

BEHIND LIGHT WORDS

BEHIND LIGHT WORDS:
IRONY IN THE
EARLY DRAMATIC POETRY OF
ROBERT FROST

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: The purpose of this thesis is to investigate how and why Frost employs irony. The types of irony Frost uses can initially be classified into two categories; "natural" and "artificial" irony. The distinction between these two terms will be elaborated and the various aspects or types of irony encompassed by each term will be discussed. The reasons for Frost's use of irony will also be examined. The poetry to be studied consists of selected long dramatic poems from three of Frost's early books: North of Boston (1914), Mountain Interval (1916), and New Hampshire (1923). The observations arising from an examination of these works should sufficiently elucidate Frost's uses of irony.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Though a great scholar, he's a democrat,
If not at heart, at least on principle.
("A Hundred Collars," p. 61)¹

This brief ironic description of Magoon, the "democrat" doctor of "A Hundred Collars," introduces the comic drama which unfolds between the doctor and Iafe the bill collector. Discussing North of Boston, the collection in which this poem appeared, Amy Lowell wrote in one of the earliest American reviews of Frost's second book:

Unlike Mr. Frost she [Alice Brown] has a rare sense of humor, and that, too is of New England, although no hint of it appears in North of Boston. And just because of the lack of it, just because its place is taken by an irony, sardonic and grim, Mr. Frost's book reveals a disease which is eating into the vitals of our New England life.²

Lowell's imperceptive review has been an open target for criticism ever since critics began to revive Frost for examination as a serious poet. Frost's sense of humour and his use of comic as opposed to "sardonic and grim" irony is now widely acknowledged. Critics have written articles and included chapters in book-length studies explicating

¹Robert Frost, Complete Poems (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 61. All subsequent references to Frost's poetry, unless otherwise indicated, will be to this edition and will consist only of the page number in parenthesis after the quotation.

²Amy Lowell, in Robert A. Greenberg and James G. Hepburn, eds., Robert Frost: An Introduction (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 49.

and examining Frost's sense of humour.³ In passing, irony is often mentioned as a mode of humour, but it has yet to be examined in depth.

Most modern critics recognize Frost as a manipulator of irony, but in the rush to explicate the symbolism or synthesize Frost's opinions on the art of creating poetry, they have neglected irony as either too obvious for lengthy discussion or of too little significance in Frost's poetry as a whole. But the obvious cannot be ignored, and the ironic potentialities of Frost's poetry should not be underestimated. Irony is one of the main features of Frost's poetry, an aspect not only of his sense of humour, but of his sense of the tragic as well.

Frost's irony is not restricted to his poetry. A sense of irony permeates his life and work. In "The Constant Symbol," a serious essay by Frost on his poetic theory, the poet wrote: "The beauty of socialism is that it will end the individuality that is always crying out mind your own business."⁴ Frost's endorsement of socialism is highly ironic. He very much respects the rights of the individual, particularly the right to privacy and freedom from outside intervention. He knows that, although "something there is that doesn't love a wall," "good fences make good neighbours" ("Mending Wall," p. 47), that an individuality which can

³See in particular: R. L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York: Rinehart, 1958): L. R. Thompson, Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1961): and W. R. Irwin, "Robert Frost and the Comic Spirit," American Literature, XXXV (Nov. 1963), 299-310.

⁴Robert Frost, "The Constant Symbol" in The Poems of Robert Frost (New York: The Modern Library, 1946), intro., p. xvii.

say "mind your own business" is essential to the maintenance of human sanity and life. Everything Frost writes and says must be carefully examined for ironic undertones which lead the careless reader into Lowell's error of gross misinterpretation.

Frost's letters and records of his conversations are equally saturated with irony. His constant teasings of some of his friends as well as attacks on his enemies are manifested in ironic comments in his letters. Thompson, in his biography of Frost, informs us of Frost's unique method of relating stories about his own life and adventures. It seems that, to extract all the possibilities from an incident, Frost would alter details of the story each time he retold it. Truth was secondary to a well structured, dramatically effective story. For ironic as well as dramatic effect, Frost would change the facts of his own life each time he told a particular tale. Frost knew how to increase dramatic tension by manipulation of irony, and he never failed to make use of his knowledge in his story-telling, as well as in his poetry.⁵

From A Boy's Will to the later masques (A Masque of Reason and A Masque of Mercy) to In the Clearing, irony is one of the major techniques Frost employs in the construction of his poetry. In A Boy's Will, Frost's first complete book of poems, irony is evident in individual poems and in the overall structure of the book. "Stars," "The Demiurge's Laugh" and "Reluctance" can be cited as examples of individual poems in which Frost displays his ironic technique. To the observer, the stars look down from heaven "As if with keenness for our fate;" but this is a man-made illusion.

⁵See L. R. Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), intro. p. xiii.

The stars, the symbolic goals of many of man's aspirations, are indifferent to man:

And yet with neither love nor hate,
 Those stars like some snow-white
 Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
 Without the gift of sight.
 ("Stars," p. 12)

Frost recognizes the ironic situation of man attempting to seek help or consolation from an indifferent universe. Man's illusions are further mocked by the Demiurge who rises behind his pursuer to laugh:

The sound was behind me instead of before,
 A sleepy sound, but mocking half,
 As of one who utterly couldn't care.
 The Demon arose from his wallow to laugh.
 ("The Demiurge's Laugh," p. 35)

Man's ironic reluctance to accept the inevitable laws of reason and nature is portrayed in "Reluctance."

Ah, when to the heart of man
 Was it ever less than treason
 To go with the drift of things,
 To yield with a grace to reason,
 And bow and accept the end
 Of a love or a season?
 ("Reluctance," p. 43)

The individual poems in A Boy's Will are arranged in such a way as to outline the development of a boy's mind. When the book was first published, Frost included glosses on each poem, to assure that the reader would follow this progression. Thompson has noted that there is often an ironic discrepancy between the poems and the glosses.⁶ Since Frost removed these glosses from later editions, we are left to our own resources to discover the use of irony as a structuring device in the book. If the

⁶Ibid., p. 398.

poems are compared and contrasted to each other, a structure appears which is reminiscent of Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience. One poem is often intended as an ironic contrast to another. For example, the contrast between the opening poem "Into My Own" and the concluding poem "Reluctance" begins with the titles. There is an ironic difference between the poet's self-assurance in the first poem and his awareness of man's reluctance in the last. Again, the optimism of "The Tuft of Flowers" contrasts sharply with the uncertainty of "Storm Fear." What emerges is a book of poems which illustrates the ironies of the development of a boy's mind, as his ideas and moods vacillate and mature.

Although irony pervades Frost's poetry from early to late, there seems to be a development or change in technique with each successive book. The development is one of quality, not quantity. The early books probably contain as much irony as the masques or In the Clearing, but a qualitative difference is evident. The irony in the early works is generally quiet and unobtrusive; it could best be characterized as subtle. The subtlety of the self-ironic narrator of "The Road Not Taken" is typical. As Frost progressed, so did the quality of his irony until, in the later books, it is much more open and obvious. Frost is progressing from a predominance of subtle suggestive irony to a preference for open, direct satire. That is not to say that Frost completely abandoned his early subtlety. It can still be found in such later works as "Directive," but from New Hampshire on, Frost seems to have concentrated more on his satirical talents, often to the exclusion of the more subtle forms he mastered early in his career.

"The chief distinction between irony and satire is that satire is

militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured."⁷ With New Hampshire Frost's irony became "militant," his values more explicit. Louis Untermeyer noticed the progression in quality from North of Boston: "In Mountain Interval, the occasional quizzical raillery of North of Boston was more apparent, the momentary descent of the eyelash was perceptibly prolonged; in New Hampshire it declares itself on every page."⁸ There can be little doubt that in Frost's later poems satire usurps the position previously reserved for irony. The irony becomes more militant, more openly mocking, leaving less to the reader's imagination. The subtlety which characterizes the irony of North of Boston is greatly diminished. The more obvious mocking, ironic tone of the later poems has caused some critics to erroneously ascribe the difference to quantity. Isaacs calls Witness Tree, Steeple Bush and In the Clearing Frost's "most" ironic works,⁹ a statement which implies quantitative difference. A careful examination of the poetry written before West-Running Brook will reveal that Frost always employs a great deal of irony, but the change in the tone of his voice as he grew older makes the irony in his later works more visible.

Irony is liable to appear not only in each book of poetry, but within each type of poem in the book. Frost's insistence on form,

⁷Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. 223.

⁸Louis Untermeyer, in Greenberg and Hepburn, p. 58.

⁹E. E. Isaacs, An Introduction to Robert Frost (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1962), p. 98.

especially on the adherence to a fixed metre, has kept him outside the mainstream of modern experimental writing. But Frost's self-imposed restrictions have not limited his choice of different poetic forms. His range extends through sonnets, odes, parables, fables, epigrams, dramatic monologues, dialogues and narratives to masques and even a one act play, A Way Out. Frost does not restrict his irony to any one of the many types of poetry he constructs. Perhaps the lyrics, the most popular poems from the explicator's point of view, are best known as bearers of irony. The brief lyric "Fire and Ice," a masterpiece of ironic understatement, is well known to many as the supreme example of Frost's irony. The masques are noted for their satire and irony. The dramatic poems, although they include some of Frost's most popular works, have even greatly underestimated for ironic potentialities. Some of the best examples of Frost's use of irony are found in these longer poems, but few attempts have yet been made to examine their ironic content.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate Frost's uses of irony in selected dramatic poems from North of Boston, Mountain Interval and New Hampshire in an attempt to isolate one of the props which support Frost's "illusion of simplicity."¹⁰ This "illusion of simplicity" has seriously hampered Frost's acceptance as a modern writer. Until a few years ago, Frost was considered an anachronism, out of phase with Pound, Eliot, Yeats, Auden and the modern writers in general. Says Lynen: "We expect an awareness of paradox and find him offering confident opinions . . . We

¹⁰J. F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 2.

expect in modern poetry an ironic view and find Frost whimsical or jocular."¹¹ This is one aspect of the "illusion of simplicity." Frost is deceptively simple, especially in his use of the colloquial idiom and his refusal to obscure his meaning under esoteric symbolism. But this apparent simplicity is seriously challenged by the subtle, ironic tone of many poems. Often when Frost seems most whimsical or jocular, he is really creating an illusion to cover an extremely serious subject. In this study, I propose to examine how and why Frost employs his irony, in the hope that I may gain admittance to some of the reality beneath the illusion.

As I mentioned earlier, Frost's irony is often recognized and then glossed over in a phrase or two. Jennings notes "that ring of slightly ironic authority,"¹² but relegates it to a minor position as a device used to propound philosophy. "Frost is basically a philosophical poet who often uses the pastoral mode as a vehicle for his inquiries into the nature and meaning of life. His irony, didacticism and lyricism, all serve this end."¹³ Thompson's chapter "Irony and Satire"¹⁴ begins with a brief discussion of irony and then quickly moves on to elaborate in much greater detail his use of satire. Thompson seems to see irony merely as a step in the evolution of Frost's satire. Cook tends to oversimplify somewhat:

¹¹Ibid., p. 2.

¹²E. Jennings, Frost (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964), p. 8.

¹³Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁴Thompson, Fire and Ice, pp. 145-156.

"Scratch Frost and you touch a rascal."¹⁵ Such generalizations dogged Frost's reputation and have not helped to elucidate his poetry. Since Lowell's first recognition of "an irony, sardonic and grim," critics have acknowledged the existence of irony in Frost's verse, but have refrained from making more than the odd passing observation or comment. In this thesis, I will attempt to examine Frost the ironist, a side of the poet which has long been recognized, but seldom fully appreciated.

The early long dramatic poems have been selected for close study because I feel that their ironic potentialities, although great, have been highly underestimated. "Everything that is written is as good as it is dramatic; it is drama or nothing."¹⁶ Frost's best long poems are miniature dramas, episodes constructed as if they were to be acted. Among the other features Frost incorporated in his dramas was the use of dramatic irony. Dramatic irony creates the tensions which have elevated poems such as "The Death of the Hired Man" to their present popularity.

Irony in the long poems is not restricted to dramatic irony. The ironies of situation, character, understatement, verbal equivocations and the other various ironic devices frequently found in the lyrics are also present in the long dramatic poems. In short, the dramatic poems provide almost a compendium of the various types of irony Frost employs in his poetry as a whole. They illustrate not only how he uses irony but also why he uses it; the objects and ideas he attacks and the positive values he supports. An examination of irony in these long poems should yield

¹⁵Cook, p. 148.

¹⁶Robert Frost, from his introduction to A Way Out, as quoted by Isaacs, p. 44.

conclusions which can be applied to Frost's poetry as a whole.

