

A NAME WITH MEANING:
THE MYSTERY, METAPHOR, AND MEANING OF
ROBERT FROST'S 'MAPLE'

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An Abstract
Presented to the
Graduate and Research Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Laura Ann Huey Culver

August 1988

ABSTRACT

Perhaps one of the most enigmatic of Robert Frost's dramatic narratives is his poem "Maple." Indeed, mystery is an integral aspect of the poem because the poem is based upon the mystery behind a name. Maple, the protagonist of the poem, was given her unusual name at birth by her mother, who died shortly thereafter. The poem follows Maple's search for the meaning behind her name, a quest that she begins in childhood and gives up in young adulthood.

The difficulty in understanding the poem is that, like Maple, the reader is not given a straightforward explanation of Maple's name and must search for revelation through the poem as Maple does throughout the first twenty-five years of her life. It is the contention of this thesis that Frost does provide his reader with the information necessary to understand the circumstances behind Maple's naming, but that this understanding can only be achieved through a careful analysis of language, metaphor, and what Frost called the "sound of sense" within the poem. This paper traces the quest for an understanding of Maple's name, examining along the way Frost's treatment of the parents' and teacher's roles in the intellectual development of the child, the shaping influence of a name, the sacrificial nature of parental love, and, ultimately, the possibility of creating meaning in a universe where the potential for human understanding is limited at best.

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To the Graduate and Research Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Laura Ann Huey Culver entitled "A Name with Meaning: The Mystery, Metaphor, and Meaning of Robert Frost's 'Maple.'" I have examined the final copy of this paper for form and content, and I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts, with a major in English.

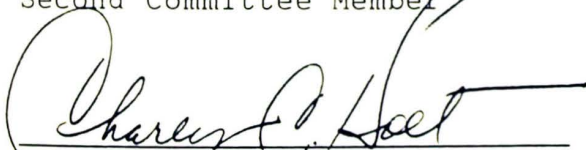


Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:



Second Committee Member



Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Graduate and
Research Council:



Dean of the Graduate School

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express her deep appreciation to Dr. David Till of Austin Peay State University for his guidance, time, and enthusiasm given during the course of this study. His cooperation in working around a somewhat abbreviated time schedule has made this study as painless as possible.

Appreciation is also extended to Dr. Steven Ryan and Dr. Charles Holt of Austin Peay State University for their advice, and Dr. William Zak of Salisbury State University, without whose initial challenge and encouragement this thesis would not have been written.

Additionally, the author wishes to thank Lesley and David for their assistance, and her husband, Robert, whose boundless love and support have made all the difference.

CHAPTER I

A NAME WITH MEANING

Since its first publication in The Yale Review in October 1921 and its subsequent inclusion in New Hampshire, little has been written about Robert Frost's dramatic narrative "Maple." Perhaps this is because, as John Morris writes, it is one of the most elaborate of Frost's "mystery-poems" (128). Not only is the poem enigmatic, as many of Frost's poems are, but it is based upon the mystery behind a name.

A careful study of the poem reveals, however, that "Maple" is not, as the dearth of critical attention paid to it would suggest, a minor poem relatively unimportant in the study of Frost. In "Maple" Frost grapples with questions and concerns that form the center of his writing. He explores the parent/teacher role in the intellectual development of the child, and he examines the cyclical nature of existence in a world where life arises phoenix-like from death. Finally, he leaves his reader to contemplate the conflict between truth and belief; and if we are left with more questions than we originally intended to solve, it is not because of Frost's lack of seriousness. It is, rather, because this is how he found the nature of existence to be: despite the order we impose with our meanings and beliefs, the fact remains that beyond our forms lies an unfathomable void whose presence can never be fully reconciled.

The protagonist of the poem, Maple, first notices her unusual name when she is publicly embarrassed by a teacher who

insists that the girl's name must be "Mabel"--not "Maple."
 "'You tell her that it's M-A-P-L-E,'" her father replies when
 Maple recounts the episode (7), and he then describes the
 circumstances behind her naming.¹ Maple's mother died
 shortly after giving birth, but before her death she made it
 clear that the child was to be named "Maple." "'I don't know
 what she wanted it to mean,'" Maple's father tells her, but he
 promises that "'By and by I will tell you all I know / About
 the different trees, and something, too, / About your mother
 that perhaps may help'" (20, 26-28).

Although Maple's father claims he does not know what the
 mother intended the name to "mean," he does not claim
 ignorance about the origin of the name. Not knowing what the
 name is to mean--how Maple is to be like a maple tree--is very
 different from not knowing the origin of the name--why the
 mother chose such an unusual name. Indeed, evidence in the
 poem points to the possibility that the father does know the
 origin of the name, but that he avoids the issue by channeling
 Maple's questions toward the meaning of the name rather than
 the origin:

"She put her finger in your cheek so hard
 It must have made your dimple there, and said,
 'Maple.' I said it too: 'Yes, for her name.'
 She nodded. So we're sure there's no mistake.
 I don't know what she wanted it to mean,
 But it seems like some word she left to bid you
 Be a good girl--be like a maple tree.
How like a maple tree's for us to guess.

