm and rhyme of a poem. By intrinsic analyses it will be apparent that these are the literary devices that refine and control the sounds in Frost's poetry. It is for this reason that they all must be discussed *en toto*.

It is Frost's intention to capture the speaking voice as it is used in everyday life. In my examination of his poem it will become apparent how these voice tones induce a spontaneity and freshness. When I say that Frost's diction derives from everyday life I should quickly add that the speech in his poetry masquerades as colloquial. Underneath this guise the reader finds a fully literary work in which the dramatic replaces, or rather transcends, the dialect, thus sparing the poem from mere regionalism. In other words, the setting and characters of his poems may be local but the themes are universal. Although this conversational mode of Frost has been attacked by critics, I will illustrate in his poetry why such a style enhances the meaning of his works.

Footnotes

[1] Lawrance Thompson, ed. *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 110.

[2] Thompson, p. 111.

[3] Robert Frost, "Getting The Sound of Sense," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, ed. E. C. Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 261.

[4] Lawrance Thompson, ed. *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 465.

[5] Robert Frost, "Getting The Sound of Sense," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, ed. E. C. Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 262.

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Introduction

Recapturing the primitive sounds which have been de-emphasized in our literature has been one of the main preoccupations of Frost's poetic theory and practice.

> 'If we go back far enough we will discover that the sound of sense existed before words, that something in the voice or vocal gesture made primitive man convey a meaning to his fellow before the race developed a more elaborate and concrete symbol of communication in language. I have even read that our American Indians possessed, besides a picture-language, a means of communication (though it was not said how far it was developed) by the sound of sense. And what is this but calling up with the imagination, and recognizing, the images of sound?'[1]

These primitive sounds which Frost describes as "the gold in the ore,"[2] once expressed by sound alone such emotions as fear, anger, happiness and desire. Modern man has replaced and supplemented these primitive sounds with concrete symbols of communication which are not necessarily dependent upon sound. Frost emphasizes the sound of meaning or what he calls the sound of sense where the connotation may be totally independent of the denotation of a word or sentence. The importance of this sound of sense becomes more obvious when we translate only the dictionary definition of words to ignore the charged meaning of the voice tone. Such a transcript would not capture the internal reactions as heard in the voice; words alone without the primitive sounds of sense deny the reader the pleasure of "[calling] up with the

imagination, and [recognizing] the images of sound."[3]

A direct comparison can be made between the development of any language, such as the American Indian's and the individual growth of any infant's language. Before he can understand his mother's words, a child first interprets the message being conveyed by the *tone* of her voice. The quality of the voice *alone* successfully conveys such sensations as affection, warmth, security, trepidation, and anger. As the child's language matures, the denotation of the words is emphasized and the sounds of the words and sentences cease to be the primary medium. When visual images are introduced to reinforce the child's sense of security, it naturally follows that the ear's role in communication further diminishes. The experiences of hearing and listening are partially denied to the individual who lives in a visually biased society--the ear becomes vestigial. Frost believes that we must return to our inherent roots of communication; the ear must also be made to see.

In correspondence with John H. Bartlett, his former student, Frost stresses the necessity for the reader and writer to listen for the sound of the sentence. When a writer or reader is deaf to this underlying sound, the real meaning of the sentence is never heard.

> It is so and not otherwise that we get the variety that makes it fun to write and read. *The ear does it.* The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the sentence sounds and they were the fastest readers. Eye readers we call them. They can get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his work.[4]

According to Frost, dictionary definitions of words and sentences alone cannot accurately convey meaning. Without careful listening, the reader and writer will never grasp the nuances of meaning which sounds convey. This is why sound is the core of Frost's definition of a sentence: "A sentence is a sound in itself on which other sounds called words may be strung."[5] A sentence sound has its own character; it may be merely suggestive, but it is always accurate. Both the writer and reader must be listeners in order to catch these sentence sounds "fresh from the mouths of people."[6] These sounds should be "so recognizable that with a little trouble you can place them and even name them."[7] Frost tells us "that the writer must write with the ear on the speaking voice. We [the writer] must imagine the speaking voice."[8] There is no place for the eye writer or eye reader; *"The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader"* (italics added).[9]

Before the meaning of a voice tone can be interpreted, one must first be aware of the sentence sounds' context. Frost gives us his own experiment: two people are talking behind

a closed door. We understand the sense or meaning of their conversation as we hear the sounds of their words and sentences. Without hearing their actual words, the listener automatically translates their sounds into definite expressions and feelings. Each emotion has its own meaning or posture as heard in a sentence sound--a sentence sound which allows the listener to differentiate between the many emotions. Because all emotions can be expressed by their individual voice tones or sound postures, their recognition is dependent upon the listener's acuity.

Any person with an untrained or lazy ear will have a great deal of trouble hearing these sentence sounds. Reacting to them is another matter. Consider for example, a young couple out for an evening stroll. The girl remarks, "My! Aren't the stars bright tonight?" His response will tell her whether or not he has heard and interpreted her sentence sound. When her statement is placed within the proper context of their relationship on this evening, the boy should be able to hear the meaning of her sentence. A clinical and clipped voice tone will tell him that she is defensive and wary of his presence. She also could be dragging the syllables out, telling him that she is bored with something or someone. Another possibility of meaning in this sentence sound could be heard in an invitational but uneasy voice tone. If he has heard a romantic or seductive voice tone, then he will know that she wants to be kissed. But if he hears only her words,

then he will conclude that she is interested in astronomy and strike up a conversation about constellations.

"The voice of the imagination, the speaking voice must know certainly how to behave how to posture in every sentence he [the writer] offers."[10] This statement may seem obvious when we consider an exclamatory remark such as "Look out for the car!" Obviously the words are subordinate to the warning of the sentence sound. The pedestrian will react to the sound alone. But not every sentence sound is as obvious as this one.

> I am only interesting to myself for having ventured to try to make poetry out of tones that if you can judge from the practice of other poets are not usually regarded as poetical. You can get enough of those sentence tones that suggest grandeur and sweetness everywhere in poetry. What bothers people in my blank verse is that I have tried to see what I could do with boasting tones and quizzical tones and shrugging tones (for there are such) and forty eleven other tones. All I care a cent for is to catch sentence tones that haven't been brought to book. I dont say to make them, mind you, but to catch them. No one makes them or adds to them. They are always there--living in the cave of the mouth. They are real cave things: they were before words were. And they are as definitely things as any image of sight.[11]

Frost rejects the easy sublimity of "grandeur and sweetness" to embrace the real and more ordinary turns of speech. He understands that the "voice of the imagination, the speaking voice" is able to posture the subtler meanings in our language. To Frost, a vagueness in literature, as heard in the lofty and

exalted voice tones, suggests nothing more than the worn-out nineteenth century charm and superficiality--whereas the freshness and precision of "sentence tones that haven't been brought to book" bring us closer to the natural tongue of the English language.

Implicit in Frost's remarks on the "voice of the imagination" is the advantage of reading poetry rather than listening to it being read to us. The sentence sounds are heard most accurately by the inner ear, resulting in a personal experience for the listener. A performer actually impedes by thrusting his interpretation upon the listener. We hear him, not the poetry; our inner ear, which calls up the imagination, is never allowed to listen. The original voice tone of the poem has been carried down secondhand from the reader to the listener. Often the listener is given only remnants of the original version. We may be intimidated or seduced by the oratorical skill of a poet when his *own* voice has soared above the *real* voice tones in the poem. When we read the same poem later, our mind's ear may uncover a totally different poem--a poem which we might actually dislike. The opposite may hold true when we hear inept readings by excellent poets. They have denied the meaning of the poem by missing the sentence sounds.

According to Frost, poetry is best received through the printed page in a state of isolation: "To judge a poem or piece

of prose you go the same way to work—apply the one test—greatest test. You listen for the sentence sounds."[12] Only here can the eye work with the inner ear to intelligently grasp the "boasting," "quizzical" and "shrugging" tones. The reader is allowed to hear the poem at his own pace, to savour the verbal music, rhyme and rhythm which poetry recitals might deny. The inner or mind's ear is the basic tool of the writer and reader.

Although Frost ventured out on many of his own reading tours, the format of his recitals was conducive to his kind of poetry. His informative and casual remarks actually made such an occasion less a recital and more of a conversation with his admirers. Because the sentence sounds and voice tones have been taken from the natural everyday speech, his casual remarks before the reading of each poem actually enhanced the overall effect of his readings. Any listening audience would discover for themselves the close relationship between their own conversational sentence sounds and those in Robert Frost's poetry.

The reader and listener's recognition of familiar sentence sounds is directly related to the images which these sounds evoke for him. A reader will best respond when he shares a kinship with a poem.

> A word about recognition: In literature it is our business to give people the thing that will make them say, "Oh yes I know what you mean." It is never

> to tell them something they don't know, but something they know and hadnt thought of saying. It must be something they recognize.[13]

This is always Frost's goal in each of his poems. There must be clarification and elaboration of the content so that the reader can first understand the poem and proceed to relate the content with his own experiences. The sounds which evoke or stimulate the reader's consciousness may be subtle and suggestive or obvious and acrimonious; whatever they are, these sounds must be recognizable to the reader. One of Frost's definitions of poetry clarifies the relationship between the sounds (or how the material is presented) and the content itself:

> And we are back in poetry as merely one more art of having something to say, sound or unsound. Probably better if sound, because deeper and from wider experience.[14]

In 1915 Frost said that "there can be no creative imagination unless there is a summoning up of experience, fresh from life, which has not hitherto been evoked."[15] Twenty-four years later Frost echoes the same sentiments when he tells us that "the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew." Because "all that can be done with words is soon told,"[16] familiar and suggestive sentence sounds are needed to supply hues and tones to meaning that summon up the experience

of the reader. Because the human voice has countless inflections which express nuances of meaning, sensitive voice tones working with words often express a new connotation by approaching the subject from an oblique angle. The sensitivity of the reader's ear to these sentence sounds determines whether his imagination summons up his experiences. When these definite sentence sounds are present in a poem, the reader must "think more deeply to call up the image for the communication of his [the reader's] meaning."[17] Frost reminds us of Carlyle's statement "that if you 'think deep enough you think musically.'"[18]

Only by trusting the ear can one catch the inflections of the human voice. In Frost's longer poems the colloquial is allowed to suggest meaning where there is a conversational give and take of sentence sounds. In such poems as "The Death of a Hired Man" and "Home Burial", the dialogue--when heard with the mind's ear--conveys meaning not through words alone but by the sentence sounds that contain the words. This very important point is missed by critic Yvor Winters when he challenges the apparent looseness of Frost's style: "Poetry is not conversational ... conversation is the most careless and formless of human utterance; it is spontaneous and unrevised."[19] Nevertheless, such spontaneity and freshness redeemed by conscious attempt are the very things for which Frost is striving. Winters' uneasiness with the voice tones tell us that he is an eye reader, not an ear reader.

The source of many critics' anxieties about Frost's conversational style derives from an inability to hear the harmony between the speaking voice and the metrical regularity of the poem. Since both fall into the iambic pattern of conversation, there really should be no confusion. When sentence sounds are included, the rhythm may be interrupted but the poem is never allowed to lose control; the basic verse pattern is always there to stabilize the whole rhythm of the poem. In the following interview with William Stanley Braithwaite, Frost clarifies this point:

> 'What I am most interested in emphasizing in the application of this belief to art is the sentence of sound, because to me a sentence is not interesting merely in conveying a meaning of words. It must do something more; it must convey a meaning by sound.
>
> "But," I [Braithwaite] queried, "do you not come into conflict with metrical sounds to which the laws of poetry conform in creating rhythm?"
>
> "No," the poet replied, "because you must understand *this sound of which I speak has principally to do with tone*. It is what Mr. Bridges, the Poet Laureate, characterized as speech-rhythm. Meter has to do with beat, and sound-posture has a definite relation as an alternate tone between the beats. The two are one in creation but separate in analysis.' (italics added)[20]

Frost is telling us that a balance is maintained between the sentence sounds and the rhythm of the poem. The sentence

sounds or sentence tones are allowed freedom within a limited metre which Frost considers to be either loose or strict iambic. Any voice tone that leaves the iambic pattern of speech will naturally return to the fixed metre. The sentence sounds are never straight-jacketed into a fixed metre; they are allowed to speak.

> It is as simple as this: there are the very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse; and there are the very irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation. I am never more pleased than when I can get these into strained relation. I like to drag and break the intonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break stumbling on the shingle.[21]

To any eye reader, Frost's poetry does seem unrevised. But within the "irregular accent and measure of speaking intonation" there are also the "very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse." When these two voice patterns are placed in a "strained relation" within the strict metre, both the spontaneity of language and the classical structure of poetry are retained. There is harmony of movement between the conversational sentences which convey the sound of sense and the poetic conventions of verse which always returns the poem to the regular metre; there is a sharing of rhythm in the iambic pattern of both the natural cadence of conversation and the regular beat of the metre.

After understanding Frost's theories regarding the sentence sound, we would naturally suppose that he possessed a passion for the dramatic. In his introduction to "A Way Out," a one act play, he makes the following sweeping statement: "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic. It need not declare itself in form, but it is drama or nothing."[22] Frost clarifies the difference between the style and *genre* (or form) of any literary work. According to Frost, all good writing is drama when the voice tones and sentence sounds of the human voice convey emotion and feeling. We know, ourselves, that after reading Frost's poems, the ear has told us that the voice tones and sentence sounds were just as dramatic as those heard in any staged play.

> A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence. Sentences are not different enough to hold the attention unless they are dramatic. No ingenuity of varying structure will do. All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination. That is all that can save poetry from sing-song, all that can save prose from itself.[23]

Frost tells us that the sound of sense is "the abstract vitality of our speech. It is pure sound--pure form."[24] This "abstract vitality" as conveyed by sentence sounds does give us the dramatic. When successfully executed, the sounds of sense should affect all *genres* of literature: "An ear and an appetite

for these sounds of sense is the first qualification of a writer, be it of prose or verse."[25] In any literary work, the sounds should work with the words and sentences. The natural speech pattern of the iambics lends itself to this "abstract vitality of sound." Sound is "pure form" when the speaking tone of the voice charges the denotation of words and sentences with meaning. "A piece of good writing," Frost says, "is making the sentences talk to each other as two or more speakers do in drama."[26] The sounds of the sentences, as well as the denotations of the words, are doing the talking; thus we hear the speaking voice.

When we consider the sentence sounds' contribution toward the dramatic, it logically follows that all of Frost's poems are dramatic.[27] Although it is true that the dramatic dialogue of "Home Burial" gives us an exchange of voice tones resulting in a clear contrast of emotion and feeling, other Frost poems which are not usually thought of as being dramatic share some of the attributes of the dramatic dialogue. Commenting on the beat of the metre, Frost theorizes that the sound of sense is applicable to all his poems:

> We depend for variety on the infinite play of accents in the sound of sense. The high possibility of emotional expression all lets in this mingling of sense-sound and word-accent.[28]

Instead of two people talking in a dramatic dialogue, both the narrator and poet's voice tones in the lyric are similarly effective in expressing meaning. Regardless of the literary form, the sentence sounds also "talk to each other as two or more speakers do in drama."[29]

Although the topic of my paper deals mainly with the sentence sound, it is necessary to examine other individual sounds within that sentence. In my discussion I will of course include such things as tempo, pause and flow, rhyme and rhythm when discussing the prosody of Frost's poetry. Individual word and syllable sounds sometimes are fused into one voice tone or sentence sound: the combination of sounds often makes up one sentence sound. To understand why poetry produces its particular effects, it is essential to scrutinize the prosodic elements in order to appreciate the inner workings of a poem.