CHAPTER II

DELIGHTFUL WISDOM

The way of understanding is partly mirth
(*"Not Quite Social,"* p. 403)

"A poem is that species of composition which
is opposed to works of science by proposing
for its immediate object pleasure, not truth"

"And though truth, either moral or intellectual
ought to be the ultimate end, yet this
will distinguish the character of the author,
not the class to which the work belongs."¹

Frost outlines some of his ideas about poetry in "The Figure A Poem Makes": "The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom."² For the poet, his act of creation is similar to love: "It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse. It assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life."³ Frost is describing the process of poetic creation, the way a poem unfolds for its creator. But the experience of the reader confronting one of Frost's poems is similar to that of the writer while he creates it. We are first captured by the delightful aspects of the poem and, if we have read sympathetically and attentively, we end by gaining some wisdom from the brief moment of clarification.

¹Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. with intro. by George Watson (London: Everyman's Library, 1965), p. 172 and p. 171.

²Robert Frost, "The Figure A Poem Makes," in *The Complete Poems of Robert Frost*, intro., p. vi.

³Ibid.

Frost does not define what he means by delight. From his comparison of the course a poem takes to the course of love, we can assume that he equates delight with pleasurable experience. But how does one define pleasure, especially the pleasure attained from the observation of art? The comparison of poetry and love provides a valid description of the relation of the artist to his creation, but the metaphor is a little too restrictive to apply to the experience of a reader. The delight or pleasure attained from a work of art need not be fostered by the element of joy or happiness usually associated with love. We can gain a great deal of pleasure from reading King Lear or the novels of Hardy or the poetry of Housman, but no one, I am sure, would equate this delight with euphoria. Likewise, the reader of "A Servant to Servants" or "Home Burial" experiences a delight which cannot be attributed to the happiness of the poetry. Delight is an elusive feeling, not restricted to a particular subject matter, theme or mood, which, in itself cannot be adequately defined. We can examine its sources and say why we have the feeling, but the feeling itself defies definition. The delight from a given poem is created not by any one particular ingredient, but by just the combination, carefully blended by the poet to elicit the reaction of pleasure. In Frost's poetry, the poetic ingredients are blended to produce delight as the immediate end. Whether the poetry is comic, tragic or pathetic, the initial feeling of the reader is designed to be delight.

One of the prime ingredients Frost employs to make his poetry begin in delight is irony. The immediate end of a poem like "Wild Grapes," is comic delight. A young girl, out to pick wild grapes from a birch tree is ironically picked by the grapes. The expected situation is reversed;

the girl hangs from the tree with the grapes, waiting to be picked by her brother. The girl's reaction and her brother's comments on the situation create the delight of the poem. Hanging from the tree like a bunch of grapes, afraid to let go for fear of falling, the girl is the central figure of a delightfully ironic picture. To her brother, she becomes another bunch of grapes which he must pick.

"Now you know how it feels," my brother said,
 "To be a bunch of fox-grapes, as they call them,
 That when it thinks it has escaped the fox
 By growing where it shouldn't -- on a birch,
 Where a fox wouldn't think to look for it --
 Just then come you and I to gather it.
 Only you have the advantage of the grapes
 In one way: you have one more stem to cling by,
 And promise more resistance to the picker."
 (pp. 241-242)

He shouts at her as he might at an elusive bunch of grapes: "'Drop or I'll shake the tree and shake you down.'" (p. 242). Finally, he returns her to the earth again by bending down the tree. She descends the same way she ascended.

The attitude of the narrator to this event she is recalling from her childhood increases the ironic delight of the poem. She begins by comparing herself to Eurydice and ironically setting her exploit as a parallel of Eurydice's flight from and return to the underworld. She purposely makes the small appear great:

That day I swung suspended with the grapes.
 And was come after like Eurydice
 And brought down safely from the upper regions.
 (p. 240)

She mocks her first pretentious comparison by next likening herself to a young ape, thus making the great look extremely small:

But I, with something of the baby grip
 Acquired ancestrally in just such trees
 When wilder mothers than our wildest now
 Hung babies out on branches by the hands
 To dry or wash or tan, I don't know which,
 (You'll have to ask an evolutionist) --
 It held on uncomplainingly for life.
 (p. 241)

Frost has created an "ironically sportive"⁴ woman who can gently criticize her own childish aspirations and lack of knowledge and hint at the deeper implications of the situation (which Frost makes explicit in what amounts to a final twelve line gloss on the story) while narrating an ironic incident from her life which is sure to delight by its comic qualities.

Frost also uses irony to create the delight we feel from his more serious poems. "The form that Frost's tragic sense takes would be more accurately described as 'pathetic' than 'tragic'."⁵ Cook's argument that Frost's tragic sense is manifested in pathos seems to be substantiated by the long poems. It is doubtful if any single poem of Frost could be called a tragedy, by a strict definition of the term. There can be no doubt, however, that Frost recognizes the tragic aspects of life and often presents them in his poetry.⁶ The delight accompanying a poem, dealing with the tragic side of life, can be developed by the use of irony. "Place For A Third" is a poem built on pathos which elaborates on the

⁴J. R. Squires, The Major Themes of Robert Frost (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 57.

⁵Cook, p. 128.

⁶For a more complete discussion of Frost's perception of the tragic in life, see Chapter III.

ironic and tragic statement of the woman in "Home Burial":

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,
 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.
 (p. 72)

Eliza's final request is that she not be buried beside Laban's other two wives. The poem records two responses to the dying woman's final request. Laban is torn between practicality and giving "good measure to the dead, thought thankless." (p. 244). He will sell a yoke of steers if he must to buy her a lone plot with a great headstone, but his heart is not really in it. "If that was how she felt, he kept repeating." (p. 244). He will if he must, but his "prudent grief" keeps his mind working to seek a more prudent way. It seems to be his prudence more than real concern for his third wife which leads him to seek the grave of her first husband and to request permission for his wife to rest there. The ironic discrepancy between what Laban is doing and why he is doing it is brought to our attention in the first half of the poem and prepares us for the final ironic twist. His request is refused and

Laban was forced to fall back on his plan
 To buy Eliza a plot to lie alone in:
 Which gives him for himself a choice of lots
 When his time comes to die and settle down.
 (p. 246)

The refusal is ironically rationalized into a consolation. Laban will have another choice to make, but this one will confront him when he himself approaches death. His prudence in the face of death has been ironically

to see where it comes back.⁷

His poetry examines the various facets and shades of particular problems, presents parallels and contrasts to help the problem stand out clearly against the background of confusion, but does not offer solutions.⁸ Poetry "ends in a clarification of life -- not a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion."⁹ The clarification comes not from a solution to the problem, but from seeing the problem clearly for what it is. We cannot expect permanent solutions. The most Frost will concede is a "momentary stay," a temporary "arrest of disorder."¹⁰ This brief clarification is the end of poetry, the wisdom which started with delight.

To obtain this wisdom, the poet must somehow distance himself from his subject matter; he must see the problem in perspective. One of Frost's favourite methods of achieving distance is through the use of irony. "The writer must keep carefully poised between involvement and detachment. Too involved, and he becomes pedagogue, analyst, or commentator."¹¹ This poise

⁷Robert Frost, as quoted in John Ciardi, Dialogue with An Audience (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1949), p. 174.

⁸Cox and Lynen are two critics who have noticed Frost's reluctance to provide solutions. See Lynen, p. 29 and Sidney Cox, A Swinger of Birches (New York: New York University Press, 1957), p. 4 and p. 19.

⁹Frost, "The Figure A Poem Makes," p. vi.

¹⁰Frost, as quoted in Ciardi, p. 173.

¹¹Irwin, p. 302.

is maintained in the early works of Frost by the poet's carefully controlled ironic detachment. In some of Frost's later poems, the ironic detachment crumbles, and he often drifts toward what he himself calls editorials.

Ironic detachment provides the objectivity necessary to attain the "momentary stay against confusion." "The Star-Splitter" demonstrates the "complete objectivity and suppression of all explicit moral judgements"¹² essential for the attainment of wisdom. The narrator, hiding any sign of emotion or judgement, casually tells us:

So Brad McLaughlin mingled reckless talk
Of heavenly stars with hugger-mugger farming,
Till having failed at hugger-mugger farming,
He burned his house down for the fire insurance
And spent the proceeds on a telescope
To satisfy a life-long curiosity
About our place among the infinities.
(P. 218)

From his detached position, the narrator looks back over the incident, reflects on his and the town's attitudes at the time and how they changed, and attains a degree of clarification from which he can pose a final question.

We've looked and looked, but after all where are we?
Do we know any better where we are,
And how it stands between the night tonight
And a man with a smoky lantern chimney?
How different from the way it ever stood?
(p. 221)

His detached objective view of the incident permits him the wisdom to question the validity of man's aspirations. For a moment he has achieved "an arrest of disorder."

The ironic detachment of the narrator of "'Out, Out -- '" at first

¹²Frye, p. 40.

makes the poem seem terrifying. With remarkable objectivity, the narrator describes the beauty of the landscape and the horror of the incident. The lack of emotion in the last few lines is often difficult for readers to accept.

No one believed. They listened at his heart.
 Little -- less -- nothing! -- and that ended it.
 No more to build on there. And they, since they
 Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.
 ("Out, Out -- " pp. 171-172)

From viewing the scene objectively, the narrator has learned a fact of existence. Life must go on. By detaching the narrator from the scene, Frost has deliberately oversimplified the reactions of the family. Their return to their own affairs is made to seem especially cold and unfeeling to illustrate a true but not exceptionally cheerful clarification.

The detachment Frost maintains with irony helps him to tread the narrow path between comedy and tragedy without becoming too involved with either. Irony is a vital link between comedy and tragedy. "If irony injects an element of comedy into tragedy, no less does it inject tragic feeling into comedy. Without irony, tragedy degenerates into melodrama and comedy into farce."¹³ Irony creates a balance which prevents the poet from being overwhelmed by the tragic in life or from lapsing into mere comedy for comedy's sake. Irony unites comedy and tragedy in such a way as to illustrate the inescapable fact that beneath the tragedy of life there is comedy, and vice versa. Frost's successful manipulation of irony demonstrates his ability to see both sides and to unite the two without falling victim to either.

¹³David Worcester, The Art of Satire (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), p. 139.

Frost characteristically understates the relationship between comedy and tragedy and life in "The Lesson For Today":

There's nothing but injustice to be had,
No choice is left a poet, you might add,
But how to take the curse, tragic or comic.
(p. 472)

The poet has a simple choice, he says, between taking the curse of life as tragic or comic. But Frost knows there is a third choice, the one he chooses in much of his poetry. He knows that the tragic and comic views are the two extremes which can be reconciled by a sense of irony. Frost is gently mocking poets who cannot reconcile the apparently conflicting views, who are unable to see the comic in the serious and vice versa and constantly portray life as a tragedy or a comedy.

Many of Frost's poems are balanced carefully between comedy and tragedy. Part of Frost's wisdom is achieved in this balance. Frost is not using comedy to mock tragedy, or tragedy to disparage comedy.¹⁴ One of his momentary stays involves the recognition of the intimate relationship of the two. Nowhere is the delicate balance maintained by a sense of irony better illustrated than in "The Witch of Coös." On the surface, the story told by the old witch is rather humorous. It has been described, surely with tongue in cheek,¹⁵ as "terribly funny." The scene of Toffile leaping out of bed, the descriptions of the skeleton as "a pile of dishes," "The chalk-pile," and even the picture of the

¹⁴Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 140. "With Frost . . . the sense of the comic in life goes hand in hand with the sense of the tragic."

¹⁵R. A. Brower, The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 166.

"tongue of fire" which "Flashed out and licked along his upper teeth./ Smoke rolled inside the sockets of his eyes." (p. 249), give the poem a humorous air. The fact that the mother is a witch and is introduced as one who "can make a common table rear / And kick with two legs like an army mule" sets the story outside reality and allows us to take it lightly. But beneath this comic exterior, there is very real tragedy involved in the drama the old witch narrates.

The tragedy of the breakdown of a family underlies the comedy. The relationship between the husband and wife has been destroyed by the wife's adultery. At a time when the child is very young and, presumably, the parents are not old, the breakdown of the marriage is manifested in the nocturnal habits of the couple:

The only fault my husband found with me --
 I went to sleep before I went to bed,
 Especially in winter when the bed
 Might just as well be ice and the clothes snow.
 ("The Witch of Coös," p. 248)

With this subtle piece of description, Frost indicates the rift which has developed between husband and wife. The cause of this rift, the adultery of the wife, is the origin of several other tragedies which the comic surface conceals.

One very real tragedy is the murder Toffile has committed for his wife.