Or for a little girl to guess sometime." (16-24) That the father's response to the name is affirmative--"'Yes, for her name'"--rather than questioning suggests that he shares some private knowledge about the name with his wife. Otherwise, he would have questioned "Maple?" or "Mabel?" as others do throughout the poem.

Maple's father chooses to emphasize the meaning of his daughter's name rather than the origin for one of several reasons. Perhaps he feels that Maple is too young to understand why the name was chosen for her, or perhaps the name had a private significance between the father and mother that would be inappropriate to share with a child. In any case, Maple's father makes it clear that although eventually he will give her knowledge about the trees and her mother that may help, it is up to Maple to guess how she is to be a good girl--"be like a maple tree" (22). It is Maple's responsibility to find meaning in her name.

Maple's father here embodies Frost's ideas on the nature of the teacher's role in the education process. Frost believed that it was the teacher's responsibility to teach students to think--to "tell them what thinking means"²--but that the actual thinking through of a problem or a belief had to be accomplished by the individual student. As early as 1892, in an editorial for the Lawrence High School Bulletin, Frost argued that even conventional beliefs had to be rethought if one intended to make them his own (Thompson, Early Years 118). Thirty-nine years later, in "Education by Poetry," Frost wrote:

We still ask boys in college to think, . . . but we seldom tell them what thinking means; we seldom tell them it is just putting this and that together; it is just saying one thing in terms of another. To tell them is to set their feet on the first rung of a ladder the top of which sticks through the sky. (SP 41)

Maple's father, then, is like Frost's ideal teacher in that he encourages Maple to think for herself, to put "this and that" together, and to come to her own conclusions about the meaning of her name. Unlike Maple's teacher, who insists that her own understanding concerning Maple's name is correct and that Maple's is wrong, Maple's father is not interested in drilling his daughter with rote information. His primary concern is that she develop within herself the ability to discover the relationships between "this and that." He cannot carve her into an adult because her growth is something she must "arouse" within herself. All he can do is "sow" the "[d]angerous self-arousing words" that may or may not precipitate her growth (29).

Frost's choice of the verb "sow" to describe the father's role in Maple's development is hardly coincidental. As an amateur botanist Frost was fascinated with the metaphorical possibilities of the growing plant. ". . . [S]omebody very brilliantly, quite a while ago," Frost wrote in "Education by Poetry," "said that the whole universe, the whole of everything, was like unto a growing thing. . . . It is a very brilliant metaphor . . ." (SP 38-39). In "Maple" Frost

translates the metaphor of the growing plant into the metaphor of the growing maples. The growing tree, which is depicted in the poem in stages varying from germinating seed to mature, sap-bearing tree, comes to metaphorically represent the growing girl, who during the course of the poem matures from a child into a woman capable of bearing children of her own. To paraphrase Maple's father, Maple is "like a maple tree" (22).

Frost's metaphor, however, becomes quite complex. Not only is Maple "like a maple tree," but at times a maple tree is also like Maple. Vehicle and tenor are reversed so that at one point in the poem a description of the girl evokes images of the tree, and at another point a description of the tree evokes images of the girl. Near the conclusion of the poem, for example, Frost describes a maple tree in language that is not only feminine, but also sexual:

Once they came on a maple in a glade,
 Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up,
 And every leaf of foliage she'd worn
 Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet.

(144-147)

Morris has recognized the metaphorical possibilities in the above passage, and in "The Poet as Philosopher: Robert Frost," he writes: "This is wrong for a naturalist's description of a maple: We do not refer to a tree as 'she,' and sugar maples do not have pink leaves. But it is right as a symbol of the woman that Maple is about to become" (128). Maple, the woman, is the vehicle through which the maple tree, the tenor, is metaphorically described.

In an earlier passage, Frost describes the effects of the words Maple's father "sowed" in her with a metaphor of the planted seed. In this instance, the transformation of Maple is the tenor while the seed image becomes the vehicle:

What he sowed with her slept so long a sleep,
 And came so near death in the dark of years,
 That when it woke and came to life again
 The flower was different from the parent seed.
 (36-39)

After the seed has been planted in Maple by the father, it endures a stage of dormancy ("the dark of years" when it is not acted upon by Maple), awakens and sprouts new life (Maple's interest in the mystery behind her name is renewed), and finally blooms into a plant whose "flowers" are different from the "parent seed": Maple's renewed interest in her name is different from her initial interest in rebuking her teacher. She now wants to understand her name's "meaning."

But this is not all that Frost does in the passage. The act of planting seed is an image that Frost often transforms into a metaphor for human sexuality, germination into a metaphor for conception. In "Putting in the Seed," for example, Frost combines images of soil, seedlings, human intercourse, and birth until the poem is an exploration of both types of fertility:

How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
 On through the watching for that early birth
 When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
 The sturdy seedling with arched body comes

Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

(10-14)

In lines 36-39 of "Maple" one finds a similar duality in Frost's metaphorical use of the germinating seed. Metaphor, syntax, and pronouns in these lines alert the reader to the possibility that the poet may be building toward something other than the contextual meaning of the passage, something facilitated by the poetical "play" of words and metaphors that fascinated Frost: "In the beginning was the word," Frost writes in "A Romantic Chasm," ". . . but the fun only begins with the spirited when you treat the word as a point of many departures" (SP 78). The point of departure in lines 36-39 is the pronoun "her." On the one level, of course, the "her" in whom the father "sowed" is Maple, and what he sowed in her are the words that eventually burgeon into Maple's desire to know the meaning of her name. But the antecedent to "her" is so remote, the language of the passage so strikingly sexual, and Frost's penchant for metaphorically representing conception with germination so well documented, the reader is invited to infer that the "her" in whom the father sowed is also the deceased mother. The father sowed with a woman to create a child who, after a period of maturation, bloomed into another "flowering," seed-bearing woman as her mother had been, but one who is different from the original parent seed.