My intrinsic analyses have been made as intensive and thorough as possible; rather than merely touching upon many poems to cite numerous examples of Frost's sentence sounds, I have restricted my study to five of his works: "The Silken Tent," "Home Burial," "The Death of the Hired Man," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and "Birches." The scope of this paper does not attempt to encompass the whole literary career of Frost; nevertheless, the five major poems discussed are works from seven

of his books published from 1914 to 1942. Eight other Frost poems have been chosen from this period whenever I felt it necessary to elaborate upon my topic.

Because of the full dramatic range of "The Death of the Hired Man" and "Home Burial," they can be acted out on stage. The sentence sounds within the verbal exchanges of the protaganists challenge the reader to apply Frost's experiment where two people are talking behind a closed door. The dramatic narrative, "Birches," also invites the reader to catch the sentence sounds from the speaking narrator and poet. Instead of two people talking behind a closed door, we now can imagine only one. The lyric offers a different challenge. We hear a voice tone which is personal, unspoken and meditative. Although the narrator is not speaking sentence sounds, he does think them. They are in the poem for us to hear and interpret. In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "The Silken Tent" our inner ear can catch the sentence sounds of the narrator and poet's inner voice.[30]

Scholarly writing on my topic of sentence sounds is surprisingly sparse. I have further limited this body of material by intentionally using other critics' comments sparingly. My criticism is not formal in the purest sense, but I do attempt to deal exclusively with only the poem. In my close readings of and listenings to the poems I have not found it necessary to

extensively quote secondary sources. The explanation of Frost's theory concerning the sentence sound is best understood when *he* is speaking; the function of this theory is also best understood when the poems are allowed to stand alone, releasing the sentence sounds to speak freely. Each poem has been analysed in chronological order so that all of the sentence sounds can be accurately interpreted within the context of the whole poem. A copy of each poem has been included in my paper for the convenience of the reader.*

*All excerpts of Frost's poetry will be cited from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. E. C. Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

Footnotes - Introduction

[1] Robert Frost, "Getting the Sound of Sense," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, ed. E. C. Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 261.

[2] Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, p. 393.

[3] Frost, "Getting the Sound of Sense," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, p. 261.

[4] Lawrance Thompson, ed. *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1964), p. 113.

[5] Thompson, p. 110.

[6] Thompson, p. 113.

[7] Thompson, p. 113.

[8] Thompson, p. 159.

[9] Thompson, p. 113.

[10] Thompson, p. 111.

[11] Thompson, p. 191.

[12] Thompson, p. 113.

[13] Thompson, p. 111.

[14] Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, p. 394.

[15] Frost, "Getting the Sound of Sense," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, p. 262.

[16] Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, p. 393.

[17] Frost, "Getting the Sound of Sense," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, p. 263.

Footnotes - Introduction

[18] Frost, p. 263.

[19] Yvor Winters, "Robert Frost or the Spiritual Drifter as Poet." Reprinted from *The Function of Criticism*, Denver: Swallow, 1957, pp. 159-87. In *Robert Frost an Introduction*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg and James G. Hepburn (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1961), p. 136.

[20] Frost, "Getting the Sound of Sense," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, p. 261.

[21] Thompson, *Selected Letters*, p. 128.

[22] Frost, "Preface to A Way Out," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose*, p. 272.

[23] Frost, pp. 272-73.

[24] Thompson, *Selected Letters*, p. 80.

[25] Thompson, p. 80.

[26] Thompson, p. 427.

[27] Dramatic is used here to denote the oral-aural character of words spoken in any context.

[28] Thompson, p. 81.

[29] Thompson, p. 427.

[30] Because the poem, unlike the play, is not usually thought of as being dramatic, the study of the sentence sounds with regard to Robert Frost's poetry has offered the greatest challenge. After reading his plays I have concluded that the sentence sounds have not been written into the lines. The dramatic quality of his plays must depend upon the oratorical skills of the actor. Paradoxically, his plays are not as dramatic as his poems. These comments on the Frost play are intentionally left open for conjecture, thereby inviting further critical analyses.

The Sonnet

Frost tells us that the sentence sounds give to a poem a "wildness." We know that this dramatic wildness produces spontaneity and realism: "If it is a wild tune, it is a poem."[1] The restraint of the theme, according to Frost, is a steadying influence when balanced with the wildness of the sentence sounds. It is also true that because the sentence sounds give meaning and substance to the theme, they also function to add stability and control to the poem.

"The Silken Tent" is a one-sentence, 14-line metaphor in which Frost balances the theme with its root system--a system in which the theme is supported and steadied by the sentence sounds. The sentence sounds never grow too fast for the theme; the theme's roots are strong and are never uprooted or weakened.

> She is as in a field a silken tent
> At midday when a sunny summer breeze
> Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
> So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
> And its supporting central cedar pole,
> That is its pinnacle to heavenward
> And signifies the sureness of the soul,
> Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
> But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
> By countless silken ties of love and thought
> To everything on earth the compass round,
> And only by one's going slightly taut
> In the capriciousness of summer air
> Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

In his comments on the initial stage of the poem, Lawrance Thompson hints at both the dramatic quality and an ambiguity.

> The poet strikes into the middle of an action, so that there is a momentary sense of lostness until the reader has derived some orientation from the context. The effect is to give the reader an initial sense of the unnecessarily obscure or oblique tendency.[2]

I agree that there is a "momentary sense of lostness," but the reader quickly becomes orientated. Any obliqueness or obscurity is steadied by the calming sentence sound in the first line. The retarding function of the monosyllabic words is enhanced by the precision required to pronounce the front vowels: "Sh*e* *i*s *a*s *i*n *a* f*ie*ld *a* s*i*lk*e*n t*e*nt" (italics added). The symmetrical pattern of these sounds establishes a latent order and design early in the poem. The rhythmic balance between the front vowels and the monosyllablic words intrinsically express a freedom and spontaneity while keeping the voice of the narrator in control. Although our ear is keenly aware of the individual sounds as our lips articulate the sudden voice changes of the syllables, we are also aware of the total quality of the line.

The first line flows into the second without any pause inducing a sense of motion with the gust of the assonantal "a's" and the mercurial double "n's" and "m's" in "a sunny summer breeze." The consonants affect the texture and tempo of the poem: the silky "s's" and liquid "l's" soften both the image of "she" and "a silken tent"; the tempo capriciously, yet gently, shifts and sways throughout this whole breath sweep.

After this stir of movement in the second line, the poem continues the theme of freedom and individuality.

> She is as in a field a silken tent
> At midday when a sunny summer breeze
> Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent.

We learn the effect which the breeze has produced upon the tent: "Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent." The sentence sound has also shifted from the casual and playful description of the wind to a tautness and economy of speech. The double alliteration of "d" and "r" sounds and the end stop both slow down the speaking voice: the tempo has been lessened to produce a more controlled and restrained sentence sound. The plosive "d" sounds cause a stoppage of breath before the release: "dried the dew." Even the firm "r" sounds add to the unhurried sentence sound of the line.

Frost completes this quatrain by leaving the reader with the image of the silken tent gently swaying at ease.

> She is as in a field a silken tent
> At midday when a sunny summer breeze
> Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
> *So* that in guys it gently sways at ease.
> (italics added)

Throughout these four lines, word and sentence sounds work in harmony

with the denotative definition of words. An example of this harmony is seen and heard with the quiet word "so." The action of the tent "gently [swaying] at ease" builds up in the metaphor: "[swaying] at ease" subtly gives this inanimate object qualities of "she." The matter-of-fact delivery of "so" suggests to the reader an intimate understanding between narrator and she." The easy and natural progression from "she" to "tent" is heard in the narrator's voice tone. Although a psychological texture is subliminally woven into the poem, Frost does not leave these sounds in merely a subliminal state: he allows them to be heard by the reader's own conscious articulation. The whispering onomatopoetic "s" sound of "so" initiates the suggestiveness of a gentle wind. The alliterative and consonantal sibilance of "s" closely follows: "*S*o that in guy*s* it gently *s*way*s* at ea*s*e" (italics added).

The casual "And" introducing the second quatrain allows a fluid continuation of the iambic pentameter: "And its supporting central cedar pole." This weakly stressed "And" is suitably followed by the strongly accented "its"--a pronoun which emphasizes the subject of the poem. With the introduction of "its supporting central cedar pole," the duality of the metaphor is allowed to both broaden and deepen. As in the first quatrain, a comparison is made by "saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another."[3] Frost initially estab-

lishes the concreteness of this pole: by its physical nature, the pole serves the simple and basic function of supporting the tent.

The tent pole also symbolizes the hidden strength of this woman. By the use of the alliteration, the reader's attention is focused upon the repetition of the "s" sounds which are heard in three separate words. A kind of tongue twister makes the reader dwell upon this line for the longest possible time: "And it*s* *s*upporting *c*entral *c*edar pole" (italics added). We hear from this slow and deliberate sentence sound the narrator's admiration and respect for the woman's stability and strength.

The end-stop immediately following "pole" in the fourth line serves the same purpose as noted earlier: it slows down the speaking voice. When the tangible connotation of the pole is established, Frost then allows the symbol to be enlarged toward the metaphysical. The abstract meaning which follows, or rather evolves from the concrete images is heard in a natural and casual sentence sound: "And its supporting central cedar pole / That is its pinnacle to heavenward." The spiritual meaning has been produced with such ease that there seems to be no transition at all. And the poem continues to "ride on its own melting"[4] when we are told that the pole "signifies the sureness of the soul." Frost has not allowed the poem to soar: he has gently returned us to the image of the tent pole by specifically noting its spiritual symbolism.

When the poem returns to the mechanical function of the ropes, all the tent imagery and the woman's characteristics simultaneously convey the same meaning. The success of the metaphor is noted in the overlapping and fusing of description where this woman

> *Seems* to owe naught to any single cord,
> *But* strictly held by none, is loosely bound
> By countless silken ties of love and thought
> To everything on earth the compass round.
> (italics added) (8-11)

The narrator does not explicitly mention the tent or the woman; instead, we combine the qualities of both.

The balance between total independence and subtle restraint is hinted at with the ambiguity of "*Seems* to owe naught to any single cord" (italics added) and the explicitness of "*But* strictly held by none, is loosely bound" (italics added). The sentence sound shifts with the denotative meaning of these lines: a carefree voice tone notes the superficiality of her playfulness, whereas an assertive voice tone specifies the extent of her freedom. The pause in the second line causes the speaking voice to slow down: "But strictly held by none, is loosely bound / By countless silken ties of love and thought." It is from this more serious sentence sound that the narrator clarifies this woman's freedom and dignity when he implicitly noted the importance of *all* the ties.

The strong character of this woman is further revealed by the qualitative importance of the ties. She does not need to be specifically mentioned in the following; sentence sound alone conveys her grace and assuredness.

> [She] is loosely bound
> By countless silken ties of love and thought
> To everything on earth the compass round.

The surrounding individual ties console and protect her as do the degrees on a compass. The true north of the compass is associated with the central cedar pole; both are sure and constant pinnacles which symbolize her soul. The circular inferences of both the surrounding ties and the "compass round" imply the perfection and balance of this woman--a woman who exists between opposites.

Other than the sentence sound, rhyme is another audial aid which in many ways adds to the meaning of a poem. Before noting the importance of rhyme I will briefly speak of the sonnet form of "A Silken Tent" which is itself a ready-made vehicle for clarity and precision: three quatrains and a concluding couplet organize the poem into simple units. The rhyming scheme follows the classical Shakespearean sonnet form (a b a b c d c d e f e f g g) and quietly adds to the formal structure.

When the agreement between the meaning and sound of words becomes one, a binding or harmonizing of meaning and rhyme occurs.

This marriage between words is evident in the rhyming of "breeze" and "ease." The poet does not need to tell the reader that this is an easy and gentle wind. The mating of sounds is suggestive of an easy wind. Sound patterns accentuate the association between words. This unifying quality of sound is also noted in "pole" and "soul." The symbolic nature of the tent pole is reinforced when "pole" and "soul" are fused by sound.

The flexibility of rhyme is necessary when there is an agreement between mood and sound. The rhyming scheme in "The Silken Tent" never overpowers the theme; rather, it works with the theme to produce nuances of meaning. Rhyme is only one of many ties which lightly bind the poem. In the loosely bound rhyme of "heavenward" and "cord" the unrestrained agreement between sounds is a refreshing detour from full rhyme. This example illustrates how rhyme allows freedom while still maintaining control--thus demonstrating the very theme of the poem.

Another example of similar sounds is offered where the meaning of rhyming words is interpreted as one unit: "air" and "aware" in the concluding couplet lend themselves to a desired mood--a mood which is allowed to gently drift off:

> And only by one's going slight taut
> In the capriciousness of summer *air*
> Is of the slightest bondage made *aware*.
> (italics added)

It is important that the couplet is preceded by the plosive "t" sound of "taut"—a sound which suggests the tightness of the guy ropes. The couplet then offers a flowing sound—one which is in antithesis to the preceding stiffness of "taut." "The Silken Tent"'s indebtedness to rhyme is apparent as the poem ends by again balancing the opposite qualities of this woman: a balance of meaning is conveyed with the balance of sound.

The strong character of this woman was conveyed earlier to the reader by the statement that "ties of love and thought" are part of her life. The poem's tone in the concluding couplet has gradually shifted from her commitments to her contentment: "In the capriciousness of summer air / Is of the slightest bondage made aware." The sentence sound of this couplet is heard as a tender sigh--a sigh which reveals her sensitivity and composure. Her freedom is expressed by the presence of her femininity--a quality sensed by the reader as she sways in the warm and soft "capriciousness of summer air."

Footnotes — The Sonnet

[1] Robert Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose,* ed. E. C. Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 394.

[2] Lawrance Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost* (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1961), p. 126.

[3] Frost, "The Constant Symbol," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose,* p. 400.

[4] Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose,* p. 396.

The Dramatic Dialogue

No better example of Frost's sound posturing can be found than "The Death of the Hired Man." Published in his *North of Boston* in 1914, the poem consists of a dramatic dialogue between a husband and wife over the return of Silas, their former seasonally-hired farmhand. The reader is immediately informed in the title that the hired man is going to die. Knowing this information, any suspense regarding the future of Silas is minimized. Frost announces in the title that any anticipation by the reader concerning Silas' fate would detract from the real subject of the poem, the dialogue and drama between Mary and Warren. The tension of "The Death of the Hired Man" is achieved and maintained in the continuous dialogue between these two main characters; it is the relationship between these two protagonists which is the nucleus of the poem.

> 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." 5
> She pushed him outward with her through the door
> And shut it after her. "Be kind," she said.
> She took the market things from Warren's arms
> And set them on the porch, then drew him down
> To sit beside her on the wooden steps. 10
>
> "When was I ever anything but kind to him?
> But I'll not have the fellow back," he said.
> "I told him so last haying, didn" I?
> If he left then, I said, that ended it.
> What good is he? Who else will harbor him 15
> At his age for the little he can do?

What help he is there's no depending on,
Off he goes always when I need him most.
He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
Enough at least to buy tobacco with, 20
So he won't have to beg and be beholden.
'All right,' I say, 'I can't afford to pay
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.'
'Someone else can.' 'Then someone else will have to.'
I shouldn't mind his bettering himself 25
If that was what it was. You can be certain,
When he begins like that, there's someone at him
Trying to coax him off with pocket money--
In haying time, when any help is scarce.
In winter he comes back to us. I'm done." 30

"Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you," Mary said.