Tell the truth for once.
 They were a man's his father killed for me.
 I mean a man he killed instead of me.
 (p. 251)

The ironic ambiguity of "for me" increases the depth of the tragedy of the murder. Toffile killed the lover when he intended to kill his wife. His

error has resulted in the grotesque situation where he is forced to live with a woman whom he intended to kill. It is not difficult to visualize why the wife prefers to fall asleep downstairs in a chair.

Guilt over her adultery and the act she has forced her husband to commit, has driven the woman mad. To cover her guilt so that she can face the world and herself, the witch relates the fantastic story of the walking skeleton which is so amusing to the reader complete with the saving lie: "We never could find out whose bones they were." (p. 251). But the "awful irony," the final tragedy of the story is that the woman has involved her innocent son and succeeded in passing her guilt and madness on to him.¹⁶ The son has become so involved that he attempts to perpetuate the lie even after his mother is willing to give it up. For the son, the distinction between reality and fantasy does not exist. Although it is blurred for the mother, she is able to finally end the lie and face reality. Like the Ancient Mariner, her guilt is relieved by telling the bizarre tale. The son, who did not witness the truth, is ironically condemned to bear the burden of his mother's guilt in his inability to distinguish between the real and the fantastic.

This tragic side of "The Witch of Coös" is built on subtle ironies. The entire tragedy is founded on the irony of "love lost in its own gaining."¹⁷ By seeking the love of another man, the witch destroys the man, the love of her husband, and the sanity of her son. It is the ironic discrepancy between the levels of the poem, between the comic story and

¹⁶ Isaacs, p. 136.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the tragic underlying truth which creates the balance the reader feels between comedy and tragedy. Nowhere in the poem are we overwhelmed by a feeling that life is entirely tragic. The comedy holds the tragedy in check. Likewise, we are constantly reminded by hints of tragedy that the poem is not purely comic. It is the ironic discrepancy between fact and illusion, the dramatic irony created by the constant confrontation of the facts of the tragedy and the witch's comic, fantastic version of the story which creates and maintains this balance. Frost's sense of irony enables him to reconcile the tragic and the comic in "The Witch of Coös" to illustrate how both can function simultaneously without either gaining the upper hand.

It is this ability to see both sides of a situation, in this case the comedy and tragedy, and comment on each without falling prey to either which has gained Frost his reputation as a "middle-of-the-road" poet.

In his brief moments of clarification, Frost often recognizes both the good and bad in life, without becoming overly optimistic or pessimistic.¹⁸

It is this neutrality gained by recognition, not ignorance, which leads Cox to call Frost a "swinger of birches": "He has been called romantic, classic, realist, naturalist, humanist, defeatist, complaisant, radical, conservative, reactionary. He swings."¹⁹ Frost explains his own position in "The Middleness of the Road":

The road at the top of the rise
Seems to come to an end
And take off into the skies
So at the distant bend

¹⁸Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 38.

¹⁹Cox, A Swinger of Birches, pp. 20-21.

It seems to go into a wood,
 The place of standing still
 As long the trees have stood.
 But say what Fancy will,

The mineral drops that explode
 To drive my ton of car
 Are limited to the road.
 They deal with near and far,

But have almost nothing to do
 With the absolute flight and rest
 The universal blue
 And local green suggest.

(p. 547)

His poems suggest universals such as "the absolute flight and rest," but he generally steers his car down the middle of the road where he can see both extremes from a safe position. He has "almost nothing to do" with these universals. The "almost" is important. Frost is interested in examining universals, but he must do so from the road, through particulars, without veering off into either direction. Frost has the unique ability to stand in the road, to look off into the sky, then into the dark woods, to examine both extremes without becoming too intimately involved with either.

From this "middle of the road" position, Frost can examine both sides of a particular problem, comment critically on the aspects he feels deserve criticism, and present the clarification he has achieved from looking squarely and objectively at the situation. The objectivity needed to achieve this clarification is obtained by Frost through his sense of irony. Using irony as a tool of criticism, he can also imply possible alternatives without offering solutions. He destroys false illusions and pretensions with ironic undercutting, exhibits discrepancies and contradictions by ironic contrasts, and, at the same time, establishes

his own ideals.

Frost asserts that irony is merely a means of self-defense. "Irony is simply a kind of guardedness . . . It keeps the reader from criticism."²⁰ Frost is intentionally creating an image of himself similar to that of Pope in his Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot. He is an unfortunate poet who is forced to use irony to keep his enemies at a distance. "Humour is the most engaging cowardice. With it myself I have been able to hold some of my enemy in play far out of gunshot."²¹ Assaulted by criticism and threatened by enemies, Frost claims that he must use irony to protect himself. In making these statements, Frost is being ironic. Irony does serve as a means of defence: here Frost is using it to defend his use of irony. He knows that irony is more than a defensive weapon, it is a weapon of attack which he has successfully employed in his own poetry.

The use of irony as criticism is accepted and followed by Frost, even if he does not admit it.²² Irony as attack is found to a large degree in "New Hampshire." One of the supposed advantages of using irony for the purpose of attack lies in the measure of defense the poet claims it achieves. Frost is protected from counterattack, at least by the

²⁰Robert Frost, The Selected Letters of Robert Frost, ed. with intro. and notes by Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 299.

²¹Ibid.

²²For the relationship of irony to criticism, see Worcester, p. 81: "Irony is a form of criticism." and Leonard Feinberg, Introduction to Satire (Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press, 1967), p. 170: "in most cases, implied criticism is present."

unperceptive. But defense is secondary. The poet wants his readers to follow the subtle hints and perceive the underlying attack. The real advantage of using irony for attack lies in the pleasure gained from the appreciation of subtle expression. Frost prefers irony to vindictiveness in his attempt to provide delight as well as wisdom from his attacks.

Frost, the "good Greek," constructed "New Hampshire" as an attack on extreme positions. He begins with a mock glorification of New Hampshire as a state free from the degradation of commerce. The opening portrait is of

a lady from the South who said
 (You won't believe she said it, but she said it):
 'None of my family ever worked, or had
 A thing to sell.'
 (p. 199)

This woman, proud of her family's freedom from work and commerce, introduces two extremes. The narrator quickly dismisses the subject of work with:

I don't suppose the work
 Much matters. You may work for all of me.
 I've seen the time I've had to work myself.
 (p. 199)

He casually dismisses the ideal that work is a good and essential part of the life of man. An ironic discrepancy is created between what the speaker is saying, and what the reader, educated to believe in the value of work, expects. Frost is demonstrating an extreme position and is ironically taking a neutral attitude toward it. Frost wants the reader to immediately halt and question the narrator's calculated neutrality. Without directly denouncing the position, in fact without taking any firm stand, Frost has caused the reader at least to question his own attitudes toward this extreme.

The narrator disregards the question of work because he feels that

commerce is a much more important problem. "The having anything to sell is what. Is the disgrace in man or state or nation." (p. 199). Frost confronts the problem of commercialism in modern society by illustrating both extremes in "New Hampshire." The series of portraits of people with things to sell are intended as illustrations of the extent of commercialism. Everything is offered for sale, from diamonds to apples, to the climate to ideas. Frost does not miss the opportunity to make an ironic attack on poets who sell their souls to political causes. The extension of commercialism to the ridiculous is presented in the old boyhood friend of the narrator who made his fortune "In dealing in 'old rags' in San Francisco." (p. 200). The narrator's final comment on the incident is "Oh, it was terrible as well could be./ We both of us turned over in our graves." (p. 200).

The opposing extreme is offered by the narrator who finds selling a "disgrace." He ironically comments: "It never could have happened in New Hampshire." (p. 200). He pictures his favourite state as a place where no one sells and hence, presumably, no one buys. Everyone is able to follow Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance carried to the extreme.

New Hampshire is

A state producing precious metals, stones,
And -- writing; none of these except perhaps
The precious literature in quantity
Or quality to worry the producer
About disposing of it.

(p. 204)

In this final summation of the assets of New Hampshire lies a hint of the truth behind the narrator's assertions. The state produces nothing of sufficient quantity or quality to sell. The preceding sections of the poem

begin to appear like rationalizations made in defense of a state which cannot compete in the modern market economy. Beneath the narrator's praise lies the ironic fact that New Hampshire is not a newly discovered Eden: it has as many faults and disadvantages as the other states.

Even the narrator who protests against the emphasis on selling in other states finds that he cannot support himself in New Hampshire.

Despite earlier protests, he closes by saying:

I choose to be a plain New Hampshire farmer
With an income in cash of say a thousand
(From say a publisher in New York City).
(p. 212)

Since he has one of the few salable items the state produces, he will be content to live in New Hampshire off the profits from one of the states he deplores. But, ironically, he cannot live in the state for which he professes his admiration.

It's restful to arrive at a decision,
And restful just to think about New Hampshire.
At present I am living in Vermont.
(p. 212)

Somewhere between the extremes of no commerce and too much commerce lies a mean which Frost approves. He never directly tells us how much is good. Perhaps he does not know himself and makes no pretense of knowing. He simply knows that extreme positions are not desirable. By presenting a narrator who favours an extreme and by undermining his arguments with subtle irony, Frost eliminates the extreme as a valid alternative.

Throughout "New Hampshire," Frost presents extreme views on various subjects and diminishes them with cleverly controlled irony. By implication, he occasionally expresses his own opinion. He does not provide solutions,

but he often shows how a situation appears to him or tells what he personally would do in a particular event. For example, he has a Warren farmer bring the topic of evolution into "New Hampshire."

'You hear those hound-dogs sing on Moosilauke?
Well they remind me of the hue and cry
We've heard against the Mid-Victorians
.
The matter with the Mid-Victorians
Seems to have been a man named John L. Darwin.'
(p. 208)

In "The Demiurge's Laugh," Frost criticize the worship of evolution he saw in the later nineteenth century.²³ In this passage from "New Hampshire" he attacks the opposite extreme, those who regard Darwin as a fool who caused a great furor with his absurd speculations on the history of man. It is not Frost or the narrator who sees Darwin as "The matter with the Mid-Victorians," but a Warren farmer introduced to show the level of intelligence / Among us." Before the farmer has a chance to launch into a tirade against Darwin, he is dismissed with "'Go 'long,' I said to him." The narrator quickly dismisses him in the same way he earlier dismissed the traveller from Arkansas when their opinions clashed. Frost is quickly rejecting this extreme.

Similarly, Frost presents and discounts two extreme reactions to nature. He rejects as "sheer Matthew Arnoldism" the position which attempts to draw a firm distinction between man and nature for the disparagement of nature:

He knew too well for any earthly use
The line where man leaves off and nature starts,

²³Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 195.

And never over-stepped it save in dreams.
 He stood on the safe side of the line talking;
 Which is sheer Matthew Arnoldism.
 (p. 211)

On the other hand, he does not look favourably on the worship of nature as a god. He compares "these improvised / Altars the woods are full of nowadays" with the worship in groves: "Even to say the groves were God's first temples / Comes too near to Ahaz' sin for safety." (p. 211). He concludes with the ironic comment "Nothing not built with hands of course is sacred." (p. 211). Somewhere between rejection and worship is the position where man recognizes the truth that nature is neither malevolent nor benevolent, but an indifferent force with which he must recognize his kinship and learn to live.

Not all of Frost's ironic attacks are directed at extremes. Not all of his attacks offer the consolation of an implied mean which, from Frost's point of view, is more desirable. Some of his attacks are vengeful, others are for the sheer joy of disparaging things that displease him. His assault on Amy Lowell²⁴ could be for no other reason than revenge against the early critic who so completely misunderstood him and wrote such comments on his poetry as: "Mr. Frost's work is not in the least objective . . . He has not been seduced into subtleties of expression": and who praised his "photographic realism" by saying: "No such bursts [of imagination] flame over Mr. Frost's work. He tells you what he sees exactly as he sees it."²⁵

²⁴Lynen, p. 66. Lynen identifies Amy Lowell as the other Massachusetts poet in "New Hampshire."

²⁵Lowell, in Greenberg and Hepburn, p. 51.

Frost ironically places her alongside Emerson as one of the bards of Massachusetts. Emerson's "'The God who made New Hampshire / Taunted the lofty land with little men'." is paralleled to Lowell's petty complaint: "'I go no more to summer in New Hampshire / I've given up my summer place in Dublin.'" In a humble confession he repudiates Lowell's criticism that his poetry was concerned only with the insanity and aberrations of New England country people.

I may as well confess myself the author
 Of several books against the world in general.
 To take them as against a special state
 Or even nation's to restrict my meaning.

 Samoa, Russia, Ireland, I complain of,
 No less than England, France, and Italy.
 Because I wrote my novels in New Hampshire
 Is no proof that I aimed them at New Hampshire.
 (p. 206)

Discussing Russian Literature, Frost directs his irony at both popular literary taste and Russian society. Russian novels enjoyed a period of high popularity in the early part of the present century. Frost attributes the success of these novels to the conditions under which they were written. If the public wants Russian novels written in America, then it will have to settle for poorer conditions.