In "Maple," then, Frost's poetical use of Maple's name is threefold. First, the fact that Maple knows neither the origin nor the meaning of her name gives Frost the opportunity to express his views on education. As an embodiment of

Frost's ideal teacher, Maple's father claims that he will give Maple the information she needs to solve her mystery, but the processing of the information--the putting together of "this and that"--is left to her. Her growth is something she must "arouse" within herself. Secondly, the symbolic identification between Maple and a maple tree permits Frost to symbolize the "arousing" nature of education with his use of plant imagery. And, finally, the name "Maple" gives Frost ample opportunity to experiment with the "play" involved in words; he introduces the cyclical nature of the progression of generations that is to become thematically significant in the second half of the poem.

CHAPTER II

THE INFLUENCE OF A NAME

As Maple grows older, the uniqueness of her name becomes more important to her. Her name, she believes, is different from the names of other children in that it has "too much meaning" (45). Traditional names like Lesley, Carol, Irma, and Marjorie have no meaning; and although a name like "Rose" has the potential for meaning, Maple knows a Rose, and her name means nothing. The problem with having a meaningful name, Maple believes, is that such a name requires that the named understand the meaning behind the name and then in some way incorporate that meaning into her identity. Maple's name becomes important to her because it gives her a center around which to organize her identity: "Her problem was to find out what it asked / In dress or manner of the girl who bore it" (52-53).³

Maple's search, for the most part, is a search for an external, literal meaning. She believes that if she searches in the right places, if she finds the right maple tree, she will discover the meaning of her name. When she finds a maple leaf in a Bible, for example, she thinks that the leaf "must have been laid / In wait for her there" (63-64). But when she does not find a literal meaning for her name in the pages the leaf "was pressed between" (65), she assumes that "there had been nothing in it" (69). She does not consider that although there was not a literal explanation for her name in the passage, meaning might have been "pressed between" the words.

Likewise, the meaning she hopes to derive from her name--the organizational center she hopes her name will give her--is also external. She wants to know what the name requires of her in "dress or manner" (69), both exterior concerns; and at a mirror she strikes her name "gently across her lowered eyes / To make it go well with the way she looked" (42-43). Maple's use of her name is cosmetic, and she looks "for herself, as everyone / Looks for himself, more or less outwardly" (70-71).

The search for personal identity is by necessity an egocentric ambition, but at this point in her psychological development Maple is egocentric to the degree that she is trapped within her own ego. Just as she is unable to move from a literal reading of the Bible passage to a symbolic one, she is unable to move from the recognition of her own personal identity to the realization that the other humans around her also have personal mysteries and identities. Maple is able to relate to others only in terms of herself.

We find examples of Maple's egocentrism in her reaction to her environment. For instance, when she finds the maple-leaf bookmark and believes it "must have been laid / In wait for her there" (63-64), she is, like the bird in Frost's "The Woodpile," "one who takes / Everything said as personal to himself" (15-16). Another illustration of Maple's egocentrism is found in lines 45-48:

Other names,

As Lesley, Carol, Irma, Marjorie,

Signified nothing. Rose could have a meaning,

But hadn't as it went. (She knew a Rose.)

Maple's catalog of names here reveals that she can recognize meaning in a name only when she can approach its potential meaning in the exact same way in which she approaches the potential meaning of her own name. In other words, she realizes that the name "Rose" might have meaning only because it is like the name "Maple" in that it is also the name of a plant. Lesley, Carol, Irma, and Marjorie are not named after plants; therefore, in the world according to Maple, their names have no meaning. Evidently she decides that even Rose's name has no meaning; she has not been able to divine any meaning, and what does not exist in Maple's mind does not exist at all. What Maple fails to realize, of course, is that meaning can take a form other than her own. "Lesley," "Carol," "Irma," and "Marjorie" (which were, incidentally, the names of Frost's children) have the same potential for meaning as Maple's own name.

It would be wrong, however, to overly criticize a young woman's egocentrism at this point. A child's world is necessarily bound by her own ego until she develops the maturity to transcend herself--to recognize the "I-ness" of others. Egocentrism is an essential stage in a young woman's psychological development. Parents are instrumental in the development of her self-esteem, and in the absence of a mother, Maple's name serves as a kind of surrogate parent; it helps awaken in her an awareness of her personal uniqueness: "This difference from other names it was / Made people notice it--and notice her" (49-50).