"I want him to: he'll have to soon or late."

"He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.
When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
Huddled against the barn door fast asleep, 35
A miserable sight, and frightening, too--
You needn't smile--I didn't recognize him--
I wasn't looking for him--and he's changed.
Wait till you see."

"Where did you say he'd been?"

"He didn't say. I dragged him to the house, 40
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.
I tried to make him talk about his travels.
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off."

"What did he say? Did he say anything?"

"But little."

"Anything? Mary, confess 45
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me."

"Warren!"

"But did he? I just want to know."

"Of course he did. What would you have him say?
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect. 50
He added, if you really care to know,
He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.
That sounds like something you have heard before?
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look 55
Two or three times--he made me feel so queer--
To see if he was talking in his sleep.
He ran on Harold Wilson--you remember--
The boy you had in haying four years since.
He's finished school, and teaching in his college. 60
Silas declares you'll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for work:
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things.
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft 65
On education--you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on."

"Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot." 70

"Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.
You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!
Harold's young college-boy's assurance piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used. 75
I sympathize. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin, like the violin, 80
Because he liked it--that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong--
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
He wanted to go over that. But most of all 85
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay---"

"I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.
He bundles every forkful in its place.
And tags and numbers it for future reference, 90
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.

He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself." 95

"He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride, 100
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different."

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it 105
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harplike morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard some tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night. 110
"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he's nothing to us, any more 115
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in."

"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve." 120

Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
"Silas has better claim on us you think
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles 125
As the road winds would bring him to his door.
Silas has walked that far no doubt today.
Why doesn't he go there? His brother's rich,
A somebody--director in the bank."

"He never told us that."

"We know it, though." 130

"I think his brother ought to help, of course.
I'll see to that if there is need. He ought of right
To take him in, and might be willing to—
He may be better than appearances.
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think 135
If he had any pride in claiming kin
Or anything he looked for from his brother,
He'd keep so still about him all this time?"

"I wonder what's between them."

"I can tell you.
"Silas is what he is--we wouldn't mind him-- 140
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anybody. Worthless thought he is,
He won't be made ashamed to please his brother." 145

"I can't think Si ever hurt anyone."

"No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do. 150
I made the bed up for him there tonight.
You'll be surprised at him--how much he's broken.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it."

"I'd not be in a hurry to say that."

"I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself. 155
But, Warren, please remember how it is:
He's come to help you ditch the meadow.
He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud 160
Will hit or miss the moon."

It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned--too soon, it seemed to her--
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited. 165

"Warren?" she questioned.

"Dead," was all he answered.
(pp.34-40)

An analysis of the first five lines demonstrates how Frost establishes meaning through the use of sound. As I discussed in my introduction to this thesis, an accurate interpretation of the Frost poem must acknowledge the delicate balance between the reader's hearing and seeing. In the following passage the ear translates a visual image--aided both by the pauses of the words and the physical movements of Mary.

> 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.'"
> (1-5)

The first two lines, interrupted by an end-stop and caesura, establish the mood and tone of the initial scene. The mood of tranquility is conveyed in the alliteration "Mary sat musing"; not until this has been established do we learn that she is "Waiting for Warren." This capitalized phrase, which is set off by itself between a comma and full stop, directs attention to Mary's act of waiting and to the character of Warren himself. This alliterative "Waiting for Warren" establishes their relationship and in the context of the poem slows down the sentence to produce the sense of passing time. The second line continues: *When* she heard his step" (italics added). The adverb "When" prolongs this act of waiting; another end-stopping now slows down

the narrator's voice. Frost further establishes Mary's anticipation of Warren's return home with: "she ran on tiptoe down the darkened passage." The short vowels and careful chronology of clauses complement her haste and urgency to "put him on his guard." These staccato sounds associated with Mary function harmoniously with her actions when she goes to meet her husband. This iambic line continues, only to end, like Mary in a full stop: "And put / him on / his guard." Finally, Frost allows Mary to reveal in the trochee and iamb that "Silas / is back." The passage has ended in a dramatic peak with the reader included in the drama.

The voice tones in Warren's introductory remarks reveal his anger and frustration over Silas' return.

> 'When was I ever anything but kind to him?
> But I'll not have the fellow back," he said.
> "I told him so last haying, didn't I?
> If he left then, I said, that ended it.
> What good is he? Who else will harbor him
> At his age for the little he can do?
> What help he is there's no depending on.
> Off he goes always when I need him most.
> He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
> Enough at least to buy tobacco with.
> So he won't have to beg and be beholden.
> 'All right,' I say, 'I can't afford to pay
> Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.'
> 'Someone else can.' Then someone else will have to.'
> I shouldn't mind his bettering himself
> If that was what it was. You can be certain,
> When he begins like that, there's someone at him
> Trying to coax him off with pocket money--
> In haying time, when any help is scarce.
> In winter he comes back to us. I'm done.' (11-30)

We are told that his greatest complaint against Silas is that he always wandered off to work on another farm at haying time when he was needed the most. Although Warren's remarks seem harsh and almost truculent at times, it is important to note that they are made in an outburst of emotion. It is a passion comprised of conflicting feelings. Underlying Warren's ostentatious protest against Silas' truancy, there exists a mute admiration for his hired man's independent lifestyle. Warren understands man's necessity for pride and self-reliance. He is sincere in saying that he himself "can't afford to pay / Any fixed wages"; for the sake of his and Silas' pride he adds an embarrassed: "though I wish I could." This inner conflict aggravates his impatience with Silas even though Warren realizes that a man who is losing his pride and independence becomes both desperate and vulnerable. Warren recognizes Silas' attempt to retain some respect when Silas has allowed himself to be coaxed off with pocket money on numerous occasions in the fall. Regret and the understanding of human suffering are heard in Warren's voice tones:

> 'He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
> Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
> So he won't have to beg and be beholden.'
> (19-21)

It is important to note that Mary is silent throughout this monologue. She functions as a kind of sounding board in

allowing her husband to 'blow off steam.' If she were not present, her husband would be thinking these thoughts. Warren's pent-up emotions are not completely exorcised as a result of his verbal outburst; but in Mary's function as a safety valve they are allowed to be released. I stress that although Mary is present, Warren does not want her to say anything in his case against Silas. In his own question and answer monologue, Warren self-justifies his actions and emotions. Further substantiating this point, critic Reuben Brower offers the following: "[Warren] is not speaking to his wife, and while reporting his debate with Silas he is really carrying on an argument with himself."[1]

Only when Warren becomes too boisterous does Mary speak: "'Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you.'" Again her husband attempts to achieve the authoritative position in this dialogue: "'I want him to: he'll have to soon or late.'" The toughness in his sentence sounds are evident, but this last comment by Warren verifies our suspicion that he has never actually confronted Silas. Nevertheless, Warren's tough posture stands in antithesis to Mary's appeal for compassion. The opposite tones in their line sounds were similarly heard in the beginning of the poem; Mary's "'Be kind'" was balanced with his challenging questions: "'When was I ever anything but kind to him?'" "'I told him so last haying, didnt I?'" "'What good is he?'" and "'Who else will harbor him / At his age for the little he can do?'" Responding to Warren's last comment, "'I want him to: he'll have to soon or late,'" Mary

ignores her husband's anger, appealing instead to his compassion by citing Silas' decrepit state:

> 'He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.
> When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
> Huddled against the barn door fast asleep,
> A miserable sight, and frightening, too—'
> (33-36)

Warren continues his questioning, asking with a new tone, "'Where did you say he'd been?'" There is an acerbic quality to this too casual and flippant statement. To avoid any misunderstanding, Warren should have directly asked, "Did he say where he had been?" Although Warren may be attempting to disguise his sincere concern for Silas—as noted in the disinterested tone of his question—the important point is that Mary hears this nuance of sound in her husband's words. We note the gently combative and chiding tone of her response: "'He didn't say.'" This phrase should be a signal to Warren that his wife is now losing her patience. Her displeasure at his sarcastic remark is immediately revealed to him when she repeats this "say," which in itself is challenging. The remainder of her answer further illustrates this change in her tone, as the reader begins to hear the contrast between the scolding of Warren and the tenderness directed at Silas.

> '*He didn't say*. I dragged him to the house,
> And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.

> I tried to make him talk about his travels.
> Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off.' (italics added)
> (40-43)

Warren interjects with more prodding questions: "'What did he say?'" "'Did he say anything?'" "'Anything?'" "'But did he?'" He asks Mary to "confess" her conversation with Silas; as is made clear by her reaction, however, it is obvious that Warren has gone too far with his aggressive manner. Mary's firmness, hinted at in her previous remark "'He didn't say,'" is now the dominant tone of her response. When Warren correctly guesses at Silas' promise to again "ditch the meadow," Mary retorts:

> 'Of course he did. What would you have him say?
> Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor man
> Some humble way to save his self-respect.'
> (49-51)

Of course Warren wouldn't; his past actions verify this. Mary continues her sarcastic attack against Warren when she says: "'He added, *if you really care to know,* / He meant to clear the upper pasture too'" (italics added). Anticipating an interjection, she asks him the question, "'That sounds like something you have heard before?'" By blunting Warren's cross-examination, Mary deprives him of the chance to be the challenging lawyer, browbeating a confession from his witness. Although the reader has

been introduced to the image of the conventional wife awaiting her husband, it is obvious from her sentence sounds that Mary is neither submissive nor passive. Her comments to Warren illustrate that a rebuttal stated in a quiet tone is as effective as a louder and more boisterous retort:

Mary finally tells Warren of her conversation with Silas. The main topic, Silas' history of broken promises and unfulfilled dreams, defuses Warren's anger; it reminds both protagonists of the special relationship and memories that they shared with Silas.

> 'He ran on Harold Wilson--you remember--
> The boy you had in haying four years since.
> He's finished school, and teaching in his college.
> Silas declares you'll have to get him back.
> He says they two will make a team for work:
> Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
> The way he mixed that in with other things.
> He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
> On education--you know how they fought
> All through July under the blazing sun,
> Silas up on the cart to build the load,
> Harold along beside to pitch it on.'
> (58-69)

She reminds Warren about Silas' relationship with Harold with a prodding "you remember": "He ran on Harold Wilson--*you remember--*"(italics added). This conversational "you remember" is similar to "you know how they fought"; it is a kind of invitation and beckoning for Warren. This same afterthought is used in "The Pasture" for the same spontaneous effect: "I

shan't be gone long.—*You come too*" (italics added, p. 1, 4,8). The realism of this scene is achieved in both poems where there is a pause for affection bridging one individual to another. This pause gives the other person time to digest what has been said and to think of something to say. In "The Death of the Hired Man" Mary's desire for Warren to remember, to reminisce, is achieved by this conversational technique. This passage conveys a sense of Silas' *former* supply of energy and motion, reminding Warren of Silas' past worth. In more general terms, the remembrance of Silas and Harold is a statement concerning the harmony of man's companionship as they share in a hard day's work.

Warren interjects with a defensive "Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot" (70). He is almost boasting to Mary of a reverence and respect which he had for Silas' privacy. Warren is telling Mary that he still does have a sensitivity—a sensitivity which she has been challenging. Like Silas, Warren has self-respect too. Warren's reaction to Mary's reminiscence tells the reader that he has been an attentive listener. His own sympathy for Silas has been evoked from her compassionate sentence sounds.

Mary then smoothly guides the conversation from the memories of the past into the realities of the present.

'Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream

> You wouldn't think they would. How some thing linger!
> Harold's young college-boy's assurance piqued him.'
> (71-73)

In the last hours of his life, Silas has confessed to Mary serious doubts about his past. Both Mary and the narrator are selective in their choice of material since we, like Warren, hear only the important things that Silas has told her. Mary's sympathy is evident in her continuing remarks:

> 'After so many years he still keeps finding
> Good arguments he sees he might have used.
> I sympathize. I know just how it feels
> To think of the right thing to say too late.'
> (74-77)

The compassionate tone in Mary's words reveals her verbal ability now. By associating herself with Silas' regrets, she is able to move closer to her husband. Mary exposes her human frailities to Warren for the purpose of assuaging his temper since he too must recognize his own flaws and limitations.

Mary's closing remarks in this passage introduce Silas' one "accomplishment" of hay loading, but, more important, they introduce the universal questions relating to all our lives.

> *'But most of all*
> He thinks if he could have another chance
> To teach him how to build a load of hay--' (italics added)
> (85-87)

'To have another chance' is the crux of Mary's passage. We have been told that Silas has had serious doubts about Harold's assurances; Silas now is questioning whether or not Harold was really "daft" at all. It is in this hour of dying that Silas struggles for "the right thing to say" (77). Time is running out for this broken man; we realize that it is "too late" for him to "have another chance" (86).

Even though Silas' days are finished, it would be a mistake to conclude that Frost is subscribing to a nihilistic philosophy. As I have stated earlier, this poem is mainly concerned with the relationship between Mary and Warren; it is the effect of this dying man and of his final death on the protagonists' lives which is all-important. In listening to Warren's description of Silas' past success of hay loading, the reader hears a clear message of optimism. The sentence sounds of Warren tell us that he is proud of both meaningful work and of his hired man:

> 'I know that's Silas' one accomplishment.
> He bundles every forkful in its place,
> And tags and numbers it for future reference,
> So he can find and easily dislodge it
> In the unloading. Silas does that well.
> He takes it out in bunches like big bird's nests.
> You never see him standing in the hay
> He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself.'
> (88-95)

It is interesting that Warren again argues with himself

in the form of a lecture; but while exposing his innermost feelings in Mary's inconspicuous presence, he applauds the positive aspects of Silas' character rather than exposing his hired man's liabilities. Warren speaks of Silas' worth as a continuous quality in this character, not as merely one accomplishment long since faded. There is never a trace of sarcasm in these words but rather a sense of boyish enthusiasm: "I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment." We hear Warren's sincerety in "Silas does that well"; it is an economical and precise diction similar to the style of Hemingway. The passage sings with Warren's respect for Silas, especially when he tells Mary, "You never see *him* standing in the hay / He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself" (italics added). Warren's reference to Silas in eight separate occasions underscores his exuberance; it is Silas' accomplishment, one which does not go unnoticed or unapplauded.

I do not wish to belabour this point, but a passage from "Two Tramps in Mud Time" aids in emphasizing the important relationship between the content and voice. The ear hears a harmony between the message and the sound of what is being communicated:

> 'Good blocks of oak it was I split,
> As large around as the chopping block;
> And every piece I squarely hit
> Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.
> The blows that a life of self-control
> Spares to strike for the common good,
> That day, giving a loose to my soul,
> I spent on the unimportant wood.'
>
> (p. 275, 9-16)

The narrator in this scene states the important significance of chopping wood: "That day, giving a loose to my soul." In "The Death of the Hired Man" no analogy for the farmwork is stated or symbolically presented to the reader. The "important wood" in Warren's passage is a "load of hay"; what is important is Warren's intrinsic feeling of pride in Silas' accomplishment. Warren's genuine feelings toward Silas do not have to be stated; sentence sounds themselves convey the meaning.

The success or failure to accurately assess the characters of Mary and Warren by their sentence sounds brings to mind incident told by Robert Frost to Lawrance Thompson.[2] In 1915 Frost attended the dramatic productions of "The Death of the Hired Man" and "Home Burial." The two actors portraying Mary and Warren were well-educated city people who believed that rural living was simple and crude. Frost watched from the audience as Mary and Warren "talked crudely" and took "clumsy steps across the stage." After the production Frost asked "Wasn't it clear from the lines that Warren was no fool, no clod-hopper?" Frost continued his questioning: "Wasn't it clear that Warren and Mary were dramatically represented as intelligent people?"