If well it is with Russia, then feel free
 To say so or be stood against the wall
 And shot. It's Pollyanna now or death.
 This, then is the new freedom we hear tell of;
 And very sensible. No state can build
 A literature that shall at once be sound
 And sad on a foundation of well-being.
 (p. 208)

As well as using irony for criticism, Frost also employs it to construct his ideas and theories. More than simply eliminating extremes and suggesting a mean somewhere between, Frost often propounds well-formed,

distinct ideas. In "New Hampshire," he uses irony to present his ideas on realism in art.²⁶ In a conversation with "a New York alec / About the new school of the pseudo-phallic" (Frost cannot resist the opportunity to take an ironic thrust at the big-city dweller and ~~the~~ Freudian), the narrator is asked to make "an almost funny choice. / 'Choose you which you will be -- a prude, or puke, / Mewling and puking in the public arms.'" (p. 210). To choose "prude" would be to write poetry completely free of nature, lacking natural realism. The other choice, to "puke," represents super-Henry Miller realism, spewing anything and everything onto the public's lap. Frost states the choice and his reluctance to choose either:

I'd hate to be a runaway from nature.
 And neither would I choose to be a puke
 Who cares not what he does in company,
 And, when he can't do anything, falls back
 On words, and tries his worst to make words speak
 Louder than actions, and sometimes achieves it.
 (p. 211)

The narrator makes three choices and each one is, ironically, the choice of not choosing. "Me for the hills where I don't have to choose" (p. 210), in his first reaction. He next asks: "How about being a good Greek, for instance?" (p. 211) and finally asserts "I choose to be a plain New Hampshire Farmer." (p. 212).

Frost is presenting the situation he is faced with as a modern poet. How much realism does he feel is essential to good poetry? Once again he is presenting the two extremes between which a solution could lie, but he

²⁶Lynen, pp. 74-77.

is not leaving the answer up in the air. He is articulating the theory he practices to create his own poetry. He chooses a middle path, the path of the golden mean, with enough realism to keep his poetry natural without offending the taste of his readers. As he has stated elsewhere:

There are two types of realist -- the one who offers a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real one; and the one who is satisfied with the potato brushed clean. I'm inclined to be the second kind . . . For me, the thing that art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form.²⁷

²⁷Robert Frost, as quoted by Louis Untermeyer in Richard Thornton, ed., Recognition of Robert Frost (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1937), p. 176).

CHAPTER III

NATURAL IRONY

"I had a lover's quarrel with the world."
("The Lesson For Today," p. 476)

After examining some of the functions irony is made to perform, we are faced with the important question of how this irony is developed. What are the sources of Frost's irony, what kinds of irony does he work with, and how does he manipulate the sources at his disposal to create the desired results? These are some of the basic questions which arise from, and naturally follow the discussion of why Frost employs irony.

The types of irony we find in Frost's works can be divided initially into two broad groups, distinguished by their sources. The two types are "natural" and "artificial" irony. Natural irony, as the name suggests, encompasses the observed ironies of life. In our day to day routine in the world, we witness many events which we would call ironic. If we watched the fire hall burn to the ground, we would probably report the situation as ironic. We might see an element of irony if a braggart doctor was humbled by a semi-literate transient. Or we might label ironic the arrest, imprisonment and subsequent execution of a person later proven innocent. Ironic situations or characters, or the ironic juxtaposition of disparate elements which may be observed every day in the world around us are all aspects which combine to define natural irony. In short, natural irony is native to life; it is observed as part of our daily experience. If we were to make notes of the ironies

we witness from day to day, unaltered by exaggeration or other flights of the imagination, we would be recording natural irony.

Artificial irony, on the other hand, is the irony of art, not life. It is not observed and recorded, but devised by an artist especially to enhance his art. It could be argued that the artist creates everything which finds its way into his art and, by extension, that all irony is artificial. It must be conceded that the artist does create all the irony in his works, that he could hypothetically lock himself in a windowless room and write about ironic situations. The artist can create scenes of natural irony, but those pictures will have to be reproductions. The artist must first observe or have observed the situation or a similar one at some time to create natural irony. The distinction between natural and artificial irony lies in the fact that artificial irony is not observed in life: it is entirely devised with an audience in mind. The audience forms an important part of the distinction. Natural irony does not require an audience: it will still exist for the participants independent of any viewers. Artificial irony presupposes an audience which will follow the hints laid down by the artist. Artificial irony is manifested in exaggeration, deliberate word play, dramatic foreshadowing and other devices aimed directly at the viewer. A narrator is often an important factor in the development of artificial irony. By manipulating the tone of the narrator, the poet can easily understate or overstate a description or the opinions of the characters. Irony can be created through the presentation of a point of view which is heavily weighted in one direction or another. The narrator provides a commentary which is foreign to our daily experiences.

Artificial irony can best be appreciated by illustration. The ironies of drama are, for the most part, artificial. That is not to suggest that drama cannot present a situation which we could define as natural irony. Many of Shakespeare's plays are based on man's ironic inability to distinguish between appearance and reality. But the irony utilized in the construction of drama is, to a great extent, artificial. The source of this irony is generally the discrepancy between what the audience and actors know. For example, Oedipus Rex is filled with dramatic ironies. The audience knows that Oedipus has killed his father and married his mother: the irony lies in the discrepancy between the knowledge of the audience and the ignorance of the characters. In A Midsummer Night's Dream, Bottom continually refers to himself as an ass after he has been transformed by Puck. The audience sees that he really has an ass's head, but Bottom is ignorant of his "translation." This irony is typically artificial, devised by the poet to involve the audience. Artificial irony, then, may be defined as the irony of art, devised deliberately by the artist and directed at an audience.

The close relationship between natural and artificial irony has probably now become evident, and should become more so as the examination of Frost's use of these two types progresses. Artificial irony is often developed as an extension of natural irony. By beginning with an example of natural irony and exaggerating or distorting certain aspects, the poet can create artificial irony. The two are often used together, the one to enhance the other, to create a highly ironic work.

The distinction between natural and artificial irony provides an important basis from which to examine Frost's irony. Frost uses both types

at will, but the emphasis on natural irony in his poetry is particularly heavy and deserves special attention. Much of Frost's poetry is based on the poet's keen observation of ironic situations and characters. Frost is a poet who looks very carefully at man and nature for the materials from which to construct his verse. His skill at accurate and vivid description has often been noticed and discussed. Amy Lowell began by recognizing Frost's talent for natural observation and, characteristically, she described it as "photographic realism." She wrote: "He gives out what has been put in, unchanged by any personal mental process."¹ Critics have since recognized the presence of personal imagination, even in Frost's most descriptive scenes. Untermeyer opposes Lowell with his statement: "Frost is never a photographic realist."² Frost's realism, it is now accepted, is of the "clean potato" variety; his natural observation is brushed clean by his imagination before it is presented to the public. While the argument has raged over the extent of Frost's realism, no one has denied the poet's skill at recording what he has observed. Natural observation, it must be admitted, provides a basis for the majority of his works.

Irony, says Frye, "begins in realism and dispassionate observation."³ Frost's irony often begins in the observation of real events which are ironic in themselves. Frost, with his acute perception of life, observes

¹Lowell, in Greenberg and Hepburn, p. 51.

²Untermeyer, in Thornton, p. 176.

³Frye, p. 42.

situations and perceives the irony in them. The irony may come from the event itself, the characters, human weaknesses and idiosyncrasies or from the conflict of aberrant points of view.⁴ When the poet transcribes these scenes as he has witnessed them, or when he creates a parallel situation inspired by his observation, he is recording natural irony. This natural irony is the foundation on which Frost builds much of his poetry.

"The Mountain" is based on the natural irony that the man who lives closest to the truth is seldom the one to discover it. The mountain is devised as a symbol of the height to which man must aspire if he wants the answers to his most persistent questions about the nature of life. On the top of the mountain, there is a spring:

But there's the spring,
Right on the summit, almost like a fountain.
That ought to be worth seeing.
(p. 58)

This fountain-like spring represents the source of knowledge, if not of all knowledge, at least of enough to satisfy queries about life in this world. The stranger ironically states: "There ought to be a view around the world / From such a mountain." (p. 58). The mountain is purposely paradoxical. It is at once forbidding and welcoming. It looks like a barrier, "like a wall," yet at the same time it provides protection: "I was sheltered from a wind." (p. 56). The paradoxical features of the mountain represent the combination of difficulty and satisfaction involved in the quest to attain the desired goal. The mountain holds the town "as in a shadow," forbidding all but the most daring from adventuring to its summit.

⁴Irwin, pp. 303-304.

The farmer is in the ironic situation of a man who has lived near the foot of the mountain "Ever since Hor / Was no bigger than a -'" (p. 60), but who has never climbed to verify the rumours he has heard about what lies on the top. He is the man in a position to discover the truth for himself by expending the effort in aspiration, but who remains on the ground and accepts on faith what others have recounted: "'I guess there's no doubt / About its being there. I never saw it." (p. 58). The farmer has not climbed the mountain, simply because he does not know how.

It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain
 You've worked around the foot of all your life.
 What would I do? Go in my overalls,
 With a big stick, the same as when the cows
 Haven't come down to the bars at milking time?
 Or with a shotgun for a stray black bear?
 'Twouldn't seem real to climb for climbing it.
 (p. 59)

The farmer is too accustomed to working around the foot of the mountain to suddenly lay down his farm tools and climb it. He would like to climb the mountain and see the source for himself, as the tone of his rationalizations indicated but to do so, he would have to abandon the world in which he has grown old and secure. To climb to the source, he would have to put aside his everyday occupations and life. He would not feel right climbing the mountain in his overalls with his stick or his gun, but to climb any other way, he would have to leave what he knows as "real." The farmer represents the ironic situation of a person who has been raised within walking distance of the truth, who has accepted the premises of others on faith and promised himself that some day, when he gets the time and courage, he will seek the source himself, but who finally wakes up to realize that he is too fixed in his ways, too dependent on the forms of his everyday life to ever launch himself forth to discover the realm waiting virtually at his own

doorstep.

Frost's quick eye for the smallest ironic incident is illustrated by the brief reference to a man who climbed the mountain, but failed to find the spring.

'One time I asked a fellow climbing it
To look and tell me later how it was.'

'What did he say?'

'He said there was a lake
Somewhere in Ireland on a mountain top.'

'But a lake's different. What about the spring?'

'He never got up high enough to see.'
(pp. 58-59)

Frost has witnessed how, rather than admit defeat, man will either construct a fantastic story, or change the subject, or both. Rather than admit that he has not climbed high enough, the man relates a parallel tale about an Irish mountain with a lake on its summit. The farmer telling this anecdote is not attempting to mock the climber who told the tale to him. He is offering the same explanation to the stranger in an attempt to change the subject and save himself from further embarrassment. Man's ironic inability to admit failure is here noted by Frost, without either approval or censure: he is merely recording a natural irony.

Frost's appreciation of the irony which can arise from the interaction of characters is perhaps best illustrated in "Snow." The drama begins when Meserve, the preacher of the "Little Racker Sect," is forced by a snow storm to stop for rest at the home of Fred and Helen Cole. The natural irony we are presented is associated with Helen's reactions to Meserve. Disgusted with the man but sympathetic to any creature caught

out on such a night, Helen vacillates between indignation and pity. She wishes that he had never stopped but begs him to stay. Her ironic shifts of attitude are quite natural for a person in her situation. Frost has captured the characteristics of a woman caught between pity and scorn, complete with the accompanying ironic shifts of mood. Helen's mixed emotions are complicated by Fred's constant teasing.⁵ As a man, he knows that Meserve will not let a storm get the better of him, that he will not be subdued by the entreaties of a woman. For his own enjoyment, Fred makes comments which he knows his wife will take seriously and which will only serve to intensify her dilemma. When Meserve returns from the barn, Fred remarks: "'I shouldn't want to hurry you, Meserve, / But if you're going -- say you'll stay, you know.'" (p. 186). In one brief sentence, Fred manages to evoke conflicting emotions in Helen; her fear of Meserve's leaving as well as her misgivings about his staying. Later he mocks his wife's imagination as she listens to the empty room through the telephone:

You can't hear whether she has left the door
Wide open and the wind's blown out the lamp
And the fire's died and the room's dark and cold?
(p. 192)

One of the ironies of the situation is that Helen does not see through her husband's ironic goading. Fred knows his wife well enough to gently tease her, but when her emotions are aroused, Helen is not able to realize just exactly what her husband is doing. The interaction on the three characters, with Meserve acting as a catalyst for the drama enacted between Fred and Helen, provides one of the most subtle and amusing examples of natural irony in Frost's poetry.

⁵Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 143.