Ironically, Maple's search for the meaning of her name leads her away from the rural environment of her childhood and into the organized chaos of the city, "a strange place / For the name Maple to have brought her to" (77-78). There she learns shorthand and finds work as a secretary. In lines 80-84 Frost builds his description of the city into a crescendo of noise and confusion that is finally relieved in line 85 by the "natural tones" of Maple's employer:

And, in the pauses when she raised her eyes,
 Watching out of a nineteenth story window
 An airship laboring with unshiplike motion
 And a vague all-disturbing roar above the river
 Beyond the highest city built with hands.
 Someone was saying in such natural tones
 She almost wrote the words down on her knee,
 "Do you know you remind me of a tree--
 A maple tree?" (80-88)

In order to fully understand the dichotomy Frost has set up in this passage between rural and urban existence, it is first necessary to understand the allusion he makes in line 84. The "highest city built with hands" is an allusion to the city and tower of Babel, and an examination of Genesis 11.4-7 reveals an interesting parallel between Maple and the builders of Babel: both recognized the organizational powers of a name. Although Maple's recognition of the power of her name is perhaps subconscious, she uses her name and the search for its meaning as a center around which she organizes her personal identity. Similarly, the builders of Babel believed

that if they made a name for themselves, they would be able to organize themselves as a people: "And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11.4).. God recognized the power the builders of Babel had discovered, and he confounded their language in order to destroy this power:

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they will begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. (Gen. 11.5-9)

Frost's allusion to Babel in lines 80-84 also works as a reference to chaos and confusion. After God confounded their language, the builders of Babel, stripped of their ability to communicate, found themselves thrown into a tumult of noise and confusion. They scattered "abroad . . . upon the face of all the earth . . ." (Gen. 11.8). Now, in the twentieth century, the "children of men" find themselves reassembled in their cities, but their condition remains chaotic and confused. They reach for the heavens with skyscraping office buildings and "airships," and their cities are enveloped in the "all-disturbing roar" of their confusion. It is here, in the midst of this confusion, where Maple hopes to find the

meaning behind her name.

As unlikely as it may seem, Maple's "self-seeking" (72) in the city does lead to what she believes to be a kind of revelation. Frost contrasts the artificial din of the city with the "natural tones" of Maple's employer as he tells her she reminds him of a maple tree. "'Because my name is Maple?'" she asks. "'Isn't it Mabel? I thought it was Mabel,'" he says (88-89). This curious Babelism (or divination, as Maple and her employer interpret it) becomes the basis for their marriage:

They were both stirred that he should have divined
Without the name her personal mystery.

It made it seem as if there must be something
She must have missed herself. So they were married
And took the fancy home with them to live by.

(92-96)

Even in death, then, Maple's mother exerts an influence over her daughter. Genetically, of course, she has helped to make the physical Maple, but her influence on Maple's psychological development through the shaping force of a name is also evident. Maple's unusual name precipitates her "self-seeking" and her marriage, and it gives her the center around which she has organized her existence: the search for the meaning behind her name.

CHAPTER III

THE SOUND OF SENSE

Although both Maple and the reader are "put off" from a straightforward explanation of Maple's name, Frost does provide his reader with all that is necessary to deduce the meaning and the origin of Maple's name. An understanding of the poem requires, however, that the reader "listen" very carefully to the language of the poem, to what Frost described in his "Introduction to King Jasper" as the "dramatic tones of voice" in poetry (SP 60). Frost believed that the "living part" of a poem--the part that transforms its "grammatical sentences" into "vital sentences"--is the "intonation entangled somehow in the syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence" (SP 107-108). This intonation is heard rather than seen. Frost explained his theory in a letter written to John Bartlett:

The ear is the only true writer and the only true reader. I have known people who could read without hearing the sentence sounds and they were the fastest readers. Eye readers we called them. They can get the meaning by glances. But they are bad readers because they miss the best part of what a good writer puts into his work.

Remember that the sentence sound often says more than the words. It may even as in irony convey a meaning opposite to the words. . . .
(Frost, Selected Letters 113)

In the dialogue of lines 106-132 between Maple and her husband, Frost gives his readers their first opening into a possible origin for Maple's name. Although her name has contributed toward her marriage, Maple has still not discovered its meaning, and her search leads her and her husband on a pilgrimage away from the city and back to her rural birthplace. There they search for a maple tree she might have missed, but they find nothing. She recalls the maple leaf she found in the Bible: "'Wave offering, / Something about wave offering, it said,'" she tells her husband (106-107). He asks her if she has ever directly questioned her father about her name. "'I have, and been put off sometime, I think,'" Maple replies (109). Maple's husband feels that they are still being "put off":

"Your father feels us round him with our questing,
 And holds us off unnecessarily,
 As if he didn't know what little thing
 Might lead us on to a discovery.
 It was as personal as he could be
 About the way he saw it was with you
 To say your mother, had she lived, would be
 As far again as from being born to bearing."
 (123-130)

In lines 127-130 Frost's use of enigma in the poem reaches one of its several peaks. Given the ironic tone of Maple's husband, who is obviously annoyed at being held off from discovery by Maple's father, the reader is inclined to dismiss the father's comparison between Maple and her mother

as the confused maunderings of a lonely old man. The temptation is to "see" the words without understanding their dramatic implications. But if the reader examines the passage with the intention of placing the father's remark in a dramatic context within which it is appropriate--if he listens for what Frost called the "sound of sense"--both the words and their sense become intelligible.