Another interpreter of "The Death of the Hired Man," critic, Nancy Vogel, has failed to hear the lines of Warren and Mary. She says: "One [Mary] is the New Testament; the other

[Warren], Old. One is reasonable; the other, beyond reason."[3] Vogel has pigeon-holed them into archetypal symbols, thereby denying them any depth or character. Even the distinguished Reuben Brower offers a too inflexible analysis of "The Death of the Hired Man." Summarizing, he says that the poem

> is the drama of man's justice and man's mercy and the pull between both values when set against the simplest and deepest of claims--the dignity of man. The essence of the poem lies in the pull and its resolution as mercy tempers justice.[4]

By suggesting that Warren lacks both mercy and compassion, Brower has stereotyped him, ignoring his full range of character. As I noted earlier, Warren's frustration with Silas is part of the anxiety which he directs to Mary. Warren's frustration is neither a yearning for justice nor an intrinsic characteristic of his personality.

Lawrance Thompson agrees basically with Brower's conclusions, saying that "the poem is brought to focus on Warren's gradual conversion to pity and mercy for one who had never earned a right to pity."[5] He continues by stating the theme to be "the transformation of the husband's stubborn and impatient prejudice, through the deliberate and gentle persuasiveness of the wife." Thompson's statement can be misleading when he strongly

infers that Warren experiences radical changes in his character. I seriously doubt whether Mary's persuasiveness or Silas' death causes any kind of traumatic metamorphosis in his personality. At the outset he had in him the person he is at the poem's end.

Again, I stress that regardless of Warren's sporadic outbursts in the form of 'tough talk,' there is never any evidence in the poem that he would hurt or humiliate Silas. Warren's threats should not be taken seriously by the reader. In the past Warren never confronted Silas about his rich brother, another example which undermines the critics' ability to see any wrath in Warren's stance toward his hired man. This brother, a successful director in the bank, and Harold, the academic, are constant reminders to Silas that he is one who has drifted in life. Although Warren may not specifically know "what's between them, [the brothers]" (39) he does have the sensitivity not to confront either Silas or the brother.

Warren's first words in the poem had been the challenging, yet defensive, "When was I ever anything but kind to him?" (10).Looking back to his past with Silas, Warren echoes the same reflectiveness in the sympathetic, "I can't think Si ever hurt anyone" (146). Wanting Mary to recognize his compassion, Warren is a willing partner in Mary's efforts to persuade him to relent. In the pauses and suspensions in their dialogue he is waiting to be coaxed out of his mood. Warren's stubbornness is an obvious

quality, but it should not be translated as malevolence: it should be regarded only as a veneer or mask to hide his inner feelings. If Warren is impatient, it is a benign impatience caused by the frustrations in his long relationship with Silas.

In "The Telephone," another Frost poem, the man's emotion and personality are also drawn out by the silence of his female companion. In the following passage the line sounds illustrate his boyish anticipation; we conclude that he has returned hurriedly to the house.

> 'I heard you talk.
> Don't say I didn't, for I heard you say--
> You spoke from that flower on the windowsill--
> Do you remember what it was you said?'
> (p. 118, 6-9)

His remarks, in the form of short fractured sentences, attempt to draw out her reply. The urgent trip to the house is verified by the word gusts and catching of breath. But the woman playfully teases him with a calm "'*First* tell me what it was you *thought* you heard'" (italics added). The length of the lines increases as the man has finally caught his breath. He gives the woman an explanation in a detailed description of what he *thought* he heard.

> 'Having found the flower and driven a bee away,
> I leaned my head,
> And holding by the stalk,
> I listened and I thought I caught the word--

> What was it? Did you call me by my name"
> Or did you say--
> *Someone* said 'Come'--I heard it as I bowed.'
> (11-17)

A close relationship between the man and woman is strongly hinted at by her response: "'I may have *thought* as much, but not aloud'" (italics added, 17). In the context of the poem her gesture to "have thought as much" denotes an affection and intimacy; non-verbal communication is just as real as what is actually stated. With this clarification the mood has gone from the emotional line sounds of this man to conclude in the quiet atmosphere of understand and trust which we hear in his final words: "'Well, so I came.'"

In "The Death of the Hired Man," Mary gets her husband to talk out his emotions by using the same strategies which any wife who is close to her husband would use. The lack of verbal communication at times does not mean that these are two alienated people divided by the return of Silas; rather, what is not stated may nurture an already affectionate bond between them. Mary's silence is a form of communication: she allows her husband to talk when he feels impelled to do so. In both of these poems the man has revealed a loving quality which the woman knows exists.

For my argument against some critics' tendencies to

reduce Warren and Mary to flat and colourless mannequins, it is essential to analyse all aspects of their personalities. Mary is too often equated with mere mercy; in reality, strength and common sense are balanced with her kindness and gentleness. She demonstrates at times qualities of Linda Lohman, the realist of the household in *Death of a Salesman*. Mary's statements are often made as clear assertions; even though their finality defuses Warren's anger, they are not made with the premeditated intent of subjugating her husband. Earlier in the poem, when Warren pressed Mary with the challenging "He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me" (46) she simply replied with a casual "Of course he did. What would *you* have him say?" (italics added, 46). By asking for his point of view, Mary has avoided a possible confrontation with Warren. Mary's words have asked a question of Warren while her sentence sound has calmly, yet firmly, expressed her own opinion. Mary's profound insight into the human personality is always followed with an active and practical participation. Mary is a strong and mature woman.

Following Warren's bouyant description of Silas' and Harold's hay loading, Mary then returns us to the sombre reality of Silas' piteous state.

> 'Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
> And nothing to look backward to with pride,
> And nothing to look forward to with hope,

So now and never any different."
(99-102)

These haunting lines are a summary of Silas' life, a life which has been described by Macbeth in the same nihilistic terms: "it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing."[6] It must be remembered that this dirge-like passage is stated from Mary's point of view. This reader, like Frost, however, has the luxury of viewing this whole drama in a larger setting, one which includes Warren, Mary and Silas. We are allowed to listen to Warren's and Mary's voice tones rise and fall throughout the poem and to objectively evaluate the effect of Silas' return on their relationship. The reader shares Mary's remorse for Silas but the positive effect which his death has on their bond is more clearly heard by the reader in their sentence sounds. Both Mary and Warren do "look backward. . . with pride" at their one hired farmhand. Their lives have been enriched by knowing Silas. Without his knowledge at times, Warren and Mary have shared his grief and embarrassment equally with his pride and happiness. Now that they realize the once strong and proud Silas has deteriorated into an old and broken man, they become much more reflective. In losing Silas, the bond between Mary and Warren becomes stronger; they realize that they have shared the intimacied regarding the failures and successes of a

human being.

The most active exchange between Mary and Warren centres around the definition of "home." Mary is the first to speak:

> 'Warren, he has come *home* to die:
> You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time.
>
> *'Home,'* he mocked gently.
>
> Yes, what else but *home?'* (italics added)
> (111-114)

Mary's words are uttered with a melancholy sense of resignation: it is her deep respect and love for Silas and for Warren that enables her to avoid any vindictiveness when countering her husband's mocking speech tone. This exchange is perhaps the focal point of the whole poem: the protagonists' values are established in relationship to each of their definitions of "home." The ease in Mary's matter-of-fact "'Warren, he has come home to die'" disturbs him. Warren has not fully realized how close they are to Silas, and he to them. Their territory called "home" is just as much Silas' as theirs, since out of compassion and need Warren and Mary are the only two friends he has. Mary's statement is, of course, not factually true, but in her sense of moral obligation and friendship to Silas, and perhaps to a higher order, Mary recognizes the hired man's need to have a place called "home." When we discover that Warren's "home" has again

been disturbed, we see him respond with more ostentatious bluffing. Warren weakly guards this subbornness with a mild form of anger; he is ready to concede his above stance. Mary's attitude is more rational and subdued; her quiet reaction to Warren's words has the effect of moderating his bluff.

The verbal jostling continues in the give-and-take exchanges dealing with the word "home." Although Warren has introduced the subject of their dialogue with the challenging voice tone of "Home," Mary will not give her definition to Warren; she will let him discover it for himself. Mary never attempts to harness Warren's emotions or artificially change his point of view; rather, by her subtle persuasiveness, she permits him to find his own conclusions.

In the following passage Mary makes the absurd comparison of Silas to a dog--a comparison which of course makes the technical definition of "home" ridiculous:

> 'Yes, what else but *home*?
> It all depends on what you mean by *home*.
> *Of course* he's nothing to us, any more
> Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
> Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.' (italics added)
> (113-17)

The strength of Mary's argument is founded on the use of subtle sarcasm working with the trenchant Frost understatement. We are able to hear the same scorn stated in the same carefree manner in

"Mending Wall." Frost describes the task of building sone walls as follows:

> We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
> *Oh, just another kind of outdoor game;*
> One on a side. *It comes to little more.* (italics added)
> (p. 33, 20-22)

In both of these passages the speakers' use of interjections such as "Yes," "Of course," and "Oh" convey a sense of indifference. In "The Death of the Hired Man" Mary haphazardly dismisses Silas: "'*Of course* he's nothing to us, any more'" (italics added, 115). Underlying her casual attitude, as heard in her voice tone, there can be heard a biting sarcasm. Similarly, the farmer in "Mending Wall" casually makes an absurd analogy: back-breaking work of building stone walls is incidentally stated as "Oh, just another kind of outdoor game." He continues with "It comes to little more," and the significance of such barriers as the Berlin Wall soberly reminds the modern reader that it usually doesn't "come to little more."

Although Warren continues to be challenged by his wife in a manner different from the intrusion of Silas, both individuals are upsetting his quiet and steady lifestyle. He reacts accordingly using the term "home" in a most uncomplimentary manner.

> '*Home* is/the place/*where*, *when*/you *have*/to go/there,

They *have*/to take/you in.' (italics added)
(117-18)

Warren's feelings are underscored by the wrenching and jarring of sounds of these strongly stressed "h's" and "wh's." The jigging trochee, followed by the stalking spondee causes the whole passage to convulse. The ear tells us that the sentence sounds are not in harmony with each other; it is a syntactic breakup corresponding to the catharsis which Silas has caused in Warren's home.

The repetition of "h's" are followed again in Mary's response, a direct challenge to her husband's last comment:

'I should/*have* called/it
Something/you some/*how* *have/n't* to/deserve.' (italics added)
(119-20)

Before elaborating on this passage let us listen to an alternate reading which also warrants comment. With the strongly accented "I" we hear:

'*I* should/*have* called/it
Something/you some/*how* *have/n't* to/deserve.' (italics added)

I prefer the first reading since the more subdued sound posture of "I" tempers the whole passage. This personal, more composed

pronoun could be replaced by the impersonal 'one' to be read with a more objective tone: "*One* should have called it." The emphasis would then be placed on the core of her message: "'Something you somehow haven't to deserve.'" Mary is not waging a person battle; she is simply appealing to the compassion of her husband. The second reading is less conciliatory; patronizing results in confrontation and animosity, not conciliation and understanding. I stress again that Mary is not conducting a personal vendetta or feud with her husband. She is reminding Warren of what he already knows: no man, regardless of his relationship to others or station in life, is homeless. They are giving Silas a home out of his necessity and out of their compassion.

The end of the spirited exchange concering Silas' home marks the beginning of a more open discussion.

> Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
> Picked up a stick, and brought it back
> And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
> (121-23)

Warren's behaviour on this tranquil stage set reveals a contemplative man whom the reader is getting to know. The seeming accidental act of breaking this stick and tossing it away is a subtle reminder of Silas' demise. The only sound we hear is the crack of an old dead piece of wood, and our thoughts turn to this dying man.

Although Warren partially knows the answers to his question, he still asks Mary about Silas' relationship to his rich brother: "Why doesn't he go there? His brother's rich, / A somebody--director in the bank" (127-29). In his recorded version of this poem Frost exaggerates Warren's question, haughtily giving a sophisticated and tasteful connotation to such words as "rich," "somebody," and "director."[7] The scorn in these remarks is directed at Silas' brother, not at Silas. The sarcasm is stated more out of pity for Silas than as an attack against his brother. The distinction is important; Mary and Warren do not dwell upon this tenuous relationship but rather direct their thoughts towards their dying hired man. Mary explains Silas' need to retain his identity and pride, but Warren almost ignores her when he thinks aloud: "I wonder what's between them" (138). Mary offers an explanation but we can not be certain; what is definite, is that the feelings of both Warren and Mary lie with Silas. The only interest that they have towards Silas' brother is one relating to Silas' inevitable outcome: "I think his brother ought to help, of course. / I'll see to that if there is need" (131-32).

The mellowing voice tones of Mary and Warren continue to tell the reader of their appreciation of what Silas has contributed to their lives. Standing together in defence of this old man, they utter the following spontaneous comments and complimentary sentence sounds. Mary begins the eulogy:

'I can tell you.
Silas is what he is--we wouldn't mind him--
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anybody. Worthless though he is,
He won't be made ashamed to please his brother."

I can't think Si ever hurt anyone."

"No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there tonight.
You'll be surprised at him--how much he's broken.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it."

"I'd not be in a hurry to say that.'
(139-54)

Mary's exaggerated summary of Silas' faults gains the sympathy of both the reader and Warren. We all know that Silas is not "worthless"; he has chosen his own road that has helped him cling to some self-dignity and independence. Mary knows that Silas has "relied on what [he] knew"; but this victory is undermined by his now decrepit state. The connotation of her sentence sounds asks, "Isn't the life of Silas, broken as it is, more worthy than to end in the back room of a farm house?" This hired man has chosen not "to go down dignified / With boughten friendship at [his] side." He will go down dignified.

Warren hears the anxiety in Mary's voice tone and quickly adds a reassuring "'I'd not be in a hurry to say that'" (154).

"Good old Silas," Warren is saying; "don't worry Mary, that man will live forever." Of course, behind this blustery veneer, we all know that Silas *is* "broken" and that his "working days *are* done" (italics added). Warren's own sentence sounds illustrate his affection for Mary and admiration for Silas.

In 1935 Frost told a public audience that "Our lives are an attempt to find out where we are standing between extremes of viewpoint."[8] Although Mary and Warren do not represent opposite viewpoints, they both have introduced diverging opinions by their sometimes spirited dialogue. Neither Mary nor Warren has attempted to radically change the other person's point of view. The subtle shifts in their voice tones over the dramatic interlude of their poem have allowed them to slightly alter their viewpoint. Their relationship has been enriched by the death of Silas since they have shared a similar grief and emotion toward their hired man. Mary and Warren discovered--or perhaps more accurately, rediscovered--where they are standing; before the poem ends, each understands more fully his partner's limitations and strengths. The love and respect for each other, which we have heard in the dancing of their sentence sounds, have allowed this understanding to include Silas. They are individuals who are able to stand alone; yet, they are made more strong in a relationship bound by love.

The poem nears its conclusion with one final reminder

that Silas is going to die. While Warren leaves the scene and goes to Silas' comfort, the reader is made to pause and contemplate the following symbolic weather:

> 'I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
> Will *hit* or miss the moon."
>
> It *hit* the moon,
> Then there were three there, making a dim row,
> The moon, the little silver cloud, and she. (italics added)
> (160-64)

Like the cacophonous snap of Warren's breaking stick, the finality of the word "hit" tells us that Silas is dying or already dead. This "small sailing cloud" has obscured the moon on this quiet evening; it is in this pensive mood that the tension of the poem is allowed to dissipate.