"A Hundred Collars" demonstrates the delicate balance between comedy and tragedy so characteristic of Frost. It also reveals an important fact about Frost's use of natural irony. On one level, the poem is comic, and on another, tragic. Both levels are ironic; in fact, both are examples of natural irony. Frost shows that his observation of ironic situations is not restricted to the comic. He sees the tragic ironies of life as well.

The comic irony unfolds as we watch Magoon, the "great man," the "great scholar" humbled by fear before the half-drunken bill collector Lafe. The doctor pictures himself as a democrat, "If not at heart, at least on principle" (p. 61), before whom the country dwellers quake with fear. He has purposely moved from the country to the city in an attempt to elevate himself above the wild rustics. But, being a democrat, he tolerates all men and does not really want to be feared. We can almost see Magoon gloating over the fear he thinks he has inspired in others as he casually talks to them from behind his printed letters. Nothing could make us happier than to see the doctor brought down to earth, humbled by his own exaggerated fears of a man who is simply attempting to communicate with him. The doctor recoils at every friendly advance Lafe makes: he will not share the drink of communion, nor will he permit Lafe to help him remove his shoes. The good, proud doctor cowers in the corner of the bed until the true democrat leaves the room. Then, still terrified and far from secure, "The Doctor slid a little down the pillow." (p. 68).

Beneath the comic exterior, there is a hint of tragedy. Doctor Magoon suffers as a result of his own self-isolation. He has cut himself off from mankind to the extent that he thinks when he sees Lafe: "A man? A brute. Naked above the waist, / He sat there creased and shining

in the light." (p. 63). He reacts like Gulliver at the conclusion of Gulliver's Travels. Magoon has deliberately isolated himself from the lower segment of mankind by building illusions of his own worth. His attempts to put himself into a higher realm have resulted in his tragic alienation. He is unable to recognize signs of fellowship when he sees them. Lave offers him the bottle for lack of a cup, and we can almost feel the shivers of horror running through Magoon's body as he rejects this barbaric offer of friendship.

Magoon's situation contains an element of tragedy, and it is ironic, but the attitude of the poet toward him prevents the situation from being labelled tragic irony. Frost is clearly mocking the doctor's misdirected aspirations. As well as being a creature with his tragic side, Magoon is a figure at whom we are intended to laugh. The poet's derision of his character removes the situation from the realm of tragic irony. In tragic irony, the character is presented as a human being caught by circumstances in a fate from which he cannot extricate himself. He is neither a hero, nor a fool, but an ordinary man involved in a predicament beyond his control. In tragic irony, "there is no attempt to make fun of the character, but only to bring out clearly the 'all too human,' as distinct from the heroic, aspects of the tragedy."⁶ Tragic irony is a natural irony. It issues from the poet's observation of the "all too human" character caught in a tragic dilemma.

"A Servant to Servants" and "Home Burial" illustrate the tragic irony which Frost frequently develops. "Tragic irony . . . [is] simply

⁶Frye, p. 237.

The woman has already spent some time in the State Asylum, and she recognizes her present symptoms, her inability to feel, as an indication that she is going mad again. She is trapped by circumstances which she knows she cannot control. Tragically out of phase with life, unable to communicate her problems and fears to her husband or the hired man, she hesitantly seeks the sympathetic ear of the stranger. The tragic irony lies in the woman's knowledge of her condition, that she is slowly returning to insanity, together with the facts that she is not responsible for her fate, nor can she prevent it. She says to the stranger:

The worst that you can do
Is set me back a little more behind.
I sha'n't catch up in this world, anyway.
(p. 87)

The best she can do is accept what life has in store for her.

The woman's insanity seems to be caused by a combination of heredity and environment. Insanity is a part of her family heritage.

I have my fancies: it runs in the family.
My father's brother wasn't right. They kept him
Locked up for years back there at the old farm.
(p. 84)

There is also a suggestion that her madness is due to proximity to the scene of the original insanity coupled with the repetition of the grotesque tale until it has become part of her life. The woman spent her girlhood living in the old farm house where her uncle was kept caged like a wild animal. For entertainment, her parents amused her by repeating, in horrifying detail, the story of her uncle's insanity. The appeal the story held for her is evident from some of the vivid descriptions she is able to recount. She may not actually have come to identify herself

with her mad uncle,⁸ but she at least did picture herself in the cage.

It got so I would say -- you know, half fooling --
 'It's time I took my turn upstairs in jail' --
 Just as you will till it becomes a habit.
 (p. 86)

The tragic irony of "A Servant To Servants" issues from the isolation of the woman. Returning home from the asylum, the woman faces the prospect of complete recovery, if Len understands her situation and needs. But the irony of the situation is that the man and wife cannot communicate. Len does not understand what is necessary for his wife to achieve complete recovery. The woman cannot communicate her fears and desires. She is isolated from the world and her husband by a barrier of misunderstanding.

Len's failure to understand his wife is far from calculated: he does not loathe her infirmity, nor is he spitefully attempting to shun her. "It's not that Len don't want the best for me." (p. 83). Len merely tends to oversimplify the problem.

He looks on the bright side of everything,
 Including me. He thinks I'll be all right
 With doctoring. But it's not medicine --
 Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.
 He says the best way out is always through.
 And I agree to that, or in so far
 As that I can see no way out but through --
 (p. 83)

Len's solution to all problems is to face them squarely and not submit until they have vanished. He is too solidly entrenched in everyday life, in the routine of making a living, to realize that all problems are not rational, that his solutions are not valid for everyone.

The final irony of the woman's isolation lies in the fact that

⁸Donald Jones, "Kindred Entanglements in Frost's 'A Servant To Servants,'" Papers on Language and Literature, II (1966), 150-161.

she knows a solution to her problem, but cannot communicate it to Len.

And there's more to it than just window-views
 And living by a lake. I'm past such help --
 Unless Len took the notion, which he won't
 And I won't ask him -- it's not sure enough.
 (p. 86)

There is a possible solution to her dilemma, but it is more drastic than simply changing the scenery. From her assertion that "work ain't all" (p. 84) and other statements, we may surmise that the solution would involve Len giving up his business activities for a more quiet and restful occupation. She seems to envy the life of the stranger who roams the country at will in pursuit of ferns. But this may not be the answer. She could not ask Len to make the sacrifice anyway: and he would never think of it himself. "I s'pose I've got to go the road I'm going: / Other folks have to, and why shouldn't I?"

The tragedy of the unwarranted isolation of "all too human" characters is also recorded in "Home Burial." Like Len and his wife, Amy and her husband are neither super-human nor sub-human, they are neither heroes nor fools and their actions are not condemned or disparaged by the poet. They are simply a rural husband and wife, tragically alienated from each other by their inability to reconcile their disparate reactions to the death of their first child. Frost is presenting the tragic irony arising from the breakdown of understanding. He is not seeking a solution to the problem, but is simply dramatizing the conflict between husband and wife as they attempt to find a suitable means of adjusting to their situation.⁹

⁹John R. Doyle, The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1962), p. 38.

The husband, like Len, is a practical person who realizes that all life does not stop when one person dies. He is able to accept death as a fact which man cannot alter or reverse. In the face of death, he can maintain his decorum and concern for farm matters. Amy is shocked to hear him saying at the burial of his only son: "'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.'" (p. 72). But for the husband, there are consolations in life which help to compensate for the death of a loved one. He thinks that love in life should help to overcome grief for the dead.

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.
(p. 71)

Amy cannot understand this attitude. She interprets his ability to accept life's reversals as indifference. She simply does not understand how anyone can accept grief for what it is and continue with their everyday concerns. In her frustration, she rails at the world: "But the world's evil. I won't have grief so / If I can change it. Oh, I won't. I won't!" (p. 72). But her rage is not really against the world which permits the death of children and the grief of young parents. The real object of her anger is her husband. By failing to understand his attitudes and actions, she has ironically transferred her grief from the death of her child to her husband's apparent insensitivity.¹⁰

The failure of understanding in "Home Burial" is not one-sided. Amy does not understand her husband's attitudes, but he does not comprehend

¹⁰Isaacs, p. 143.

her grief. To some extent, he is the "blind creature" she claims him to be. It seems to have taken him a long time to even realize that the cause of his wife's continued grief might be associated with the little family graveyard. He admits that he cannot understand why she should take the loss of her child so inconsolably, or why he should not be allowed to speak of "his own child that's dead." What he fails to realize is that he might be at least a partial cause of his wife's unhappy condition. He does not for a moment consider that his immediate acceptance of the child's death and apparent lack of concern could be the factor behind Amy's unabating grief.

The mutual misunderstanding is the source of the rift which has developed between the couple. She accuses him of sneering and he retaliates with the threat of physical violence. Each misjudges the other's intentions and endeavours to gain self-protection through aggression. As the poem progresses, the rift becomes wider, the chances of eventual reconciliation slimmer.

Frost suggests that the breach between Amy and her husband may be an illustration of the natural inability of men and woman to understand each other. Says the husband: "A man must partly give up being a man / With women-folk." (p. 70). In "Home Burial," "A Servant to Servant," "The Housekeeper," "The Death of the Hired Man" and other poems, Frost consistently displays the difference between the male and female. The male generally represents practical reason while the female embodies emotion. John, in "The Housekeeper," sees no reason to legalize his relationship with Estelle as long as life is running smoothly. But Estelle does not follow John's logic. One day she runs away, forsaking

the security of their long relationship to join a man who will marry her. Warren's arguments in "The Death of the Hired Man" are largely rational. He will not have Silas back because the man is a useless parasite, returning only when he is out of work and money. It takes Mary's sympathetic response to the return of the hired man, and her carefully controlled emotion-filled argument to persuade Warren that Silas has come "home" to die. Frost sees a natural distinction between the way men and women react to a given situation. Men react according to practical reason, while women tend to follow their emotions.

This difference of approach by each sex can be a barrier between the communication of man and women. In "The Death of the Hired Man," the two reactions are reconciled by the understanding of Mary. The characters in "The Housekeeper," "A Servant To Servants" and "Home Burial" are not so lucky. The basic understanding needed to reconcile the sexes is lacking in these poems: in fact, the lack of understanding drives the protagonists farther apart. Frost recognizes the possibility of tragic irony inherent in the man-woman relationship. As Amy's husband appears to be approaching an appreciation of their situation, when he has succeeded in calming his wife somewhat, he demonstrates that his understanding is apparent, not actual. Looking out the door past his wife, he reinforces his apparent indifference by commenting on the traveller in the road.

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!

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.
I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will! --
(pp. 72-73)

The conclusion gives no hint that reconciliation would ever be possible for this couple. Frost knows that some people, like Mary and Warren, have the ability to reconcile their difference. He also knows that there are others who do not possess the necessary secret. He watches and records the tragic irony of these couples doomed to alienation from each other by their failure of understanding.

CHAPTER IV
ARTIFICIAL IRONY

"But all the fun's in how you say a thing."
("The Mountain," p. 59)

Natural irony serves as the foundation on which Frost erects much of his poetry. But, in most cases, it is only a foundation, composing a portion of the irony in the poem. Beginning with events which are ironic in themselves, the poet exaggerates certain aspects, adds artificial ironies, and produces a poem in several ironic dimensions. The artificial irony is closely related to natural irony. The contiguity of the two types is demonstrated in an examination of Frost's use of verbal irony.

In verbal irony, or the irony of speech, "the implication of what is said is in painfully comic contrast to its literal meaning."¹ Except for the phrase "painfully comic," Thompson's statement provides a valid definition of verbal irony. Depending on the situation, the discrepancy between what is said and what is implied may be quite painful, or it may be purely comic, or it may be painfully comic. Verbal irony is the irony of speech produced whenever there is a variance between what is said and what is implied.²

Verbal irony may be a natural irony. If a character intentionally

¹Alan R. Thompson, The Dry Mock: A Study of Irony in Drama (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1948), p. 5.

²See also M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957), p. 44.

directs an ironic comment at another character, in full knowledge that the comment is ironic, the incident would fall within the realm of natural irony. As in life, a character in a poem may purposely present a statement with a double meaning. He may do so to amuse or confuse his fellow interlocutor, or he may direct the statement mockingly, in full knowledge that the implications will not be comprehended. Verbal irony becomes artificial when the poet employs it for the enlightenment or amusement of the reader alone. When neither the person making the remark nor the listener comprehend the significance, when only the audience is intended to appreciate the double meaning, the irony is artificial. When the verbal irony is perpetrated by the narrator, it falls into the same category as any other irony directed solely at the viewer: it is artificial.

In "Snow," Helen directs an ironic pun at Fred.

'He may be small,
He may be good, but one thing's sure, he's tough.'

'And strong of stale tobacco.'
(p. 182)

She counters his assertion that Meserve is, above all else, tough, with the rejoinder that his strength lies in his odour. This situation is an example of the natural irony Frost observes in verbal interchanges. But Frost is also a master of artificial verbal irony. He creates his dialogues and narratives with a reader in mind, and does not miss an opportunity to enhance his conversations by the inclusion of artificial irony at appropriate times.