The first step in understanding the dramatic importance of these lines is to understand the father's remark. He reminisces that his wife, had she lived, would be "'As far again as from being born to bearing.'" In other words, if Maple's mother was twenty-five years old at the time she gave birth to Maple, she would be at least fifty years old now had she survived. Maple's father is measuring time using his daughter's birth as his pivot. But he is doing more than simply measuring time. Since enough time has passed to put his wife once more again from being born to bearing, Maple is now at least as old as her mother was when she died. The "sound of sense" in the passage--the dramatic tone of voice of the father we hear filtered through the son-in-law's irony--suggests that Maple's father sees his wife in his daughter.

The next step in understanding the passage is to understand what motivated the father's remark. His comment is not spontaneous, but a reaction to "'the way he saw it was'" with Maple. Something about his daughter brings back not only memories of his wife, but associations of birth and giving birth as well. What the father sees is that Maple has reached

that stage in her life where she may soon be getting about the business of parenting--sacrificing her own egocentrism so that the larger concerns of the progression of generations can be met. She is, perhaps, even now pregnant.

When Frost puts line 127, "'It was as personal as he could be,'" into the son-in-law's mouth, then, he is "playing" with sentence sound. Given the frustrations of Maple and her husband, one interpretation of the sound of this clause is that Maple's husband is being ironic. He believes that the father's response to "the way it is" with Maple is impersonal. What the reader realizes, however, is that the father's reaction is extremely personal. Maple's father sees Maple as he last saw his wife--preparing to give birth to new life--he thinks of his wife, and he realizes that the cycle of generation has gone full circle. His reaction is literally "'as personal as he could be.'"

Another reading of the dramatic tone or sound of line 127 is that the husband feels that although his father-in-law's comment was somewhat impersonal, it was as personal as the father-in-law was capable of being. The father is unable to express himself emotionally, and his reticence is something Maple should be willing to understand. This reading follows from the "sound" of the preceding section of dialogue between Maple and her husband. Here, the husband shows himself to be a more understanding person than Maple. He is not as egocentric, and he realizes that it may never have been intended for Maple to know why her parents chose such an unusual name for her:

"Because no telling but it may have been
 Something between your father and your mother
 Not meant for us at all.

.

"And then it may have been
 Something a father couldn't tell a daughter
 As well as could a mother. And again
 It may have been their one lapse into fancy
 'Twould be too bad to make him sorry for
 By bringing it up to him when he was too old."

(112-114, 117-122)

In the above lines, Frost, through the voice of Maple's husband, has outlined three possibilities for the origin of Maple's name. It may have been her parent's "'one lapse into fancy'"--that is, her parents may have had no logical reason for choosing the name. They just liked the word "maple." But then again it might not have been a lapse into fancy. It may have been something between a husband and a wife not meant for a child, or it may have been something a father would not feel as comfortable discussing with a daughter as would a mother.

These last two possibilities suggest that the origin of Maple's name might be sexual in some way. To a man born in the Victorian era, as Frost was, a father would find it more difficult to discuss a sexual origin of a name than would a mother. Also, sexual relations between parents are not "meant" (114) to be shared with the children they produce. But Maple's own eventual conceiving is meant for her, and her father does indeed know what "little thing" might lead Maple

and her husband on to discovery (125). Their own child might lead them to a discovery of the meaning, if not the origin, of Maple's name.

At this point in the poem, however, Frost still has not given his readers anything more than general possibilities about the origin of Maple's name. The name may have been a "'lapse into fancy'"; but given the fact that the father does appear to have some secret knowledge about the name, this seems unlikely. Another possibility is that the name had a private and perhaps sexual significance between Maple's father and mother. This is the possibility that Frost develops in the last forty lines of the poem.

CHAPTER IV

THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF MAPLE'S NAME

In "The Poet as Philosopher: Robert Frost," Morris argues that one mystery in "Maple" can be solved by what Maple remembers about the leaf-marked passage in the Bible. "'Wave offering, / Something about wave offering, it said,'" she tells her husband. As Morris points out, there are at least half a dozen references to wave offerings in the Old Testament, but he believes that the reference Maple most likely found was one in Numbers 5.25 that involves a "trial by ordeal for suspected adultery."⁴ He writes:

According to the text, when a husband suspects his wife of adultery, he is to bring her before the priest, who will determine her guilt or innocence by means of the following test. He first accepts an offering of grain, which he waves before the altar. Then he prepares a drink composed of water mixed with dust from the floor of the tent in which the crime is supposed to have been committed. The accused wife drinks this potion. If it has no effect upon her, then she is judged innocent. If it makes her violently ill, then she is guilty and will (perhaps) die in childbirth.

Apparently Maple's mother read this passage in the Bible, brooded over it, and interpreted her own illness and approaching death as punishment

for adultery. (128)

In light of this revelation, Morris believes that the meaning of Maple's name is solved in lines 144-147:

Once they came on a maple in a glade,
 Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up,
 And every leaf of foliage she'd worn
 Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet.