The poem ends with another example of non-verbal communication between Mary and Warren. In the first scene Mary had gone to Warren when he returned:

> She took the market things from Warren's arms
> And set them on the porch, then drew him down
> To sit beside her on the wooden steps.
> (8-10)

In this initial scene we note her control of him. Her subtle gestures take the place of the spoken word; it is a benevolent

manipulation whereby eye contact or the gentle brush of her hand conveys her feelings. Returning to the last scene we note the similar intimate bond in the way they interact.

> Warren returned--too soon, it seemed to her--
> Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.
>
> "Warren?" she questioned.
>
> "Dead," was all he answered.
> (164-67)

"The Death of the Hired Man" is a dramatic gallery of sentence sounds framed by the eloquence of silence.

In "The Death of the Hired Man" the give-and-take in the relationship of the two protagonists is apparent in the dancing of their sentence sounds. The opposite of this harmony can be found in the sentence sounds of "Home Burial" where the husband and wife verbally participate in combative jousting.

> He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
> Before she saw him. She was starting down,
> Looking back over her shoulder at some fear,
> She took a doubtful step and then undid it.
> To raise herself and look again. He spoke 5
> Advancing toward her: "What is it you see
> From up there always?--for I want to know."
> She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
> And her face changed from terrified to dull.
> He said to gain time: "What is it you see?" 10
> Mounting until she cowered under him.
> "I will find out now--you must tell me, dear."
> She, in her place, refused him any help,
> With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
> She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see, 15
> Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.
> But at last he murmured, "Oh," and again, "Oh."
>
> "What is it--what?" she said.
>
> "Just that I see."
>
> "You don't," she challenged. "Tell me what it is."
>
> "The wonder is I didn't see at once. 20
> I never noticed it from here before.
> I must be wonted to it--that's the reason.
> The little graveyard where my people are!
> So small the window frames the whole of it.
> Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it? 25
> There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
> Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
> On the sidehill. We haven't to mind *those*.
> But I understand: it is not the stones,
> But the child's mound---"

"Don't, don't, don't,
don't," she cried. 30

She withdrew, shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs,
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?" 35

"Not you!--Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air,--
I don't know rightly whether any man can."

"Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs." 40
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
"There's something I should like to ask you, dear."

"You don't know how to ask it."

"Help me, then."

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

"My words are nearly always an offense. 45
I don't know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught,
I should suppose. I can't say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With womenfolk. We could have some arrangement 50
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you're a-mind to name.
Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
Two that don't love can't live together without them. 55
She moved the latch a little. "Don't--don't go.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there 60
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance
I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing,
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably--in the face of love. 65
You'd think his memory might be satisfied---"

"There you go sneering now!"

"I'm not, I'm not!
You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead." 70

"You can't because you don't know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand--how could you?--his little grave;
I saw you from that very window there,
Making the gravel leap and leap in air, 75
Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting. 80
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave 85
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it."

"I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed." 90

"I can repeat the very words you were saying:
'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'
Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
What had how long it takes a birch to rot 95
To do with what was in the darkened parlor?
You *couldn't* care! The nearest friends can go
With anyone to death, comes so far short
They might as well not try to go at all.
No, from the time when one is sick to death, 100
One is alone, and he dies more alone.
Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
But before one is in it, their minds are turned
And making the best of their way back to life
And living people, and things they understand. 105
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"

"There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.

The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up? 110
Amy! There's someone coming down the road!"

"*You*--oh, you think the talk is all. I must go--
Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you---"

"If--you--do!" She was opening the door wider.
"Where do you mean to go? First tell me that. 115
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!*--"
(pp. 51-55)

The sense of confrontation is established early in the poem with a machine-like rhythm: "He saw her ... Before she saw him" (1-2). These nameless persons resemble bodies rather than people talking to each other. Although the man does most of the talking in this passage, Amy's presence is manifested by her fearful gestures. Her jerky and uncertain movements create a mood of anxiety and fear.

She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again.
(2-5)

The husband's curiosity has been whetted by his wife's peculiar behaviour at the top of the stairs. His inquisitive "'What is it you see / From up there always?'" is immediately followed by the conversational "'*for* I want to know'" (italics added). This phrase has been tagged on as an afterthought to emphasize

both the importance and sincerity of his question. The softening effect of "for" changes the connotation of his question from a demand to a request. Even a hint of affection is detected in this hesitant remark. Her reaction is immediate: "She turned and sank upon her skirts at that." Now that she has physically shut him out of her view, she mentally ostracizes him: "And her face changed from terrified to dull." His words alone have failed, so he now attempts to utilize his physical superiority in a menacing gesture by "mounting" the stairs "until she cowered under him." Even though his sexual domination is suggested by this stance, it also could be argued that this act is a sincere attempt to move closer to his wife's thoughts.

The husband endeavours again to reach his wife: "'I will find out now--you must tell me, *dear'"* (italics added, 12). And we hear another tagged-on word which underscores the strain of their relationship. Similar to "'for I want to know,'" "'dear'" is said in the same pleading voice tone. He is trying to retain his composure yet appeal to his wife's own moderation. We can imagine this man biting his lip trying to control his emotions. Although "'for'" and "'dear'" do check this anger, thereby allowing him enough time to talk in a gentler tone, there exists a bottled rage behind the gentleness.

Amy's response is again, silence: "She, *in her place,* refused him any help, / With the least stiffening of her neck and

silence" (italics added, 13-14). She has found sanctuary in her isolated "place"; here she is immune to her husband's bothersome questions. It is possible that Amy hears sarcasm and scorn in the tone of "dear."

Initiating a bitter and vindictive counter-attack against her husband's ignorance, Amy seeks vengeance, not comfort. She actually seems to savour these few moments of silence, anxiously anticipating her husband's discovery of the grave scene from the window: "She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see / Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see" (15-16). The discovery of the grave now explains to the reader her emotional behaviour and awkward presence on the stairs. The fear and anxiety resulting from her child's death have been transformed into the hate and cruelty she directs toward her husband. Although this woman is tormented, she has not lost her capacity to consciously manipulate him. We are told that "she *let* him look" (italics added) a comment which is strongly suggestive of a cognizant power to control him. Her continuous rebuffing of his previous advances is part of this control.

In the following exchange we hear a contrast of sentence sounds. The husband's previous tone of pleading now becomes meek and reflective. Amy's silence has vanished, to be replaced by acrimonious questions.

She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see,
But at last he murmured,. "Oh," and again, "Oh."

"What is it--What?" she said.

"Just that I see."

"You don't," she challenged. "Tell me what is is.'
(15-20)

The husband's voice tone is sombre, resigned and final. The agonizing reminder of his child's death is combined with his shame for being unaware of the scene from the window. He now regrets his previous cross-examination of his wife. Regret is heard in the dejected tone of "'Just that I see'" (18).

Amy now has the opportunity to make amends with her husband; instead, she refuses to hear the sudden shift in his voice tone. She has heard her husband's "'I see'" which informs her of his new understanding and fresh grief; yet she denies him the opportunity to enter into her world. Her voice tone abruptly shifts from the definite "'you don't'" to the doubting "'tell me what it is.'" This schizophrenic transfer from statement to demand gives evidence of her emotional deterioration.

In the next passage he tells Amy what he sees, but from her point of view, his remarks are more casual than conciliatory.

'The wonder is I didn't see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.

> I must be wonted to it—that's the reason.
> The little graveyard where my people are!
> So small the window frames the whole of it.
> Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
> There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
> Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
> On the sidehill. We haven't to mind *those*
> But I understand: it is not the stones,
> But the child's mound—'
>
> (20-28)

His comments are made from his perspective, as noted in the lack of reference to his wife and the consistent use of "I." This detachment continues as he "sees" only from his viewpoint: "'the little graveyard where my people are!'" Although one may argue that he is being callous in his seeming indifference to Amy, the natural rhythm and line lengths reveal a spontaneity in his words. In his sincere and childlike observations, where he thinks aloud in uncontrived and honest reactions, we can hear a pondering and reflective mood: "'I must be wonted to it— that's the reason'"(22). These are personal and sensitive remarks from a man who has known grief but who has also learned how to deal with it. His description of a peaceful and detailed setting also evokes a tender and melancholy mood: "'There are three stones of slate and one of marble, / Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight / On the hillside'"(26-27). Only when the husband directly addresses his wife does the easy rhythm of the sentence sounds shift to a jerky and uncertain

"'We haven't to mind *those*. / But I understand: it is not the stones, / But the child's mound—'" His sentence sound is a signal or a nervous anticipation of his wife's reaction.

The voice of Frost is saying much more than that of the farmer. There is a definite tone of resignation and stoicism in this description of the graveyeard. We read about a scene which is peaceful; not until we are directed to the explicit detail of the "child's mound," does death seem hideous. Our inability to cope with a loss of a child or a loved one is in direct contrast to our lackadaisical attitude toward the vague concept of death. We accept marble and slate tombstones but are repelled once we leave these symbols and euphemisms to approach the subject of death directly.

Frost's farmer is also an unconscious metaphor maker. Later he will use birch fences and weather to talk about death. Here, comparing a graveyard to a bedroom, he is talking about mere dimensions.

> 'The little graveyard where my people are!
> So small the window frames the whole of it.
> Not so much larger than a bedroom, *is it?*' (italics added)
> (23-25)

On an emotional level the comparison of the graveyard scene to a bedroom is, of course, unfortunate. The farmer has not chosen these words to be either spiteful or callous towards his wife;

his remarks are made for only a superficial and opportune comparison. Even his innocent "'is it?'" is politely asked to include her in his cursory observations.

In his functional bluntness, the farmer is unconsciously making metaphors which Frost harnesses as vehicles. But beneath the farmer's words, the reader again is able to hear the voice of Frost. In the following Shakespearean soliloquy (Hamlet's graveyard scene), sleep and death are similarily being yoked for the same grotesque effect:

> To die; to sleep,
> No more, and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to; 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd, to die, to sleep.[9]

Unfortunately, Amy reacts to only the superficial level of his diction. Her response to her husband's description of the graveyard is in direct contrast to his melancholy voice tone. She is deaf to the underlying sentence sounds of his words. With a rush of emotion she retorts: "'Don't, don't, don't, / don't'" (29-30). In correspondence with John Cournos, Frost commented on her response as follows:

> I also think well of those four "don'ts" in "Home Burial." They would be good in prose and they gain something from the way they are placed in verse.[10]

It is important to note that the voice automatically increases in pitch and tempo when the four "'don'ts'" are pronounced. We hear in her line sounds an instability as her emotion changes from anger to revulsion. This frenzied crescendo is a verbal stabbing; it is a violent repudiation of her husband which further decreases any possibility of compromise.

It is no accident that the quick and choppy contracted forms of "do not" and "cannot" are riddled throughout the poem. The recurrence of these caucophonic sounds must be attributed to Frost's belief that "the sentence sound often says more than the words."[11] Following Amy's outburst of "'Don't, don't, don't, / don't'" the dialogue continues

> He said twice over before he knew himself:
> "*Can't* a man speak of his own child he's lost?"
>
> "*Not* you!--Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I *don't* need it!
> I must get out of here. I must get air.--
> I *don't* know rightly whether any man can. (italics added)
> (34-38)

It is obvious that a man can "speak of his own child he's lost," but it should be spoken of in a manner sympathetic to his wife's feelings. However, the man here is talking *at* his wife not *with* her. Even his speaking "before he knew himself," suggests that she is not included in his conversation; his heard mumblings cause further animosity.

Amy's response is also in the form of a denial. She rejects her husband's capacity to sympathize by blindly dismissing the sensitivity of one-half of the human race: "'I don't know rightly whether any man can'" (38). Her attack of claustrophobia and her desire to leave the house are not isolated incidents. When the husband's pleading of "'Don't go to someone else this time'" is repeated later in the poem, the general state of their relationship becomes much more apparent to the reader. She has rejected her husband in the past; he therefore attempts to talk things out with her this time.

The following exchange underscores the tenuous relation between them. He is now the one at the top of the stairs while she stands beside the front door on the verge of leaving.

> 'Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
> Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs.'
> He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
> There's something I should like to ask you, *dear*."
>
> "You don't know how to ask it."
>
> "Help me, *then*."
>
> Her fingers moved the latch for all reply. (italics added)
> (39-45)

The visual impression one gets from this stage set is one of tension and anxiety. His attempts to calm his wife by sitting down and promising not to come down the stairs have been offset

by his clenched fists, a symbol of power and force. He is also above her, which from Amy's perspective increases her feelings of subjugation and claustrophobia. He unknowingly threatens her with his physical stance and gestures while she unconsciously intimidates him with her fingers on the latch. Like the mechanical device on the door, Amy also functions like an inanimate object. She is an unthinking entity, conditioned to leave the house rather than to participate in meaningful and rational discussion. These actors resumble duelists, posed for battle.

The husband's sentence sounds temporarily save a direct clash and the departure of Amy. His reasonable "Listen to me" is followed by the cautious "'There's something I should like to ask you, *dear*'" (italics added, 42). I have noted the same device of "dear" as used earlier where he succeeds in restraining his fury behind a veneer of repose. He is pleading for a conciliation by directly asking her for help: "'Help me, *then*'" (italics added). The desperation in the voice tone of "then" sustains the tension of the passage. The acknowledgement that he needs help in order to understand her animosity is paradoxically the reason why she spurns him. His sentence sounds can be translated into a desire to share her grief. He is really saying "'Then help me understand your bitterness—tell me what is wrong.'"

The continuation of the farmer's appeal to his wife stresses the negative rather than the positive. The contractions

of cannot and do not continue to contaminate and impede his effort at reconciliation.

> "My words are nearly always an offence,
> I *don't* know how to speak of anything
> So as to please you. But I might be taught,
> I should suppose. I *can't* say I see how,
> A man must partly give up being a man
> With womenfolk. We could have some arrangement
> By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
> Anything special you're a-mind to name.
> Though I *don't* like such things 'twixt those that love.
> Two that *don't* love *can't* live together without them.
> But two that do *can't* live together with them.' (italics
> (45-55) added)

His remarks are double-edged: half-hearted gestures asking for a reconciliation are stated in voice tones that both accuse and console. He initiates his remarks by overstating his faults; the reader immediately hears echoes of self-pity and sneering in the accusatory "'you'": "'I don't know how to speak of anything / So as to please *you*'" (italics added). By innuendo, the acerbic quality of this remark attempts to place blame on Amy. Even his promise that "'I might be taught, I should suppose,'" is quickly negated with the reneging "'I can't say I see how.'" The husband's frustration, as heard in his sentence sounds, undermines the effectiveness of his plea.

Hints of martyrdom are detected by the reader with the suggestion of a platonic arrangement. The emphasis is on his

self-sacrifice: "'A man must partly give up being a man / With womenfolk.'" He has neglected to consider that such a new relationship would negate her feelings as a woman. Although this oversight may be obvious to the reader, one must remember that his statements have been produced from a *now* barren relationship. Any physical abstinence would be a reflection of a present psychological impotency and an overall sterility in their lives.

The farmer's statement of denial and rejection summarizes his deteriorating relationship with his wife.