One type of verbal irony is the "irony of inversion," the irony of saying one thing and meaning the opposite.³ Frost uses irony of inversion in "New Hampshire" as a method of criticism. He tells of the

³Worcester, p. 80.

ideals of New Hampshire's one real reformer:

Did you but know of him, New Hampshire has
 One real reformer who would change the world
 So it would be accepted by two classes,
 Artists the minute they set up as artists,
 Before, that is, they are themselves accepted,
 And boys the minute they get out of college.
 I can't help thinking those are tests to go by.
 (p. 202)

The final comment is an example of the irony of inversion. The reformer would change the world so that it would be acceptable to the young, inexperienced idealists. The young artists and the recent graduates are notably the angry young men, who enter the world for the first time equipped with a set of extravagant ideas about how the life should be. Experience in how the world actually does run, generally modifies the high ideals to fit reality. The poet suggests that he would change reality to satisfy the young idealists. But Frost demonstrates in the same poem his rejection of extremes, one of which is world-changing idealism. If one were to attempt to change the world at all, Frost would not suggest following the examples of inexperienced idealism.

To get the full effect of the ironic inversion, we must remember that the reformer is one of New Hampshire's "samples," one of the assets of the state. Frost is directing his irony not only at the reformer, but at the state also for having no better example to offer. Part of Frost's mock praise of New Hampshire is involved in the development of the state as a microcosm, complete with a sample of everything, but with nothing of sufficient value to make it anything more than "restful." The ideas of this one reformer are a reflection of New Hampshire and the poet's

comments on the reformer are also intended as thrusts at the state.

Later in "New Hampshire," Frost comments on Russia: "This, then, if the new freedom we hear tell of; / And very sensible." (p. 208). As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Frost thinks that the lack of freedom in Russia is anything but "very sensible;" he thinks that it is deplorable for a government to restrict the individual's freedom. But in context, Frost makes this ironic inversion seem not only plausible, but desirable. He argues that life goes too well in America, and good literature cannot be written on a foundation of well-being. In Russia where freedom is restricted, the writers have succeeded in creating exceptional novels. The American public has been captured by the Russian novel and wishes that its equivalent would be written in America, but, Frost laments:

How are we to write
The Russian novel in America
As long as life goes so unterribly?
(p. 207)

If the Russian novel is to be written in America, the people who desire it most will have to be content to alter the conditions in their homeland to make it more like Russia. By extension of the argument to the absurd, Frost concludes that the restrictions placed on the Russian people have fostered the conditions under which the novel could be produced, and hence are "very sensible." The irony of saying one thing and meaning the opposite is here directed at two objects. Frost is ironically commenting on the undesirable conditions imposed upon the people in Russia: he is ironically attacking a system of government and society. At the same time, the poet is using his irony as a weapon to attack the people of America who are never satisfied. Life is good in America, the people are free, but

they are not satisfied with the literature their country produces. They expect American novelists and poets to be Dostoievskis. Frost is telling them that they can have one thing or the other: they can have freedom and the American novel, or communism and the Russian novel.

Verbal irony takes more forms than simply the irony of inversion. By manipulating words, Frost creates ironic puns, parodies, paradoxes and other verbal equivocations in which the implied meaning contrasts the literal, but is not opposite to it. The way in which artificial irony is superimposed on a foundation of natural irony is illustrated by the way Frost employs ironic names. To the natural irony of the interaction of characters in "Snow," Frost adds ironic names to further enhance our enjoyment of the situation. The "bombastic and conceited" preacher is named Meserve.⁴ If we divide his name after the first two letters, we find that it is composed of the two words "me" and "serve." An ironic contrast exists between the possible interpretation of this unusual name. Should the combination of the two words be interpreted as meaning "I serve," or "serve me?" Both possibilities are conceivable from the actions of the character in the poem. In fact, the poem concludes with a discussion of just that problem: should Meserve's untimely visit be considered as an imposition or a service?

'The whole to-do seems to have been for nothing.
 What spoiled our night was to him just his fun.
 What did he come in for? To talk and visit?
 Thought he'd just call to tell us it was snowing.
 If he thinks he is going to make our house
 A halfway coffee house 'twixt town and nowhere --'

⁴Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 116.

'I thought you'd feel you'd been too much concerned.'

'You think you haven't been concerned yourself.'

'If you mean he was inconsiderate
To rout us out to think for him at midnight
And then take our advice no more than nothing,
Why, I agree with you. But let's forgive him.
We've had a share in one night of his life.
What'll you bet he ever calls again?'

(pp. 193-194)

Helen would agree that his name should be interpreted as "serve me." She thinks that he has awakened them out of sheer selfishness, that he has imposed himself on them because he feels that he ought to be served. Fred is not so sure. He recognizes the possibility that Meserve may have done them a favour. By dropping in out of the stormy night, Meserve has permitted them the opportunity to share in the life of another human being. A rare occurrence has taken place and Fred recognizes it. It is not often that man has the chance to become so completely involved in the life of a fellow creature, and Meserve has offered this opportunity to the Coles. Despite the inconvenience, Fred feels that Meserve has performed a rare service for them, one which he does not expect to see repeated.

Meserve's hosts also have ironic names. With Coles we associate coals, and the warm glow of the hearth. Comfort and hospitality are offered the preacher, but notwithstanding ambivalent emotions from Helen. Fred is more concerned with teasing his wife than with presenting Meserve with the comforts of home. Fred's actions may be prompted by his knowledge that Meserve will not stay anyway, but the warm coals in the hearts of the Coles do not seem to be glowing as brightly as their name would suggest.

"The Generations of Men" introduces us to a family named Stark who find their origin "In an old cellar hole in a by-road," in "A rock-

strewn town where farming has fallen off, / And sprout-lands flourish where the ax has gone." (p. 94). The family originates in a stark environment. Frost has created a name which is ironically appropriate to a family with such an origin. The central character of "The Self-Seeker" is called "The Broken One" because his feet have been mutilated in an accident at a mill. The implications of the name are not restricted to the injury. The Broken One will not allow his will to be broken. Despite the entreaties of Will and the bickerings with the insurance representative, he firmly maintains his original posture: he will accept five hundred dollars to pay for the cost of medical assistance, but will take no remuneration for his lost flowers.⁵ The Broken One will not be broken. The husband of the witch in "The Witch of Coös" has an ironically ambiguous name. Toffile may be a French Canadian corruption of Théophile, which means "Beloved of God," or it may be meant to signify "Teufel-devil."⁶ The contrasting implications to the name are even more meaningful when viewed in the light of the witch's story of infidelity, murder and insanity.

Frost's intentional use of word play to create irony is noticeable not only in the names of his characters, but throughout his poetry. In "The Self-Seeker," both the Broken One and Will pun on the words soul and sole. Says the Broken One: "I'm going to sell my soul, or, rather, feet." (p. 117). He implies that in selling the soles of his feet, he is selling

⁵Ibid., p. 109.

⁶Brower, p. 169.

his soul. To show the seriousness of the matter, Will counters with:

"'With you the feet have nearly been the soul." (p. 117). The implications beneath the comic word play are indeed serious.

The implications of some statements made by the woman in "A Servant to Servants" are tragically ironic. Discussing her husband's philosophy, she agrees that he is probably right: "in so far / As that I can see no way out but through --" (p. 83). The implications of "out" and "through" are tragically ironic.⁷ "Out" means out of her present situation, free from the bondage of her insanity, but it also carries the hint of meaning out of society and back to the asylum, or out of life completely. The word "through" can mean across, as in moving through her dilemma to stability, or it can signify finished, the end of the race. This one simple statement by the woman sums up her alternatives in ironic, double-meaning words. She may find the way out of her present situation by working through it, or she may simply be finished, driven out of society or life by her inability to cope with the dilemma. The woman approaches the conclusion of her monologue with the words: "Bless you, of course, you're keeping me from work, / But the thing of it is, I need to be kept." (p. 87). Frost is here punning on the several meanings of the word "kept."⁸ In the context of the sentence, it merely means to be kept from work, a solution the woman has previously proposed for her problem. On another level, "kept" means to be taken care of. The woman definitely does need to be taken care of,

⁷Doyle, p. 119.

⁸Jones, p. 160.

but, as she herself recognizes, Len will not think of it, and she cannot tell him. A third solution suggested by the implications of "kept" involves the imprisonment of the woman, either in the cage or the asylum. This final meaning of "kept" seems to be tragically approaching fulfillment. By using a single word and implying several connotations for it, Frost is able to suggest the three possible solutions to the woman's problem.

The double meaning of "The Code" is suggested by the title. A code is a system of communication as well as an ethical standard.⁹ The two meanings of the word are used to construct the poem. The codes of communication and values are inseparable. When the code of values is not understood, communication breaks down. When communication is faulty, further breaches of the value code are likely to occur. According to the rural New England code of ethics, "The hand that knows his business won't be told / To do work better or faster -- those two things." (p. 91). Anyone familiar with the code of communication will also know the code of values, and will not intentionally violate it. A violation of the code of communication is also a breach of the code of values, and results in retribution. The farmer Saunders breaks the code with his failure to communicate with the worker. This apparently insignificant breach of etiquette is sufficient to warrant the worker's attempt to murder the farmer. Ironically, the code both unites and separates men. The double meaning of the code underlies the poem and causes the ironic discrepancies between the system of values of the reader and the narrator.

Frost's word play occasionally finds expression in open parody.

⁹Lynen, p. 101.

Frost parodies Shakespeare in "New Hampshire" when he characterizes the ultra-realists as "Mewling and puking in the public arms." (p. 210). He parodies the opening scene of Macbeth in the conclusion of "The Generation of Men":

'Where shall we meet again?'

'Nowhere but here
Once more before we meet elsewhere.'

'In rain?'

'It ought to be in rain. Sometime in rain.
In rain tomorrow, shall we, if it rains?
But if we must, in sunshine.' So she went.
(p. 102)

It is comically ironic that the young couple should christen their newly-discovered love by arranging their next meeting with the words of the witches who are preparing to meet Macbeth. Throughout their first meeting by the old cellar hole, the young Starks have been attempting to conjure up visions from the past. The man hears the voice of his "Granny" speaking from the cellar hole, and receives an oracular message from the brook. After conjuring voices throughout the poem, it is ironic to see the couple take on the form of the conjurors from Macbeth. There is a final ironic discrepancy between the parody and the original. The witches quote their words as they set about to assist in the demise of Macbeth. The young Starks parody the witches as they make arrangements to meet again to solidify their relationship and begin to re-establish life from the old cellar hole.

One of Frost's favourite techniques of verbal irony is understatement.

Understatement has been defined as "exaggeration in reverse":¹⁰ it is the irony derived from "deliberately representing something as much less than it really is."¹¹ Reporting the presence of the spring on top of the mountain, the old farmer in "The Mountain" says: "That ought to be worth seeing." (p. 58). The spring is the symbol of the source of knowledge which can be attained by climbing the mountain. The source of knowledge would be more than simply "worth seeing." The discovery could be the most important one a man will ever make in his life. The understatement tends to make the value of the goal appear greater. From hints Frost has placed earlier in the poem, we expect that the spring is more than merely a spring; we are led to surmise that it is the source of some kind of knowledge. When the old farmer makes the simple statement that the spring ought to be worth seeing, we recognize a contrast between his words and our expectation of the value of the spring. The immediate effect of the recognition of the understatement is that the goal increases in value in our eyes: the ironic difference between statement and fact increases our awareness of the fact and makes it appear of even greater proportion than before.

"I do think, though, you overdo it a little." (p. 71), says the husband in "Home Burial." By understating his wife's exaggerated grief, the husband emphasizes the extent of her problem. In overdoing it "a little," she has arrived at the stage where she will not permit her husband to so much as speak of their dead child. Her grief has truly risen out of

¹⁰Feinberg, p. 119.

¹¹Abrams, p. 45.

proportion. Similarly, the final lines of "Place for a Third" understate and emphasize the dilemma of Laban.

Laban was forced to fall back on his plan
To buy Eliza a plot to lie alone in:
Which gives him for himself a choice of lots
When his time comes to die and settle down.
(p. 246)

Frost makes the awkward situation appear deceptively simple: in reality, we know it will be extremely difficult.

The understatement in "Paul's Wife" also comes at the conclusion of the poem and helps to underline the hidden reality.

Murphy's idea was that a man like Paul
Wouldn't be spoken to about a wife
In any way the world knows how to speak.
(p. 239)

Paul will not be spoken to about a wife in any way the world knows how, because the world does not know how to speak. Murphy understates the situation because, like the rest of the world, he does not recognize Paul's wife. In this poem, Frost is talking about the process of poetic creation.¹² Paul is the poet who creates beauty out of the material of a pine log. The world, however, cannot understand or accept the beauty of his creation.