The problem with this passage, Morris writes, is that it is . . . wrong for a naturalist's description of a maple: We do not refer to a tree as "she," and sugar maples do not have pink leaves. But it is right as a symbol of the woman that Maple is about to become. Like her mother, she will stand naked, arms lifted up, feminine pink and sinful scarlet. The tree embodies a prophecy, like the prophecies with which the Greek tragedies begin; and, like those prophecies, it is not comprehended by the principal actors. The young couple ask, concerning the maple for which the girl has been named, "Could it have been another maple like it?" Yes, the "mother" of this tree is like the "daughter," just as the girl will resemble her mother when the cycle of sweetness and of scarlet begins again with her. The tree is a symbolic prophecy of the daughter's sin. (128)

Morris's observation about the metaphorical nature of the maple tree's description in lines 144-147 is an important one; Frost is, through metaphor, making an analogy between the tree

and the woman, and in order to understand the poem the reader must be aware of this analogy. But Morris's interpretation poses several problems, the first of which is his reading of the trial by ordeal for adultery. Numbers 5 commands that when a husband suspects his wife of adultery, he is to bring his wife and a jealousy offering of barley meal before a priest. After the priest has prepared a potion of holy water mixed with "the dust that is in the floor of the tabernacle" (not the "dust from the floor of the tent in which the crime is supposed to have been committed," as Morris writes), he accepts the jealousy offering and waves it over the altar (Num. 5.17-28). Next, he burns a handful of the offering upon the altar, and the woman drinks the potion:

And when he hath made her to drink the water,
 then it shall come to pass, that, if she be
 defiled, and have done trespass against her
 husband, that the water that causeth the curse
 shall enter into her, and become bitter, and her
 belly shall swell, and her thigh shall rot: and
 the woman shall be a curse among her people.

And if the woman be not defiled, but be clean;
 then she shall be free, and shall conceive seed.

(Num. 5.27-28, emphasis added)

Rather than prove that Maple's mother was guilty of adultery, such a trial by ordeal would prove that she was not guilty: Maple's mother did conceive seed.

A second problem with Morris's argument involves Maple and her husband's reaction to the maple tree in the glade.

Lines 152-162 indicate that in the glade, Maple and her husband are very close to a discovery of the origin of her name. Furthermore, Maple is aware of being on the verge of discovery, but she refuses to discover her parents' secret. She is no longer looking for it:

Could it have been another maple like it?

They hovered for a moment near discovery,

Figurative enough to see the symbol,

But lacking faith in anything to mean

The same at different times to different people.

.

And anyway it came too late for Maple.

She used her hands to cover up her eyes.

"We would not see the secret if we could now:

We are not looking for it any more."

(152-156, 159-162)

More important than Maple's lack of faith here is what Frost implies in the passage. The implication in lines 155-156 is that the tree Maple and her husband have stumbled upon in the glade has taken on a private "meaning" between them, and that this meaning is the same meaning that another maple tree once held for Maple's mother and father. Maple's failure is a failure to believe that what the maple in the glade might mean to her and her husband now is identical to what another maple meant to her mother and father twenty-five years ago. She lacks the faith that anything could "mean / The same at different times to different people." Keeping this in mind, Morris's argument that Maple's name is a prophecy of her

future adultery is problematic. It is unlikely that a "maple in a glade, / Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up" would come to symbolize future adulterous love to Maple and her husband, a couple alone, on holiday, and walking through a woods.

Morris's suspicion that the origin of Maple's name is sexual, however, is correct. Yes, Maple will stand naked like her mother, "arms lifted up, feminine pink and . . . scarlet" (Morris 128). Frost has purposefully confused tenor and vehicle in the girl/tree metaphor throughout the poem so that the girl and tree here are interchangeable. But the sexuality that Maple holds in common with her mother is not "sinful" and adulterous--it is conjugal. Maple and her husband's own lovemaking may be the catalyst that propels them toward the discovery that the origin of Maple's name "could be a thing so bridal" as a husband and wife's making love under a maple tree and conceiving a child there (158).

If the origin of Maple's name--the secret she has searched for since childhood--is her own conception beneath a maple tree, then one mystery in the poem is solved. To paraphrase Maple's husband, the mother's choice of her daughter's unusual name was something between a father and mother not meant for Maple at all (113-114). But that still leaves the mystery of the "meaning" of Maple's name unsolved for her. How is Maple to "[b]e a good girl--be like a maple tree," as her father tells her (22)?

The answer to this mystery lies in part in Frost's allusion to the Old Testament "wave offering," and in part in

the plant imagery found throughout the poem. In "Maple," maple trees are described in various stages of growth that roughly parallel Maple's own development, stages ranging from germinating seed to mature, sap-bearing adult: In lines 36-39, as noted above, Frost uses the metaphor of the germinating seed to describe the effects of the words Maple's father sowed in her; in line 150, we find an implicit comparison between the newborn Maple and "a two-leaved seedling"; in lines 144-147, there is the girl/tree metaphor of the maple in the glade; and in lines 136-138, we find a description of fully mature, sap-bearing trees. This is the one stage in the life of a maple tree that Maple does not want to acknowledge. She and her husband keep "their thoughts away from when the maples / Stood uniform in buckets, and the steam / of sap and snow rolled off the sugarhouse." They do not want to acknowledge the sacrifices that are sometimes required of maples.