> 'Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
> Two that don't love can't live together without them.
> But two that do can't live together with them.'
> (53-55)

Although he may believe in such a negative philosophy, the sentence sounds reveal a conflicting viewpoint. There is a contrast between the words of the narrator and the voice of the poet. Frost's disagreement is expressed in the verbal contortions of this riddle-like dogma. The plosive sounds of the "t's" and "d's" end with a stoppage of breath only to be followed by the "th" sounds. The poet's reluctance to accept the farmer's statement is heard in the discord of sound: it is a stumbling of consonants in which the jerkiness is the poet's way of dispelling the idea that love corrupts any relationship.

A brief reference to "West-Running Brook" clarifies my remarks regarding the voice of the poet and the narrator. In the following example, the ear tells us that the line sounds are actually the meaning of the passage. The passage is like the "West-Running Brook": individual lines pause at end-stops, swirl and with an easy and natural flow convey the feeling of movement and gentle rhythm. The sentence sounds within this passage correspond to the many rivulets and eddies within the main current of the stream. These sentence sounds are allowed freedom and movement but are still kept within the boundaries of the river banks and rhythm of the poem.

> 'Our life runs down in sending up the clock.
> The brook runs down in sending up our life.
> The sun runs down in sending up the brook.
> And there is something sending up the sun.
> It is this backward motion toward the source,
> Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
> The tribute of the current to the source.
> It is from this in nature we are from.
> It is most us.'
>
> (pp. 259-60, 64-72)

These two people celebrate their lives in which constant change is welcomed with optimism and joy. The reader feels compelled to join with them in this exultation. There is a sense of belonging and kinship which allows individuality, yet denies isolation. The sound of sense in the repetition of "sending," expresses the

meaning of uplift, growth and dynamism. The sounds of the syllables and consonants send up words which in turn send up sentences. From the cadence of the man's voice we hear graceful line sounds and we feel the surge of energy and motion as caused by the rise and fall of the lines. The line lengths shorten to end in a compact resolution as heard in the assuredness of his voice tone. The harmony of sentence sounds is analogous to his philosophy: the union of two people is as natural as a setting sun and a running brook. The intimate relationship between the man, woman and the brook completes the trinity: it is a union of man with nature.

Although the man in "Home Burial" also states his philosophical belief to his mate and the theme of his remarks also revolves around the male-female relationship, this man advocates alienation, not union. The husband's message to Amy is the application of Frost's theory that "the sentence sound often says more than the words. It may even as in irony convey a meaning opposite to the words."[12] There does exist an irony in the farmer's confusing lecture where a tension is created between the sentence sounds and what is being said. If he were talking behind a closed door, we would hear a muddled and tongue-twisting monologue. The sentences lurch and jerk when jabbing contractions stumble over end-stops and caesuras. Even the repetition of the personal "I" contributes to this monotonous and

jaded lecture. This man recognizes and expresses his abhorrence to barriers between two people: "'Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.'" The existence of these insidious "things" will only aggravate an already strained relationship. Unless the recognition of these barriers leads to their removal, the disharmony of their marriage, as heard in the sentence sounds, will bring that marriage to an end.

The farmer's plea continues, but as "she moved the latch a little," his voice tone shifts from a muddled and artificial discourse to a direct and spontaneous request.

> 'Don't--don't go.
> Don't carry it to someone else this time.
> Tell me about it if it's something human.
> Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
> Unlike other folks as your standing there
> Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.'
> (56-61)

Although his frustration becomes more conspicuous as heard in the agitation of these remarks, sincerity is the predominant sentence sound in his plea. He is spontaneously asking Amy for an invitation to share her grief. Absent is the circuitous and faulty logic evident in his previous passage; now he employs a direct appeal by stating his desire to reconcile their differences.

In the third and last section of this passage another shift in sentence sounds occurs. He should have waited for her

reply after "'Give me my chance,'" but instead he continues:

> 'I do think, though, you overdo it a little,
> What was it brought you up to think it the thing
> To take your mother-loss of a first child
> So inconsolably—in the face of love.
> You'd think his memory might be satisfied—'
> (62-66)

The husband is the one who is "overdoing it a little." Her opportunity to speak has been forfeited by his patronizing remarks: "'I do think, though, you overdo it a little.'" His tone can only aggravate an already volatile situation. He has returned to the accusatory and condescending sentence sounds to place Amy in the role of a naughty pupil being chastised by a teacher. The farmer is correct in suggesting that Amy cherishes her grief, but he should not challenge her.

Amy's accusation that he is "sneering" produces yet another shift in her husband's sentence sound:

> 'I'm not, "I'm not!
> You make my angry. I'll come down to you.
> God what a woman! And it's come to this,
> A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.'
> (68-71)

The frustration heard in his voice is a reaction to his wife's terse and accusatory rebuttal. He knows that his words have had

a negative effect upon her. His shouting tells the reader that he has lost control of his emotions; the problem is compounded with the threat of physical force. This uncontrolled anger has left neither himself nor his wife any room for compromise. They bitterly continue to question the other person's actions and emotions rather than talk about the child that they have lost. Unlike Mary and Warren in "The Death of the Hired Man," the protagonists in "Home Burial" never maturely discuss the cause of their grief. In the former poem, Silas strengthens a relationship; in the latter, the death of their child destroys one.

The cause of Amy's scorn is now revealed to her husband and the reader. She has witnessed from the window her husband's digging of her child's grave, and seen him make

> 'the gravel leap and leap in air,
> Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly
> And roll back down the mound beside the hole.'
> (75-77)

The grief for her child was being translated into hate and bitterness which would soon be directed at her husband. She has been repulsed by her husband's apparent enthusiasm and zest for this solemn task. His returning with earth-stained shoes and talking symbolically about the weather has further infuriated Amy. She has not considered the possibility that either the physical

exertion in his grave digging or his talking to himself could be a natural release of his grief.

From her visual description, implying an indifference, the husband can only evoke a rueful cry of resignation: "'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed. / I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed'" (89-90). Now that he has heard how his actions were interpreted, he can anticipate a similar misinterpretation of his words. He knows what is coming; he knows now how the next thing he said that day was misunderstood.

His prediction is accurate as Amy relentlessly continues:

> 'I can repeat the very words you were saying:
> 'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
> Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'
> Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
> What had how long it takes a birch to rot
> To do with what was in the darkened parlor?'
> (91-96)

Her reaction to his words tells us that she has missed the meaning of his sentence sounds. The dejected mood in his voice tone should have told Amy that her husband was distressed; instead, she interprets his words only on a literal level. The metaphorical implication of the farmer's statement directs our attention again to man's reluctance to accept death. Frost's comparing this rotting birch to the dead child is best understood with the

biblical "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." This same theme is echoed in the previously noted passage of "West-Running Brook" where one's life is described in the context of the larger cycle of nature: "'it is from this nature we are from'" (71).

Amy's grief and hate have grown larger in her belief that her husband is indifferent and callous. She sees him as part of a world that is "evil." Her alienation from her husband and this world is underscored by her comment: "'No, from the time when one is sick to death, / One is alone, and he dies more alone'" (100-01). This same indifference is acted out by the workmen in "Out, Out--": "And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs" (p. 137, 33-34). In Amy's case she is repulsed by people who "'make the best of their way back to life.'" Their apparently minimal sorrow is regarded by her as inappropriate but her grief is actually more fraudulent and more ostentatious.

Amy's philosophical outburst ends with the frenzied "Oh, I won't, I won't'" (101). Throughout this passage, the sentence sounds tells us that she is on the verge of an emotional collapse. Her acute paranoia is evident in the fear she has for her husband and the world--both of which she considers to be adversaries.

The sentence sounds in the farmer's immediate reaction

have returned to his patronizing voice tone.

> 'There, you have said it all and you feel better.
> You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door.
> The heart's gone out of it: why keep it up?
> Amy! There's someone coming down the road!'
> (108-11)

His flimsy attempt to comfort his wife is ludicrous since he has ignored the depth of her grief. This man has been deaf to her bizarre and hysterical sentence sounds. When the farmer hears someone approaching their house, his voice tone then changes from condescension to alarming concern. The farmer is embarrassed, both for himself and for his wife. The superficiality of public opinion is more important to him than the comforting of his wife.

The protagonists in "Home Burial" are both guilty of insensitivity. Their guilt derives from their selfish behaviour of imposing a point of view on the other rather than listening to their mate's sentence sounds. An excerpt from "The Death of the Hired Man" illustrates the contrast between them and people who are actually listening to each other. In the following passage Mary offers Warren his requested information only as a result of his *gentle* prodding.

'What did he say? Did he say anything?

"But little."

"Anything" Mary, confess
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me."

"Warren!"

"But did he" I just want to know."

"Of course he did. What would you have him say?'
(p. 36, 43-49)

Mary and Warren have both made a compromise but still preserve their individuality. Warren's voice tone shifts from the demanding "'What did he say" Did he say anything?'" to the humble "'But did he? I just want to know.'" His retreat from direct questioning illustrates his respect for Mary's protection of Silas. Her reluctance to give her husband this information is heard by him in her quiet and reserved voice tone of "'But little.'" Warren receives a mild chastisement with her exclamatory "'Warren!'" and now he retreats even further. Mary's compromise has been to verify Warren's suspicion. She is being honest with her husband while consciously tempering his briskness with her voice tones. Although the subject of their dialogue is serious, a playfulness exists between the push and pull of their sentence sounds.

A passage from "Home Burial" illustrates the contrasting clashing of sentence sounds.

She let him look, sure that he wouldn't *see*,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn't *see*.
But at last he murmured, "Oh, and again, "Oh."

"What is it—what?" she said.

"Just that I *see*."

"You don't," she challenged. "Tell me what it is."

"The wonder is I didn't *see* at once.' (italics added)
(15-21)

Amy's obsession with her husband's supposed blindness underscores *her* lack of vision. She bases her conclusions only upon outward appearances. The distraught voice-tone of her husband is not heard; she fails to "see" with her ear. Amy has stereotyped her husband into the role of an unfeeling and indifferent male. It is also interesting that she never addresses her husband by his given name. The lack of this personal gesture tells her husband that she considers him less than a person—a nonentity. By denying him the possibility of change, she has negated his very existence. By dismissing her husband, she exposes herself to be a "blind creature."

The poem ends with the bitter intensity of the husband's screaming at his departing wife. His threatened use of force again replaces reason and common sense. Hatred—their extreme state of exasperation—is now the dominant mood of this relationship. The conclusion is inevitable since the protagonists are

deaf to the other person's sentence sounds. Their inability to react to the different nuances of meaning in their mate's voice tones has caused this final confrontation.

> 'If--you--do!" She was opening the door wider.
> "Where do you mean to go? First tell me that.
> I'll follow and bring you back by force. I *will!*---'
> (114-15)

Barriers have silenced this marriage; only the echo of a slammed door can now be heard.

Footnotes — The Dramatic Dialogue

[1] Reuben Brower, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 158.

[2] Lawrance Thompson, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 60.

[3] Nancy Vogel, "A Post Mortem on "The Death of the Hired Man," in *Frost: Centennial Essays*, Jac L. Tharpe (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1974), p. 201.

[4] Brower, *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, p. 162.

[5] Lawrance Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost* (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1961), p. 112.

[6] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. M. R. Ridley (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1934), pp. 33-34. Act 11, Scene V11.

[7] Robert Frost in the recording *Robert Frost Reads His Poetry* (New York: Caedmon Records Inc.,).

[8] Thompson, *The Years of Triumph*, p. 418.

[9] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. M. R. Ridley (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1934), p. 51, Act 111, Scene 1.

[10] Lawrance Thompson, ed. *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 130.

[11] Thompson, p. 113.

[12] Thompson, p. 113.

Footnotes -- The Dramatic Dialogue

[13] The Holy Bible, King James Version (Oxford: Oxford University Press Warehouse, Amen Corner, 1897), Genesis 3:19.

The Lyric

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," which according to Frost contains "all I ever knew,"[1] will always be elusive to the critics since there are no definitive explanations as to how and why it words. The meaning, as in most of Frost's poems, can be traced to their implicit quality; any scientific or explicit criticism falls far short of absolute analysis. I do not wish to show fault with or make light of scholars in my remarks, but rather I am making the point that in any poetic masterpiece there may be a great deal that cannot be clinically explained. The fascination that "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" holds for a reader is part of the mystery.

The poem, as Lawrance Thompson states, "breaks into the middle of an incident, so that there is a drama-in-miniature revealed with setting and lighting and actors and properties complete."[2] This 16-line lyric with its simple plot also is clearly outlined to the reader. The voluminous scholarly writings on this poem have not been initiated by the factual content supplied by either the traveller or the narrator. The diversity among the critics' interpretations has originated from the varied and sometimes ambiguous sentence sounds. In order to understand and appreciate this poem we must join *with* the narrator in his snowy setting and forget our rational and intellectual processes. Only until we approach and become immersed in the sentence sounds that are found under the words, will our subjective interpretation allow

us to live the poem.

> Whose woods these are I think I know.
> His house is in the village, though;
> He will not see me stopping here
> To watch his woods fill up with snow.
>
> My little horse must think it queer
> To stop without a farmhouse near
> Between the woods and frozen lake
> The darkest evening of the year.
>
> He gives his harness bells a shake
> To ask if there is some mistake.
> The only other sound's the sweep
> Of easy wind and downy flake.
>
> The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,
> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.
>
> (pp.224-25)

The narrator's ambivalent mood is established in the opening line: "Whose woods these are I *think* I know" (italics added). The ear may detect one of two distinct word sounds in "think." First, if we hear a quick and certain "think," then this first line is a statement of fact. The sentence sound of "Whose woods these are I think I know" tells the reader that the traveller does know who owns the woods. Critic, John Ciardi, concurs with this conclusion when he says that the narrator "knows who owns the woods ... he is familiar with the parts."[3]

A second reading of this first line introduces the strong

possibility that the narrator really is guessing as to the ownership of the woods when he says "I *think* I know" (italics added). An underlying, hesitant and uncertain voice tone for this word tells the reader that the traveller is not certain of his information. The narrator, then, is not certain of his exact location. I agree with Ciardi that "the man is familiar with the parts," but nevertheless this traveller is oriented only in general terms. Even the title of the poem adds an ambivalence to these woods; the lack of the definite article "the" before "woods" suggests the universal and indefinite rather than the particular and specific.

Once the trepidation in the first line is established, the mood is then stabilized with the assuring "His house is in the village, *though*" (italics added). Editor Lathem's controversial comma preceding "though" slows down the reader's voice so that we are made to linger upon this word. Although the words "though" and "know" rhyme and are equally stressed, this comma is unnecessary, since the reader's ear naturally hears a fluctuation in the rhythm. I conclude this point by again emphasizing the importance of the conjunction "though" which is an afterthought of the narrator's uncertainty. He does know that "His [the owner's] house is in the village," and this assuring statement is contrasted with the doubt of the first line--a doubt echoed by the word "though."

The solitude and loneliness of this journey are further established when the traveller realizes that the possible owner of the woods "will not *see me* stopping *here*" (italics added). The long "e" sounds of this line contrast with the long "o's" of the previous "Wh*o*se w*oo*ds these are I think I kn*ow*. / His house is in the village th*ough*" (italics added). His thoughts have moved from a pondering in the first two lines to a definite statement in the third. The shift in sentence sounds corresponds to the narrator's realization that he is unable to see the man in the village and the man in the village cannot see him. The narrator's ties with civilization have been consciously severed; his new relationship with these woods is closer and stronger than ever before.