All those great ruffians put their throats together,
And let out a loud yell, and threw a bottle,
As a brute tribute of respect to beauty.
(p. 239)

Because his creation is not accepted, Paul is forced to hide it from the sight of men. He will not talk about the poetic "wife" he has created

¹² James Cox, "Robert Frost and The Edge of the Clearing," Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXV (Winter, 1959), 84.

because no one knows how to talk about her: all the men can do is jeer and tease. It is this ironic ignorance displayed in Murphy's understatement which has forced the suppression of Paul's creation.¹³

The topic of understatement in Frost's dramatic poems inevitably leads to a consideration of the role of the narrator in the creation and perpetuation of irony. In the poems we have just examined, the understated remarks are made by characters involved in the action. Even in "Paul's Wife," the narrator is simply repeating the words of Murphy. But understatement is not limited to the actors. One of the most characteristic features of Frost's dramatic poems is narrative understatement: that is, the narrator is the one who understates the situation. "The Grindstone" is characterized by the narrator's ironic understatement.¹⁴ In a casual, often humorous tone, the narrator relates his experience at grinding a blade, a situation with serious implications and undertones. At an age when his work in the world is finished, the narrator reminisces about his struggles to fulfill the requirements of life.

And, anyway, its standing in the yard
Under a ruinous live apple tree
Has nothing any more to do with me,
Except that I remember how of old
One summer day, all day I drove it hard,
And someone mounted on it rode it hard,
And he and I between us ground a blade.
(p. 232)

The process of grinding a blade is symbolic of man's struggles in life.

¹³Joseph M. DeFalco, "Frost's 'Paul's Wife': The Death of an Ideal," Southern Folklore Quarterly, XXIX (1965), 265.

¹⁴See Lynen, pp. 91-95.

On the opposite side of the stone sits a "Father-Time-like man" who applies the pressure to the wheel to slow the process and make it more difficult. Man is constantly fighting the pressures of time in his attempts to complete his duties. Time does more than simply oppose man's efforts, it also sits in judgement of the results.

I wondered who it was the man thought ground --
 The one who held the wheel back or the one
 Who gave his life to keep it going round?
 I wondered if he really thought it fair
 For him to have the say when we were done.
 (p. 233)

In time the results of man's achievements are judged. The grindstone is a symbol of the world of life, and the process of grinding represents man's efforts "to keep it going round." The entire process is hindered and judged by time.

The process of living is not easy, and the results are not always happy. The action of grinding against the pressure of time gives rise to "bitter thoughts." Man is led to question the authority of the judge. The narrator sees his afternoon's work as "grinding discord out of a grindstone." (p. 233). The process is complicated further by man's recognition of limits.¹⁵ When will the blade be sharp enough? "Wasn't there danger of a turn too much?" (p. 234). Man works within limits under the judgement of time. He can either overdo or underdo his task. The narrator, tired after a life of toil, is willing to take a chance and leave "something to the whetter;" he will risk incompleteness because he knows that someone else can hone the edge, but the Father-Time-like figure keeps forcing him on.

¹⁵Cook, p. 106.

The narrator is now out of the race with time. With the perspective of distance, he can relate his experience without becoming too emotionally involved. He can even see the "bitter thoughts" through the perspective gained from dissociation, and keep them carefully controlled as the subject, not the tone of the poem. By using the grindstone as a symbol for the world, the narrator ironically understates the implications of his afternoon on grinding. He begins with a comic description of the machine.

Having a wheel and four legs of its own
Has never availed the cumbersome grindstone
To get it anywhere that I can see.
(p. 232)

The narrator is comically understating the fact that a grindstone is a stationary, inanimate object. Not only as far as he can see, but as far as anyone can see or has ever seen, a grindstone is unable to move under its own impetus. The inability of life to carry out its routine without the efforts of man is being understated at the same time.

The entire analogy between a grindstone and the world amounts to a form of understatement. The narrator is purposely comparing something great, the process of life, to something insignificant, an afternoon's work at a grindstone. The understatement is enhanced by the comparison of the grindstone to other farm implements. The other machinery is indicated as superior to the grindstone.

All other farm machinery's gone in,
And some of it on no more legs and wheel
Than the grindstone can boast to stand or go.
(I'm thinking chiefly of the wheelbarrow).
(p. 232)

By mocking the grindstone and the world with unflattering comparisons, the narrator is understating the real force of his life-long opponent.

The narrator describes his task as "beating insects at their gritty tune." (p. 233). He understates the size of the task by comparing it to insect noises. The only value he admits the labour has is that it creates a louder sound, sufficient to drown out the insects. The comparison ironically understates the value of the tasks man must perform in the world.

Understatement is one of the characteristics of the mask Frost assumes as narrator. For his long dramatic poems as well as his lyrics, Frost frequently creates a persona who has been described as a "cheerful, crotchety Yankee farmer,"¹⁶ a typical New Englander,¹⁷ or simply as a "common man."¹⁸ The narrator is generally a rural man, occasionally a rural woman, who describes rural events or scenes from a point of view characterized by detachment, terseness and indirection. It is this narrator who has earned Frost the title of "Yankee." Frost's characteristic "Yankee manner" has been noted as "a fine blend of caution, critical detachment, shrewd appraisal of self and others, diffidence, dry terseness and laconic indirection."¹⁹ It has been argued that these characteristics, especially the cautious way of saying things have been incorrectly diagnosed as Yankee mannerisms. They constitute "a manner characteristic of any

¹⁶Irwin, p. 300.

¹⁷Lynen, p. 90.

¹⁸Cox, "Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," p. 75.

¹⁹Thompson, Fire and Ice, pp. 57-58.

cautious, sophisticated adult."²⁰ No doubt both arguments are true. Frost is undoubtedly a cautious sophisticated adult who has chosen to present his feelings through the mouth of a rural Yankee persona embodying an exaggerated extension of his acquired mannerisms.

Using this narrator, Frost can create and employ many types of irony. As we have seen, the narrator is often a master of puns and verbal equivocations. More commonly, however, it is the tone of the narrator which provides the irony. As in understatement, the tone of the narrator is often at variance with the implications of what he says. Tone of voice is every bit as important to Frost as the literal meaning of the words.

In a letter to John Bartlett, Frost wrote:

There are tones of voice that mean more than words. Sentences may be so shaped as definitely to indicate these tones . . . A sentence must convey a meaning by tone of voice and it must be the particular meaning the writer intended . . . The tone of voice and its meaning must be in black and white on the page.²¹

Frost's own description of irony involves the contrast between tone and literal meanings: "Remember that the sentence sound often says more than the words. It may even as in irony convey a meaning opposite to the words."²² The tone of voice in which Frost chooses to narrate his poems is often in ironic contrast with the subject. The meaning conveyed by the tone and the literal meaning of the words are played one against the other to produce a

²⁰ Isaacs, p. 95.

²¹ Frost, The Selected Letters of Robert Frost, p. 204.

²² Frost, as quoted in Thompson, Robert Frost: The Early Years, p. 435.

poem echoing with irony.

The ironic understatement of the narrator of "The Grindstone" provides an instance where the meanings from the tone and the words are set in contrast. The jocular playful tone reverberates against the serious symbolic meaning of the words. The light tone provides a contrast which highlights the underlying seriousness. The "playful seriousness" often noticed in Frost's lyrics also operates in the dramatic poem.²³ In "The Grindstone," the playful tone helps to keep the "bitter thoughts" at a distance and, at the same time, the ironic contrast highlights the more serious implications.

The tone of the narrator of "The Star-Splitter" is at ironic variance with the underlying seriousness. The narrator calmly relates how Brad burned down his house to collect the insurance money to buy a telescope. The narrator's objectivity makes the scene quite comic. The meaning from his tone suggests an amusing incident where a man follows his whim and does what many have dreamed of, but never seriously considered. The narrator's acceptance of the incident assures us that all is well. But the meaning of the words is quite different. That man's curiosity about the nature of the universe should lead him to destroy his home and all the security that a home signifies, is a very serious topic. The seriousness of the subject is reinforced when the poem closes with a question as to the worth of any attempt to fathom the universe. Is the slim possibility of success really worth the sacrifice?

²³L. R. Thompson, Robert Frost (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), p. 14.

The female narrator of "Wild Grapes" also demonstrates Frost's ability to construct an ironic tone. Her casual tone masks the serious implications involved in man's aspirations after goals which are too high for his reach. If the goals are bent down to reach the man, there is a possibility that, instead of his attaining the goals, the goals will take hold of the man and whisk him off into space. It is desirable to climb birches after the precious grapes, but first we have to learn how to climb, how high to climb, and how to return to earth again. We do not need to learn to let go with the heart, we can always maintain our aspirations, but we must learn to let go with the hands, to release our physical grip on objects which are beyond our grasp.

"New Hampshire" presents a narrator whose tone is at constant variance with what he is saying. In the same light, comically ironic tone he criticizes his favourite state, the precious "specimens" the state holds dear, the other states of the union, fellow poets, literary tastes and just about anything that happens to cross his mind. While he is making his attacks, his tone is ironically defensive. In answer to the critic who

said she couldn't stand the people . . . ,
 The little men (it's Massachusetts speaking).
 And when I asked to know what ailed the people,
 She said, 'Go read your own books and find out.'
 . (p. 206)

the narrator assumes the position of a misunderstood artist and, in an ironically mocking tone, makes a confession which is at once an explanation of his regionalism and an attack on the unperceptive critic. The narrator's tone never deviates into seriousness, but the words often discuss matters of vital importance. Ironic tone is a type of verbal irony where the implications of what is said are in contrast to the literal tone in which

it is said.

Frost's use of verbal irony, particularly understatement, has often been noticed in the lyric poems. There is one type of irony Frost employs which, by its very definition, is limited to the dramatic poems: that, of course, is dramatic irony. "Dramatic irony . . . is the sense of contradiction felt by spectators of a drama who see a character acting in ignorance of his condition."²⁴ According to Sedgewick's explanation of his definition, there are three factors which must be present in dramatic irony: conflict, ignorance and spectators.²⁵ There must be a conflict between man and man, man and circumstances or man and an impersonal power. The character must be ignorant of his situation: he must mistake the appearance of the situation for the reality which underlies it. Finally, there must be spectators who are able to perceive both the appearance and the reality and feel the contradiction between what the character does and what he should or would do. Dramatic irony is a typical example of artificial irony. It is consciously devised by the poet, often from a natural irony, and directed at an audience.

Sedgewick's definition of dramatic irony in drama can be applied to Frost's dramatic poems. The conflict of characters is one of the highlights of the dramatic poems. Frost illustrates a man versus man conflict on "The Code," the opposition of man and woman in "Home Burial," and man or woman against circumstances in such poems as "A Servant to Servants"

²⁴G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony: Especially in Drama (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1948), p. 49.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 48-49.

or "The Witch of Coös." By contrasting appearance and reality, by keeping the actors ignorant of reality and showing the reader both the appearance which the actors see and the truth behind it, Frost constructs dramatic irony which helps to emphasize the significance of the situation. The discrepancy between what the viewer knows and what the actors think brings the conflict into sharper focus and intensifies the emotional response of the reader.²⁶

In "The Death of the Hired Man," we are told the outcome before the poem begins. Frost intimates the conclusion in the title. We know that the hired man is going to die and, from this perspective, can watch the drama between Warren and Mary unfold. The central feature of the poem is the conflict between the man and wife over the return of the hired man.²⁷ Both Warren and Mary are ignorant that the outcome will involve the death of Silas. Mary foresees that "he has come home to die" (p. 52), but she does not expect his death to be immediate. Her comment and subsequent entreaties to Warren to be kind enhance the dramatic irony. We know that the hired man will die, while she expects to see him alive.

Warren's ignorance is even greater and more ironic than Mary's. He does not recognize the significance of Silas' return but sees it as simply one more appearance of the hired man who only returns when the work has been completed and he is out of money and a place to live. Warren displays open hostility to the reappearance of Silas. "I'll not have the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

²⁷ There is some disagreement on this point. Thompson, Fire and Ice, p. 112, and Brower, p. 159 both agree. For an opposing view see Robert P. T. Coffin's review of Fire and Ice in American Literature, XIV (Jan. 1943), 438-439.

fellow back," he declares. He has no sympathy for the transient farm laborer who has disappointed him so often in the past.

'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.'

(p. 49)

Warren does not see the human aspects of Silas. He does not realize the position of a man who has no other place to call home: he sees him merely as a parasite who returns armed with excuses (Silas has come "to ditch the meadow" and "clear the upper pasture") when he has been laid off by the other farmers.