Maple's father, however, does acknowledge the sacrifices that are extracted not only from trees, but from humans as well. "'You and she just saw / Each other in passing . . .'" he tells Maple about her mother, "'One coming this way into life, and one / Going the other out of life . . .'" (10-13). Maple's father acknowledges the sacrifice of the individual involved in the progression of generations. He has sacrificed his wife who, in turn, has sacrificed her life in order that new life can come of the old. And, when he sees Maple with her husband and "'the way it is with her,'" he realizes that the cycle should, for all the risk, begin anew.

It is this sacrificial quality of parental love--not adultery--that Frost is alluding to in the "wave offering" of lines 106-107. In the Old Testament books of Exodus and Leviticus, we find numerous references to wave offerings, all of which involve wave offerings as part of ritual sacrifices to God. In Exodus 29.24-25, for example, Aaron and his sons are commanded to wave one loaf of bread, one cake of oiled bread, and one wafer of unleavened bread as a "wave offering before the Lord." The bread is then burned by the priest upon an altar: "it is an offering made by fire unto the Lord." Frost appears to have had the sacrifice by fire in mind when he wrote that the tree Maple and her husband relate her to is the maple "the autumn fire ran through / And swept of leathern leaves, but left the bark / Unscorched, unblackened even, by any smoke" (140-142). Maple and her husband are uncomfortable viewing Maple in a sacrificial role and prefer to see her as unblemished by the "fire" of the progression of generations.

The theme of life out of death is a familiar one in Frost and one that he often explores, as he has done in "Maple," through the use of plant imagery. In the sonnet "In Hardwood Groves," for example, the poet states that the only avenue of new life is through the death of old life:

The same leaves over and over again!
 They fall from giving shade above,
 To make one texture of faded brown
 And fit the earth like a leather glove.
 Before the leaves can mount again
 To fill the trees with another shade,

They must go down past things coming up,
 They must go down into the dark decayed.
 They must be pierced by flowers and put
 Beneath the feet of dancing flowers,
 However it is in some other world

I know that this is the way in ours.

If we measure existence on a biological scale the apex of which is the reproduction of offspring, old life and new life cross paths at a point where one is traveling away from the apex toward death, the other toward the apex and reproduction of new life. In the case of Maple's mother, the movement in the biological cycle from reproduction to death has been accelerated. Just as leaves "must go down past things coming up," Maple and her mother only see each other "in passing in the room upstairs / One coming this way into life, and one / Going the other out of life. . . ."

Maple's refusal to discover her name's meaning could be motivated by several factors. Perhaps it is, as Frost writes, a "filial diffidence" that keeps her from discovery, a fear of recognizing her parents outside of their roles in relation to her. She has, after all, organized part of her existence around their roles as mother and father to her, and she may be unwilling to acknowledge them in the roles of lovers, roles necessarily outside of herself. Or perhaps it is a fear of being forced, by association, to shift her own identity from that of lover to that of mother, her husband's identity to that of father; she is too egocentric to acknowledge the sacrificial quality of her role as an individual in the

progression of generations. At any rate, she has failed to move beyond her own ego to a point where she can recognize others outside of their roles in relation to herself, and she has closed herself to the meaning that has been thrust upon her: "'We would not see the secret if we could now: / We are not looking for it any more'" (161-162). She has constructed her own "meaning" concerning her name--a belief in the unsolvable mystery behind the meaning of her name--and to discover a meaning at this point would be to threaten the framework upon which she has organized her existence.

CHAPTER V

CREATING MEANING FROM CHAOS

There is at least so much good in the world that it admits of form and the making of form. And not only admits of it, but calls for it. We people are thrust forward out of the suggestions of form in the rolling clouds of nature. In us nature reaches its height of form and through us exceeds itself. When in doubt there is always form for us to go on with. Anyone who has achieved the least form is lost to the larger excruciations. (Frost, "Letter to The Amherst Student," SP 106)

Much of Frost's prose and poetry, perhaps all of his writing, as he would argue, is concerned with creating order from confusion--imposing form upon chaos and thereby creating meaning from the meaningless. Frost's chief weapon in the struggle against chaos is the metaphor. According to him, our understanding of existence depends upon our ability to understand one thing in terms of another--our ability to think metaphorically. And the ability to perceive in terms of metaphor is synonymous with the ability to think. "The metaphor whose meaning we are best taught in poetry--that is all there is of thinking," Frost wrote in "Education by Poetry" (SP 43). Poetry, since it is "made of metaphor" (SP 24), affords us the opportunity to impose a structure upon our existence and thereby find at least a temporary respite from the confusions that continually threaten to overwhelm us. It

is a "momentary stay against confusion" (SP 18).

Ultimately, the value of the metaphor, however, is not its power to lead us to truth. After all, metaphors break down; they take us just so far in our thinking and then they give out. It is hard to know at any point how close to truth we stand with them. But they are valuable because they create order, and it is in this order that Frost finds or "makes" meaning. "The freedom is ours to insist on meaning," he wrote in his essay "On Emerson" (SP 116). Truth has little to do with meaning because meaning is self-imposed.