Special mention should be made concerning the casualness of the sentence sound heard in "He will not see me stopping here / To watch his woods fill up with snow." The narrator seems to be playfully rationalizing his disorientation by stating a reason for his presence in the woods. Although one may argue that Frost's statement is merely a cursory remark, having no weighty significance in the poem, such a deduction would ignore the latent power of the Frostian understatement. The traveller's whimsical voice tone when heard in the obvious observation that the man in the village "will not see me stopping here," actually enhances the effect of the narrator's isolation. This line

emphasizes his distance from the village. Being conspicuous by its presence, the easygoing sentence sound in the narrator's casual remark is a bluffing tactic, whereby he seeks, consciously or unconsciously, security from his relationship with this nearby village.

By the use of understatement, the narrator not only attempts to hide his loneliness but also tries to camouflage his fascination with this whole setting. We hear a teasing quality to "He will not see me stopping here." The narrator's voice tone suggests that he has done something wrong; he sounds like a schoolboy silently boasting to himself about a well-executed prank. The reader can hear the same mischievousness in his words when the traveller knows that the man in the village does not know of his presence. Here, the reader may consider that the narrator believes himself to be the true owner of the woods since he alone appreciates their aesthetic beauty.

The last line in this verse reintroduces those hollow "o's" and hushed "w's" to gently return the traveller to the subject of the woods: "H*e* will not s*ee* m*e* stopping h*e*re / T*o* *w*atch his *woo*ds fill up with sn*ow*" (italics added). The "e" sounds of "He will not see me stopping here" are not abrupt, but they do provide enough distinction to contrast with the muffled sounds of the woods as they "fill up with snow." I should quickly add that although this last line of the stanza is

onomatopoeic, the sounds of the woods are not imitated. Just as there is not one specific sound that the traveller hears, also there is not one dominant poetic device in this line: it is the culmination of many sounds that can be heard only when the narrator stops and listens. An analysis of the prosodic elements in this concluding line aid in our understanding of the imaginative and emotional feelings that are conveyed. The blending of consonants from one word to another softens the word sounds by preventing abrupt changes in articulation: "T*o* *w*atch hi*s* *w*oods *f*ill up wi*th* *s*now" (italics added). The easy flow of the consonants throughout this line-sound adds to the restful scene. The alliterative "To *w*atch his *w*oods," allows the reader to savour the velvety "w" sounds in an interlude distinct from the traveller's stay (italics added). The assonance has created a rhythmic pattern where the vowels overlap: "To watch h*i*s w*oo*ds f*i*ll up w*i*th sn*ow*." This poetic device contributes not only to the conversational rhythm of the iambs but also produces the euphonious sounds in this winter setting.

The traveller may be hearing gentle brushing of boughs, falling clumps of snow from overloaded branches as he sits wreathed in falling snowflakes; even when there are no sounds the traveller senses imaginary noises in these woods. If I were writing this stanza, a mention of a hooting owl would be

included to convey the mood. Such a heavy-handed approach would, of course, ruin the stanza since it would state the meaning or effect rather than suggest it. The use of complementary poetic devices achieves the desired mood by implicit, rather than explicit, techniques. The narrator's senses have been numbed—not by one specific detail but by the overall effect of the mood which the woods have produced. The setting has taken on overtones of a cloistered and claustrophobic woods. This is, of course, the extreme state of isolation, a state later verified with the description "dark and deep."

Unlike the man in the village, the horse is a witness to the narrator's break in routine. The traveller's sensitivity is noted when he considers only the possible feelings for the horse's and his divergent behaviour. The outward tone of his voice is carefree as he again downplays his inward desire to view these woods: "My little horse must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse near." Behind the comical notion of a thinking horse, the reader can hear a subtle apology being made for the change in routine. His slight embarrassment is an automatic reaction to the predicted conditioned response of his horse. The narrator, however, is always alone; whether or not his companion can "think" or "ask" does not have any effect upon his isolation.

In my earlier comments I inferred that the factual content

is of secondary importance to the meaning of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." To illustrate this point, I will introduce another Frost poem which is similar in outward content and form but has very different sentence sounds. The importance of sentence sounds will become much more apparent to the reader when noting these differences between the two poems. The reader is able to hear in the sentence sounds of "Acquainted with the Night" a disparity between the narrator and his environment.

> I have been one acquainted with the night.
> I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
> I have outwalked the furthest city light.
>
> I have looked down the saddest city lane.
> I have passed by the watchman on his beat
> And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.
> (p. 255, 1-6)

These first two stanzas tell us that this narrator is also alone at night. His conversational iambic pentameter is found in the same rhyming scheme as "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" but with only a light variation. Underneath the cataloguing of energetic accomplishments, the reader can hear in the sentence sounds a monotonous and static rhythm. The humdrum of the overused first person singular suggests that this is a boastful and egotistic traveller. When one considers this relationship of his sentence sounds to his activity, it is reasonable to conclude

that he is bored. Regardless of his insistence, his wearisome sentence sounds tell us that he has not found any satisfaction or pleasure by wandering from one end of the town to the other.

In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" the narrator must stop in order to appreciate what is around him. When he has done this, a special sharing has taken place between the subject and object. The sounds of the woods have produced a fascination for the traveller. The sentence sounds describing his experience *is* the meaning of the poem. Frost does not suggest that one must journey to the woods in order to find peace with himself or with his environment; isolation and man's harmony with the environment originate from the psyche of the individual. It is not dependent upon geography.

Before I return to "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," I would like to briefly mention the last line in the second stanza of "Acquainted with the Night": "And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain." In both poems the narrator has indicated his embarrassment at being found in what he considers an awkward situation. The traveller in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is innocently enticed by these captivating woods. His whole experience is an accidental discovery from which he learns, in isolation, something about himself. This is a positive experience which he can partially "explain." The narrator in "Acquainted with the Night" roams the town with the sole purpose

of discovering something. He, too, is isolated but in terms that critic Reuben Brower refers to as: "utter personal, moral, and historical homelessness."[4] The rigid and stilted sentence sounds reveal his stark and sterile journey. This narrator is "unwilling to explain" to the watchman because he is unable to explain to himself what he is looking for. The narrator of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," however, reveals in his more mellifluous sentence sounds a willingness to share his explanation with us. His effort is a sincere attempt at gathering into statement and sound as much of his "statement" as he can.

The narrator's strange experience on this special night of the winter solstice suggests his standing in a state of limbo: "Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year." The traveller's thoughts have drifted from specific details concerning his horse and an accessible farmhouse to reflect upon his solitary and intimate relationship with nature. We savour the aesthetic beauty of the woods only from a distance. It is only when we stop to view this setting, near a frozen lake, that we then appreciate this scene. We also become aware of the horse's urgency to return home. The horse's reaction to this time-wasting venture tells the narrator that he has things to do and places to go. The traveller's submission to the spell of these woods certainly takes him away from American practicality.

The horse's disgust and impatience become more vociferous

as we begin the third stanza. A tone of anxiety is produced in the first two lines by the quick and sharp sounds of "shake," "ask" and "mistake."

> He gives his harness bells a sh*ake*
> To *ask* if there is some mis*take*.
> The only other sound's the sweep
> Of easy wind and downy flake. (italics added)

These cacophonous sounds are associated with syllables which lurch or "shake" themselves. Compare these sounds to the natural and fluid "The only other sound's the sweep." These sounds "sweep" themselves across the lines and by their motion contrast with the restlessness of the two previous lines. We slow down easily and gently with "Of easy wind and downy flake." We "watch" the "woods fill up with snow"; the cumulative effect produces a sense of warmth and security. Lawrance Thompson interprets this scene similarily and hints at its hypnotic effect. He tells us that "the spell of the movement is so strong that the traveller is reluctant to leave."[5]

Thompson also refers to this scene as a "cold storm."[6] I do not want to quibble, but the mood of this scene to me has not been produced by any blowing storm or frigid temperature; rather, as noted in my previous remarks on sentence sounds, we envisage a serene and benevolent snowfall. We have witnessed the bond of

kinship which has developed between the traveller and the setting, whereas a "cold storm" would suggest that he has met an antagonist along his way. This New England setting had enveloped the narrator in a warm embrace. He has seen the woods "fill up with snow" and witnessed the "easy wind and downy flake." These inviting and protective characteristics of the woods are only two fascinations that compel the narrator to savour this winter setting.

The denotation of "*easy* wind" and "*downy* flake" of course states the desired meaning, but the connotation as produced by the sentence sounds also does its indirect work (italics added). Perhaps we could more fully appreciate this connotation by comparing these lines to "After Apple-Picking":

> The only other sound's the sweep
> Of easy wind and downy flake.
>
> Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
> The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
> (p. 68, 7-8)

In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" the easy rocking of "only other" to "sound's the sweep" sways gently in harmony with the sleepy "s's" and "z's." Also the "o" sounds soften the lines by allowing the soothing and metronomic rhythm to move in a natural motion. Even the "ake" in the feathery "flake" is

softened by the "f." The slumbering word-sounds created by poetic craftsmanship are spoken in the intonations of everyday speech. The movement caused by the sentence sounds results in the rhythmic to and fro of the passage.

We hear in "After Apple-Picking" the similar sleepy "s's" and "z's" which induce the desire for, and invitation to, sleep. The dreamy suggestion of slumber is first introduced: "Essence of winter sleep is on the night." After this abstract and general statement the narrator gives the reader only enough information to convey the mood. Too much detail would only break the spell by piercing the hazy effect of drowsiness. The "scent of apples" is allowed to linger like an anaesthetic perfume; we can imagine the narrator dozing off.

Not until the narrator becomes immersed in the beauty of this winter setting does Frost summarize the characteristics of the woods: "lovely, dark and deep." The liquid "l" of "lovely" rolls off our tongue; in the context of the line this over-used adjective works perfectly. We are checked by the comma after "lovely" which allows the reader to dwell on this word for the longest possible time. After this pause the alliterative "dark, and deep" completes the description of the woods. Like "lovely," these strongly stressed adjectives elaborate on the beauty of the woods with their suggestion of its mystery and charm. The direct reference to these woods as being "dark" and "deep" is made with

contemplative acceptance by the narrator. I stress that nothing insidious or malevolent is suggested in his final observation of the woods: the description is an accurate yet enchanting summary which by its brevity allows him to return on his journey.

The contemplative mood is interrupted with the reminder that we must fulfill our commitments:

> But I have promises to keep,
> And miles to go before I sleep,
> And miles to go before I sleep.

The introductory "But" shifts our perspective from a visceral experience to a cerebral realization. This quick one-syllable word gently, but firmly, returns us to our journey. Although the traveller is preparing to complete his journey, the pace or tempo has slightly decreased. The commas at the end of each line in this closing verse slow the voice down; as a result the meaning and melancholy have not been stunted by any premature haste. The repetition of rhyme in its rhythmical and rocking sway is conducive to slumber; also the repetition of those drowsy "s's" in "promises" and twice repeated in "miles" and "sleep" are allowed to linger like the narrator's mood. Because there is only one rhyme in this last stanza, the traveller never leaves the cocoon of the overall mood which Frost's sentence sounds have spun around him.

Footnotes - The Lyric

[1] Robert Frost, quoted by Reginald L. Cook, "Robert Frost's Asides on his Poetry," *American Literature*, XIX (January 1948), p. 357.

[2] Lawrance Thompson, *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost* (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1961), p. 25.

[3] John Ciardi, "Robert Frost: The Way to the Poem," *Saturday Review*, XL (April 12, 1958), p. 14.

[4] Reuben Brower, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 35.

[5] Thompson, *Fire and Ice*, p. 25.

[6] Thompson, p. 25.

The Dramatic Narrative

"Birches" is balanced between delight and wisdom, earth and heaven, poetry and speech, and humour and seriousness; so should one's life be balanced, according to Frost.

> When I see birches bend to left and right
> Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
> I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
> But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
> As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them 5
> Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
> After a rain. They click upon themselves
> As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
> As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
> Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells 10
> Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust--
> Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
> You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
> They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
> And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed 15
> So low for long, they never right themselves:
> You may see their trunks arching in the woods
> Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
> Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
> Before them over their heads to dry in the sun. 20
> But I was going to say when Truth broke in
> With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
> I should prefer to have some boy bend them
> As he went out and in to fetch the cows--
> Some boy too far from town to learn baseball, 25
> Whose only play was what he found himself,
> Summer or winter, and could play alone.
> One by one he subdued his father's trees
> By riding them down over and over again
> Until he took the stiffness out of them, 30
> And not one but hung limp, not one was left
> For him to conquer. He learned all there was
> To learn about not launching out too soon
> And so not carrying the tree away
> Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise 35
> To the top branches, climbing carefully
> With the same pains you use to fill a cup
> Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
> Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
> Kicking his way down through the air to the ground. 40

> So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
> And so I dream of going back to be.
> It's when I'm weary of considerations,
> And life is too much like a pathless wood
> Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs 45
> Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
> From a twig's having lashed across it open.
> I'd like to get away from earth awhile
> And then come back to it and begin over.
> May no fate willfully misunderstand me 50
> And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
> Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
> I don't know where it's likely to go better.
> I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
> And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk 55
> *Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
> But dipped its top and set me down again.
> That would be good both going and coming back.
> One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.
> (pp. 121-22)

The literal levels of both the poem and the narrator's attitude towards life must be understood before we can appreciate their metaphorical and spiritual significance. Frost, who considers Emerson to be his New England ancestor in matters of poetry, has used Emerson's theory of correspondence in "Birches" to elaborate upon the presence of a design or pattern in our lives.

> Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting the natural appearance as its picture.[1]

Frost is telling us that we live in a temporal state of suspension: life is "too much like a pathless wood," he says--

but it is also "the right place for love." Even on this path there is a balancing of sensations: with the "tickling" of cobwebs and the pain caused by the "lashing" of a twig. The natural appearances and feelings are, of course, stated by the poet natural speech. A too severe voice tone, devoid of casual and playful sentence sounds, would place the poet in the role of a pontificator. Only when we share in the poet's earthly moods of frustration and enthusiasm can we consider the spiritual implications.

In spite of the very regular preestablished accent and measure of blank verse, the speaking voice in the first three lines has its share of control:

> When I | see bir|ches bend | to left | and right
> Across | the lines | of straigh|ter dark|er trees,
> I like | to think | some boy's | been swing|ing them.

The casual voice tone of "I like to think" quickly eases the reader into the poem. We react positively to the narrator's conversational style: we have been invited to share the enthusiasm and excitement of his mood. The poem has already progressed from mere fact to be interpreted by the narrator's imagination: "When I see ... I like to think." Although the narrator's voice shifts from a clinical observation to a whimsical wish, design and order have been kept in control: the disorder of birches "[bending] to left and right"

has been balanced with the symmetry of "straighter darker trees." An analogy can be made between the narrator's off-handed sentence sound and the bending birches: the former is framed in the regular metre, the latter, in "lines of straighter darker trees."

The narrator is quick to playfully undermine his reflection: "But swinging doesn't bend them down as ice storms do" (4-5). This comment allows the reader to share the same emotions as the narrator who welcomes our participation. We agree with his comments: "Yes, that's right! Swinging *doesn't* bend them down to stay as *ice storms* do." We are not annoyed at this seeming looseness of the poem: the narrator's familiarity with the reader is never obtrusive. The carefree attitude of this admirer of birches conveys through the descriptive imagery and casual sentence sounds an airy mood--a mood which is shared with the reader.

The arrangement of the vowels in "a sunny winter morning" increases the tempo to suggest a burst of energy. This same technique is found in "The Silken Tent" in a similar phrase "a sunny summer breeze." In both phrases there is a blending of consonants and vowels which allow the syllables to overlap each other.