The conflict between Warren and Mary has been seen as the conflict between mercy and justice.²⁸ Warren's "eye for an eye" attitude is countered by Mary's sympathy and eventually succumbs to it. Warren's hostility is tempered by Mary's calm, emotion-filled argument until a position is reached where they are both willing to accept Silas. The first sign of Warren's change of heart is indicated when he recognizes the hired man's ability to load hay.

'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.'

(p. 52)

There is a sign of mellowing in his reminiscence of Silas' one real accomplishment. When Mary counters his cynical definition of home, Warren's attitude changes even more.

²⁸Brower, p. 162.

'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.'
(p. 53)

His remaining arguments are ineffectual; they are quickly and sympathetically countered by his wife. Finally, Mary succeeds in calming Warren and instilling sympathy into his attitude. She argues so effectively that it is Warren who says "'I can't think Si ever hurt anyone.'" (p. 54). The victory falls completely to Mary. But, ironically, the transformation of Warren does not result in awareness. Neither Mary nor Warren is aware of the approaching death.

The dramatic irony of the situation is involved in our feelings as we watch the drama develop, knowing that the pacification of Warren will be of no avail. The dramatic conflict finds its ironic fulfillment in the final line of the poem. The hired man has died. We have known since the beginning that his death was imminent. Warren has been reconciled to an acceptance of Silas, but it is too late. The entire conflict over the hired man takes on an ironic colouring in the light of the conclusion.

The reality behind the illusion in "Home Burial" is not revealed at the beginning of the poem. The title, in fact indicates the subject of the conflict, but not the ultimate cause. The actual source of the conflict is revealed to us as the poem develops, but it is never comprehended by the actors. The conflict between the husband and wife is apparently over the death and burial of their first child. The poem dramatizes the confrontation of the couple and the husband's attempt to understand the reason for his wife's prolonged grief. In a flash of insight, the husband

recognizes what he believes is the source of the sorrow.

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!

 But I understand: it is not the stones,
 But the child's mound --' (pp. 69-70)

With his newly discovered knowledge, he attempts to console his wife with the statement that his love should be sufficient to make up for the death of the child. What he fails to realize is that the real cause of her grief is his ability to accept the death with an attitude his wife interprets as indifference.

From the remarks of the wife, we soon discover the true cause which her husband cannot see. Her reactions to her husband's discovery are not manifested in relief that he has finally discovered the answer to the problem. She reacts to his faulty interpretation of her grief by alternately running from him and raging at him. From her reactions we are able to deduce the reality. We can watch the husband operating in ignorance of the knowledge we possess. The dramatic irony increases the tension of the conflict and the gravity of the situation. Our knowledge of the cause of the rift between husband and wife emphasizes the alienation of the couple from one another. The husband is ignorant of the true cause, the wife is unable to communicate except through rage, and we hold the knowledge which is the key to the problem.

Dramatic irony is created in "The Mountain" by the innocent questions and comments of the stranger who is ignorant of the significance of the mountain or his remarks. The old farmer and the reader recognize the

mountain and spring as sources of knowledge. For the young stranger, the mountain is simply a mysterious geographical structure which seems closer to the town than it actually is. He first demonstrates his ignorance of the value of the mountain by giving his stomach priority over mountain climbing.

'Is that the way to reach the top from here? --
Not for this morning, but some other time:
I must be getting back to breakfast now.'
(p. 57)

When the farmer describes the spring and the top of the mountain, the stranger comments: "There ought to be a view around the world / From such a mountain." (p. 58). The dramatic irony lies in the stranger's ignorance of the profound statement he has just made. The knowledge obtainable from the source will yield a view of the workings of the world.

The stranger does not understand the farmer's reason for not having climbed the mountain. The farmer explains how it would not seem right to climb in his everyday working clothes. He is intimating that he must leave the forms of the world he knows if he wishes to climb. He is stating that he simply does not know how to go about the process of mountain climbing. The stranger ironically misinterprets this explanation as a statement of the farmer's lack of desire to climb. He overlooks the frustration in the farmer's tone at not having climbed when young, and now not knowing how. "I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to -- / Not for the sake of climbing." (p. 59). The young narrator is more interested in the paradox of the stream than in the spring on the top of the mountain.

'Warm in December, cold in June, you say?'

'I don't suppose the water's changed at all.
You and I know enough to know it's warm

Compared with cold, and cold compared with warm
 But all the fun's in how you say a thing.'
 (p. 59)

The old farmer is experienced in the ways of the world. He knows that the source on top of the mountain is more important than verbal equivocation. From interpreting the signs in the poem, we also know the value of the mountain. The dramatic irony is created by our perception of the ignorance of the young stranger in the age-old conflict between innocence and experience.

The contrast between appearance and reality in "The Mountain" is fostered by Frost's use of symbolism. It is by interpreting the symbols that we discover the truth. The symbol of the spring as the source of knowledge indicates the meaning which the stranger misses. The spring is described as a fountain. Both springs and fountains are associated with the source of life or knowledge. Here, the narrator's ironically true comment on the view from the top of the mountain indicates that this spring is intended to represent a source of knowledge. The mountain, consequently, is associated with the barrier to knowledge which man must overcome. The correct interpretation of the symbols gives knowledge of the reality which the farmer knows and the narrator does not.

By manipulating symbols and images, Frost creates a type of dramatic irony. Strategically placed in the conflict between the actors, the symbols and images help to illuminate the reality or the ignorance, or foreshadow the conclusion. These devices let the audience into some knowledge which at least one of the characters is unable to perceive.

The husband in "Home Burial" employs an ironic image to describe

the graveyard where the child is buried.²⁹

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?
 (p. 69)

If he thinks that he is being comforting by comparing the small graveyard to a bedroom, the husband is mistaken. The use of this image helps to underline the man's lack of understanding of his wife. The bedroom suggests the place where the child was conceived and possibly, in the rural setting of the poem, where it was born. The associations which this image raises for both the mother and the reader are much broader than the speaker intended. There is an ironic difference between what he is saying and the implications that are felt to accompany the image.

The images which open "The Death of the Hired Man" supplement the dramatic irony created by the title. Two objects, the lamp-flame and the darkened passage, help to foreshadow the coming death. The lamp-flame suggests brevity and transience. A flickering lamp-flame is frequently associated with the conclusion of life. When the flame is extinguished, the life of the man as well as the candle dies. This image is not extended throughout the poem. Frost is not making the comparison of waning life to a waning lamp. But the suggestions inherent in the image suggest approaching death to the reader and, combined with the title, foreshadow the passing of Silas. The darkened passage serves a similar purpose. The dark passage from life to death is suggested, but not explicitly stated. The symbolic

²⁹See Doyle, p. 37 and Randall Jarrell, "Robert Frost's, 'Home Burial,'" in Don Cameron Allen, The Moment of Poetry (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p. 107.

possibilities for both these images are exploited by Frost to create dramatic irony.

The conflict in "In the Home Stretch" is a quiet one. It exists in the attitudes of each person to the attempt to find a new beginning in old age in rural retirement.

'No, this is no beginning.'

'Then an end?'

'End is a gloomy word.'

(p. 146)

Rather than use a gloomy word, Frost simply states that the old couple are entering the "home stretch." We know as well as the old woman does that this move marks the beginning of the end for them. The contrast between Joe's optimism that they really are entering a new life and his wife's and our knowledge that nothing has changed, that they are simply going to complete their lives in the country instead of in the city, results in the dramatic irony which pervades the poem.

Once again, Frost uses images to let us into the reality beneath the conflict. When Joe's wife looks out of her kitchen window she sees:

'Rank weeds that love the water from the dishpan
More than some women like the dishpan, Joe;
A little stretch of mowing-field for you:
Not much of that until I come to woods
That end all. And it's scarce enough to call
A view.'

(p. 140)

Her view is a look into the future. For herself, she sees the rank weeds which will grow from her dishwater. In the opening lines of the poem, we are shown the woman looking through "a dusty window" at these weeds. For her, the future will vary little from the past: there will always be dishes

to wash and other household chores to be performed. By showing us "rank weeds," Frost is giving us a preview of what the woman can expect. Her future contains no hope for anything better. The woman later reiterates this fact with her statement that there are no beginnings and no ends: life for her simply continues as always.

For Joe, she sees a small "mowing-field." His retirement will involve a certain amount of pleasurable labour in the fields. Close to the field are the woods, the symbol of the final, dark peace. The weeds, field and woods are used as symbols of the future of the couple. They are placed early in the poem so that we may see the reality which the old couple will have to face. The woman recognizes the symbols and attempts to communicate their meaning to her husband without destroying his morale. She does not appear to succeed. He is as excited about the prospect of a new life at the end of the poem as he was at the beginning. The result is not tragic, pathetic or comic. The dramatic irony simply serves to highlight the contrast between romantic and realistic approaches to life.

CONCLUSION

We make ourselves a place apart
Behind light words that tease and flout,
But oh, the agitated heart
Till someone really find us out.
("Revelation," p. 27)

Frost's poetry begins in the poet's awareness of life. This awareness is manifested in vivid, accurate description of the natural and human world, and in careful recording of the natural ironies of life. But Frost's art goes further than simply natural observation. Even in the poems which seem most purely descriptive, Frost is selective: his landscapes and other country scenes include only the objects he wants to be seen. It is no accident that the effects of the ice storm are depicted so vividly in "Birches." Frost includes the detail to demonstrate the difference between truth and fancy: "But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay / As ice-storms do." (p. 152). The cruel facts of nature, not our aspiring, destroy our avenues of discovery. The little horse in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is more than merely a detail in Frost's accurate description of a winter scene. The horse shakes his bells to call the traveller back from his reverie and to remind him of his obligations to himself and the world.

In the same way, Frost's use of irony goes beyond the mere observation of ironic events and characters. The poet creates artificial ironies as well, ironies of invention, understatement, dramatic irony and others, which give additional depth to his poetry. Frost knows how to manipulate artificial irony to criticize what he does not like or what he

cannot accept. He is also fully aware of the value of irony for emphasis. Frost's sense of irony provides him with the distance necessary to gain a detached, objective view of the objects or situations he wishes to criticize or emphasize. A poem like "New Hampshire" is filled with examples of Frost's ability to create irony. The narrator is sufficiently detached to present subtly ironic criticism in place of vindictiveness or sarcasm. At the same time that he is criticizing what he does not like, Frost is using irony to emphasize his own ideas. Irony for emphasis is even more evident in "The Death of the Hired Man" where the irony underlines the conflict between the man and wife.

In Frost's best poems, the observed and created, the natural and artificial, go hand-in-hand. Frost begins with a foundation of natural irony; a situation which is ironic in itself forms the subject matter of the poem. Onto this foundation, Frost superimposes level upon level of artificial irony. He may begin by creating dramatic irony and supplement this further with verbal equivocations, understatement, or some other type of artificial irony. The result is a poem like "Home Burial" or "A Servant to Servants," both of which start with the observation of an irony of life which is supplemented by devised, artificial ironies. The tension achieved by the combination of natural and artificial irony places these poems among the best Frost has written.

An awareness of the functions and functionings of irony helps us to get beneath the "light words" to find out what Frost really intends, not only in the dramatic poems, but in the lyrics and masques as well. Both Frost's sense of the tragic and his sense of humour are better understood when the implications of his irony have been appreciated.

It is his sense of irony which allows Frost to see humour in seriousness and gravity in the comic. An understanding of how and why Frost employs irony will illuminate many of the problems involved in forming an adequate and valid interpretation of the poet's works. Above all, an awareness of the uses of irony will help to dispel the "illusion of simplicity" which hovers over Frost's poetry.

Irony links Frost with the modern school of poetry. The modern tendency has been to turn away from the literal meaning of the words, to hide the meaning in one way or another. As Frost says, "We make ourselves a place apart." Two techniques which turn away from the obvious are irony and symbolism. Frost's symbolism varies from that of such modern poets as Eliot or Yeats in that it is "organic."¹ His symbolism starts from nature: he has not developed a system of esoteric symbolism, but draws his analogies from the natural world. Frost also relies on irony to avoid direct statement. Irony, like symbolism, is a method of saying one thing and meaning another. Frost ranks with his contemporaries in his use of irony to imply another meaning beneath the surface of the words. But unlike his modern fellow poets, Frost appears deceptively simple. Without understanding his symbolism or his use of irony, many have appreciated his poetry for its vivid description and tense drama. Many others have fathomed his use of symbols but have failed to understand fully the subtle alterations of meaning implied by irony. Unless Frost's irony is understood, his poetry will continue to maintain an air of simplicity.

¹Cook, p. 71.

If we do not penetrate the "light words," we are missing an important dimension of Frost's art. As the poet playfully states himself:

It takes all sorts of in and outdoor schooling
To get adapted to my kind of fooling.²

²Frost, an untitled epigram from In the Clearing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 100.

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