Once the setting is established, descriptive imagery further elaborates upon the birches:

> They click upon themselves
> As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
> As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
> (7-9)

The sounds caused by the simultaneous use of the cacophony and alliteration, evident in the "c's," "sk's" and "z's," give the sense of quickness and brittleness to the branches. Not only do the alliterative sound effects allow us to hear the clicking of these crystal branches, but sound also lends itself to a visual appreciation of the scene: now encased in ice, the birch trees have been transformed into fine china. The onomatopoetic effect in this passage functions both in a narrow and broad sense: distinct sounds in these lines allow individual birches to be seen and heard. Also the overall effect has been produced by a sentence sound where we can see and hear this symphony of trees in a much larger setting.

> *S*oon the *s*un'*s* warmth make*s* them *s*hed cry*s*tal *sh*ell*s*
> *Sh*attering and avalan*ch*ing on the *s*now crust--
> *Such* heaps of broken gla*ss* to *sw*eep away
> You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
> (10-13) (italics added)

These breathy consonants complement the metamorphosis of the birches as they "shed [their] crystal shells." The seeing and listening to the birches" [shedding] crystal shells" is reported by the narrator in a celebrating sentence sound--a sentence sound expressive for the trees' rebirth and new-found freedom. Again, I stress that in these lines, onomatopoeia transcends the imitation of sounds as in the tinkling of ice. The sounds have actually aided to recreate the whole scene--a scene complete with motion, energy and most important, the narrator's joy.

The beautiful wintery imagery describing this spectacle prepares us for a hyperbole which characterizes the whole setting: "You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen." This is a visceral reaction as heard in the spontaneity of the narrator's sentence sound--a revealing sentence sound which has shifted in his description of the birches, which now presents his whole impression of the scene. The narrator's poetic language has momentarily lapsed because of the captivating and reverential nature of the scene: he has been awe-struck by an enchanting sight which the previous description conveyed. The colloquial "You'd think" is a radical departure from his previous verbal music. The comparison of the forest floor with that of heaven also introduces the balance between the temporal and the heavenly--a balance which the narrator will elaborate upon later in the poem.

Religious imagery is subtly re-introduced with the personification of the iced trees being "bowed."

> They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
> And they seem not to break: though once they are bowed
> So low for long, they never right themselves.
> (14-16)

Throughout the passage we learn of the result which ice storms have had upon birch trees. Implicit in the image of the bended trees is their now subservient stance manifested by their excessively stooped posture in their wintry heaven. A sober statement of fact

is heard in the narrator's sentence sound. Once standing upright and proud, the birches now are distorted and humbled. Their icy burden which they have long since shed has permanently caused their trunks to bow. Never again able to regain their dignity and composure, their crowns are humiliatingly "dragged" through dead ferns and shrubs.

The human quality of the bowed birches is then elaborated upon with a more playful sentence sound.

> *You may see their trunks* arching in the woods
> Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
> Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
> Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
> (17-20) (italics added)

The tempo has been allowed to shift with the conversational and lighthearted "You may see their trunks." The metaphor of the playing girls replaces the serious religious symbolism in the previous lines. The branches which were "dragged to the withered bracken by the load" now "throw their hair / Before them over their heads to dry in the sun." The static description of the previous scene described birches in a frozen and lifeless posture. Now, the sense of freedom and vitality is expressed in the dynamic description of the trees. We are left with the image of the trees facing the sun; celebrating this dramatic change, the narrator's sentence sound reaches a triumphant climax.

According to critic Elaine Barry, the first twenty-two lines of the poem are a distinct section which "deals with the factual reason for the trees being bent."[2] "The second section," she tells us "reverts to the fanciful reason: "I should prefer to have some boy bend them.'"[3] I agree that there is a division in the poem, but I prefer to hear the shift at line twenty where the new sentence sound, not the content of the poem, changes its direction. After that exquisite passage ending with the "girls on hands and knees that throw their hair / Before them over their heads to dry in the sun," we are suddenly interrupted with

> But I was going to say when Truth broke in
> With all her matter-of-fact about the ice storm,
> I should prefer to have some boy bend them
> As he went out and in to fetch the cows--
> (21-24)

Frost seems to be saying that he has wandered from his discussion; his words preceding this point are a mere distraction or detour from the text. Of course we know that the only matter-of-factness is that heard in the tone of his voice. Frost has begun this poem in delight, but we have already heard a subtle seriousness beneath his playful sentence sounds. Before the narrator specifically returns to his fantasy of some boy swinging birches, he feels he must assert his own presence. With a certain playful indignity he huffishly says: "But I was going to say when Truth broke in."

The combative sentence sound keeps in control the serious connotation of "Truth."

Frost's catalogue of facts in the first twenty lines seem to have been made by a scientist, but these facts are still stated in poetic terms. The narrator has not contorted scientific fact with his use of poetic imagery; rather, by allowing the metaphor to function as a vehicle, the accuracy of facts is heightened when they are made accessible to the reader's own emotions and sensitivities. Although the sentence sound of "Truth [breaking] in" tells the reader that a shift has occurred in the poem, the content of the first section causes us to question Frost's statement; "Truth" has been evident throughout this first section. Frost has uttered much more than mere scientific fact.

The tempo of the poem is allowed to increase slowly with the lingering and melancholy mood of the narrator.

> I should prefer to have some boy bend them
> As he went out and in to fetch the cows--
> Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
> Whose only play was what he found himself,
> Summer or winter, and could play alone.
> (23-27)

Although we learn later in the poem that the narrator was once [himself] a swinger of birches and "[dreams] of going back to be,"

the meditative and reflective mood of the above passage tells the reader that the imaginary boy was once the narrator.

In an interview aptly called "We seem to lack the Courage to Be Ourselves," Frost gives the following advice to the youth of the country:

> 'Criticism is the province of age, not of youth. They'll get to that soon enough. Let them build up a friendship with the writing world first. One can't compare until one knows.
>
> 'But I want them [youth] to feel that a philosophy of life is something that is not formal, that means delving in books and superimposing on themselves. No, a philosophy of life is an attitude to life.'[4]

These words become more clear when we consider the actions of the young man in "Birches." The lad's spontaneous act of subduing and conquering these trees has resulted from his own individuality and self-reliance. By testing the flexibility of the trees, he is intrinsically discovering his own strengths and limitations. The Freudian suggestion with the mention that these are his father's trees, underscore the evolutionary process of knowledge. To be a successful swinger of birches he must balance assurance with patience and enthusiasm with caution. He has tested the pliability of the birches; now he will test the accuracy of his judgment. In both criticizing life and swinging from birch trees, experience precedes knowledge: "One can't compare until one knows."

The victory of birch swinging must be meticulously planned before one can launch out too soon.

> He always kept his poise
> To the top branches, climbing carefully
> With the same pains you use to fill a cup
> Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
> (35-38)

Only when he has learned his craft, can the boy earn his reward:

> Then he flung outward, feet first with a swish,
> Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
> (39-40)

The poet is not expressing the theme of man versus nature but rather the theme of man's developing physically and psychologically because of nature. The boy's knowledge has been gleaned not by rigid and conscious plan but because of the successful application of his skills. He has earned his reward of freely swinging from birch trees to the ground.

The narrator's story, as played out by the young boy, allows the reader to share the poet's former experience as a swinger of birches: in referring to his past Frost ponders about his whole life. As an example, the narrator confesses that "So was I once myself a swinger of birches. / And so I dream of going back to be" (41-42). It is a reflective and melancholy comment that escapes the sentimental by its sincere tone. Of course he can only "dream

of going back": the narrator realizes that he cannot relive his past. We hear the same tone of regret from another traveller when

> Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
> And sorry I could not travel both
> And be one traveller.(p. 105)

The man in "Birches" looks backward with pride to his days of birch climbing; it is with mild nostalgia that he sees that he cannot return to his boyhood. But now the narrator can realize the worth of his past boyish enthusiasm. In this positive, natural, and linear progression, the intellectual growth which derives from age transcends the superficial attitude of youth. We can neither choose two diverging roads simultaneously--nor fuse youthfulness with maturity. We can reflect upon each of our lives--lives which are balanced between "considerations" and "love."

Throughout "Birches," Frost avoids the appearance of fabricating voice tones but succeeds in capturing the speaking voice as it is used in everyday life. The sentence sounds in his conversational monologue charge common phrases with sound postures or with the sounds of sense. Comparing "life" to a "pathless wood" is a dreadful cliche when isolated from the text, but Frost elaborates on this dead metaphor to instil it with new life and meaning:

> And life is too much like a pathless wood
> Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
> Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
> From a twig's having lashed across it open.
> (44-47)

The use of this metaphor is successful because the rugged imagery and concrete diction have taken over from the esoteric "pathless wood." The precise and concrete diction of "burns," "tickles," "broken," "weeping," and "lashing" has humanized specific sensations. Frost has uplifted his metaphor to the level of human feelings and emotions; due to its accessibility, it can now reach the empathy of the reader. The reader is never stranded in the woods; Frost's poetry is always a clear path.

Once the narrator has established the specifics of birch climbing, he then expands upon this metaphor by launching it outward to embrace a more general meaning.

> I'd like to get away from earth awhile
> And then come back to it and begin over.
> (48-49)

He does not want to leave permanently but to merely "get away," and only for "awhile." This interlude before returning to earth would be a kind of retreat--a time when he could rekindle his energy so that he can again make a fresh beginning. The meditative mood as expressed in this brief passage results from the harmony between

the contemplative sentence sound and his thoughts and emotions. The narrator here is not directly addressing the reader. He is thinking his personal thoughts aloud with a kind of mild nostalgia. We heard the same melancholy mood earlier: "I dream of going back to be [a swinger of birches]." The reader should not conclude from this same meditative sentence sound that the narrator has any regrets regarding his life. The narrator is saying that life is worth experiencing twice; new challenges and opportunities always await the birch climber.

Earlier in the poem, "Truth broke in"; now the subject of fate similarly penetrates the previous solitary mood.

> May no fate willfully misunderstand me
> And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
> Not to return.
> (50-52)

We hear a prankish quality to this voice tone but one which actually disguises his inward fear of leaving earth permanently. He guards himself from fate by directly speaking to any omniscient listener. There is, of course, a danger of overstating the degree of the narrator's fear in the above passage; rather than fear, perhaps determination or stubbornness is a more accurate description of his emotion. The jesting quality of his sentence sound which mildly mocks fate does not diminish his apprehension of death, but more importantly this sentence sound allows the narrator to better express

his positive affirmation of life. Fear is an intimidating and insidious emotion which controls and enslaves the will of the individual, whereas stubbornness in this poem is a positive attitude which allows freedom of expression and thought. The narrator is in complete control of his emotions. By considering life's end and a possible opportunity to return, he has allowed the subject of life's value to be placed in perspective and honestly discussed.

According to Frost, the control of one's honour is imperative when expressing and clarifying a meaning or idea. In his introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson's *King Jasper*, Frost elaborates upon this doctrine.

> The style is the man. Rather say the style is the way the man takes himself; and to be at all charming or even bearable, the way is almost rigidly prescribed. If it is with outer seriousness, it must be with inner humor. If it is with outer humor, it must be with inner seriousness. Neither one alone without the other under it will do.[5]

Throughout "Birches" there is a weaving of voice intonations both serious and playful. Even though the pastime of observing birches on this "sunny winter morning" evokes a carefree attitude, the theme which germinates from this mood is serious. We are able to hear this dichotomy in the tangled sentence sounds of the follow-

ing: "Earth's the right place for love: / I don't know where it's likely to go better." Although the outer playfulness of his sentence sound seems trite, the inner seriousness suggests much more than shallow and capricious speculation. The narrator, of course, cannot definitely know where love is likely to go better. This is a truism. But by casually understating his strong bond with earth, the narrator does not negate the possibility that a heavenly world exists. By commenting upon his temporal life, he has reflected upon a spiritual existence. It is this delicate balance between the playfulness as heard in the narrator's sentence sounds and the success as achieved in the poet's theme that would evoke Ezra Pound's comment that "Mr. Frost has humor, but he is not its victim." [6]

Concrete diction also functions with humour to keep the distance between narrator and reader at a minimum. It is important to note that the vehicle of the metaphor is described in concrete terms where the "black branches" are seen against "a snow-white trunk." The order and design of the birch trees balance with the abstract fantasy of his journey. This same visual stability was noted earlier where the fluid bending of the birch trees was framed within the boundaries of "straighter darker trees." The symmetry of the contrasting colours and lines of these birches is interpreted by the narrator as a kind of natural scaffold or ladder.

To further emphasize the importance of concreteness in Frost's poetry, several lines of "After Apple-Picking" are offered where an actual ladder is used to climb a tree.

> My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
> It keeps the pressure of a ladder round.
> I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
> (p. 68, 21-23)

The physical pain reminds this man that he is standing on a ladder. By recognizing his dependency on the earth he controls his balance —a balance which is maintained even as the ladder sways and boughs bend. He realizes, that to remain on the ladder without falling, he must continue to experience this ache.

The physical climbing toward heaven has only whetted the narrator's curiosity for all spiritual ascent. This uncertainty about such a journey is heard in the whimiscal "I'd like to get away from earth awhile ... I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree." Frost is neither being glib nor blasphemous; he doesn't pretend to know what exists after death. He can only reflect upon his existence here on earth and to honestly appraise why he would want to leave. When the poem is steeped in off-handed sentence sounds, the reader can also share the narrator's mood. There is a flexibility established between the reader and the poem's content which would be absent if the poem were not presented in a carefree manner. The voice in "Birches" would then be didactic and pretentious;

instead, we are allowed to share the narrator's opportunity to leave earth for a while. Again, I emphasize, Frost can only speak honestly from his own emotions; as he says in "Mowing," "Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak" (p. 17, 9).

The narrator's sense of satisfaction is heard in "That would be good both going and coming back." He has controlled his own pace, ascent and descent. The economical use of diction accents his commitment to earth; a desire of returning verifies this love with earth.

The rootedness of the trees is analogous to the love of the narrator. The trees and narrator soar and sway; nevertheless, neither actually leaves the earth. On this imaginary journey he only wants to climb "*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more, / But dipped its top and set me down again." His bonds with earth are never severed. Just as the tree's root and branch systems are identical the narrator's earthly bonds and heavenly notions are also balanced in symmetry.

In his essay "On Emerson," Frost says: "I don't like obscurity and obfuscation, but I do like dark saying."[7] The last line of "Birches" is such a dark saying: "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches." "The casual throwaway quality of this line," Elaine Barry tells us, "remains on the level of statement--whimsical, unexplored";[8] nevertheless, beneath this sentence sound of the narrator, we hear another sound--one which is expressed

by the voice of the poet. Throughout the poem the poet has elaborated upon the physical and psychological balance of birch climbing. This Frostian understatement has a calming effect whereby the assurance and pride of the poet is solidified. Yes indeed, "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches."

Footnotes - The Dramatic Narrative

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson,* ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p. 32.

[2] Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.), p. 112.

[3] Barry, p. 113.

[4] Robert Frost, "We Seem to Lack the Courage to be Ourselves," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose,* ed. E. C. Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 293.

[5] Frost, "Introduction to Robinson's King Jasper," in *Robert Frost Poetry and Prose,* p. 351.

[6] Ezra Pound, in *North of Boston,* in Robert Frost An Introduction, ed. Robert A. Greenberg and James G. Hepburn (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 48.

[7] Robert Frost, "On Emerson," in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost,* ed. Hyde Cox and E. C. Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), p. 114.

[8] Elaine Barry, *Robert Frost,* p. 116.

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