In "Maple" Frost dramatizes the disparity between truth and meaning. The simplest truth concerning Maple's name is that either Maple's parents had a meaning in mind when they chose to name her Maple, or that the name was simply a "lapse into fancy" and had no meaning. But meaningful or meaningless makes little difference; what does matter is Maple's belief that her name has meaning, and this belief is what imposes order and gives meaning to her life: "Thus had a name with meaning, given in death, / Made a girl's marriage, and ruled in her life. / No matter that the meaning was not clear" (163-165).

The same is true of Maple's husband's divining of her "personal mystery" (92-93). On the one hand, it could be a true divination. Then again, it could be a chance occurrence motivated by word association, or a subconscious remembrance that her name is really Maple--not Mabel. At any rate, whether or not his knowledge is a true divination makes little difference. What does matter is that they choose to believe

it is and base their relationship on this belief. The divination may or may not be real, but their relationship is very real. With it they impose order upon the Babel-like confusion of their existence.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of belief to Frost. It was his opinion that we do not just believe in ourselves, our relationships, our country, but that we actually believe these things into existence: "The Founding Fathers didn't believe in the future . . ." Frost once said.

They believed it in. You're always believing ahead of your evidence. . . . The most creative thing in us is to believe a thing in, in love, in all else. You believe yourself into existence.

You believe your marriage into existence, you believe in each other, you believe that it's worthwhile going on. . . ." (Interviews

with Robert Frost 271)

But the problem with belief is that it, too, like metaphor, can fail. The belief of Maple's teacher that there is no such name as "Maple" fails; there does exist such a name, and Maple bears it. What is more, belief may not only fail, but it can also keep us from the truth. Maple is to be criticized because her need to believe in the mystery of her name blocks her from the truth about her name.

Frost summarizes the disjunction between truth and meaning in the concluding eight lines of the poem where, for the first time in the poem, his poetic persona intrudes into what has been up to this point a strictly dramatic narrative:

Thus had a name with meaning, given in death,
 Made a girl's marriage, and ruled in her life.
 No matter that the meaning was not clear.
 A name with meaning could bring up a child,
 Taking the child out of the parent's hands.
 Better a meaningless name, I should say,
 As leaving more to nature and happy chance.
 Name children some names and see what you do.
 (163-170)

Maple's name, "a name with meaning," has given her the center around which she has organized her life. She has grown both physically and intellectually from the seeds that her mother and father sowed to create her--and that they sowed to create her psyche--and now she has blossomed into an independent individual in her own right. Her name has taken her "out of the parents' hands," and the fact that she never discovers her name's intended meaning--the truth about her name--makes little difference. The meaning that Maple's name has created in her life is her own meaning.

At the same time, Frost seems to imply that the fact that it is her own meaning and not the truth in some way diminishes the meaning in her life. "Better a meaningless name, I should say, / As leaving more to nature and happy chance." He should say better a name without meaning, but he does not, for the truth of the matter is that meaningful or meaningless makes little difference when the meaning we ultimately impose on our lives is our own. "Nature and happy chance" have played an important role in Maple's development. She haphazardly

stumbles upon a husband, and the couple stumbles upon the maple in the glade whose discovery, if it had not come "too late for Maple" (159), could have led them on to a realization about the truth of her name.

This ambivalent attitude toward meaning or belief is central in Frost's poetry. Belief is necessary because it imposes order upon existence, an order that can allow us to exceed ourselves in the same way that nature, through us, exceeds itself, as Frost wrote. But at the same time, belief can be a hindrance, as it is to Maple, in that it can keep us from the truth whose existence we can never be sure of; all metaphors break down. Yes, there is order and belief on our side, but beneath the framework of our imposed forms remains the maw of chaos:

The background in hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. . . . To me any little form I assert upon it is velvet, as the saying is, and to be considered for how much more it is than nothing. If I were a Platonist I should have to consider it, I suppose, for how much less it is than everything. (SP 107)

Concerning poetry, Frost defended a position very similar to his belief about the teacher's role in the educational development of the child. He believed that it was the poet's responsibility to provide his reader with the meaningful material of the poem, but that it was ultimately the

responsibility of the reader to process this material--to discover the relationships between "this and that." Like a parent or a teacher, the poet cannot give his "meaning" away. Growth from the reader can only be achieved when the reader works his way through the metaphor and symbol of the poem, a process that requires both the creativity to interpret symbol, and the faith to believe that symbols can mean the "same at different times to different people" (156). Too often readers are like Maple and her Bible, searching to find an easy revelation and becoming frustrated when one is not apparent. They rob themselves of the pleasure of the creative interaction that must take place between poet and reader if personal enlightenment is to occur. "I don't like obscurity and obfuscation," Frost wrote in "On Emerson," "but I do like dark sayings I must leave the clearing of to time. And I don't want to be robbed of the pleasure of fathoming depths for myself" (SP 114).

Of course, there are risks involved in such poetical play. The reader risks the possibility that his time and intellectual energy will be wasted on a poem that yields nothing. And the poet, for his part, risks the possibility that his labor will produce nothing--that the reader will become frustrated and reject the poem--or that he will be misunderstood. But these are risks that one takes, sacrifices that one is willing to make for the possibility that poetry will give birth to enlightened understanding. And in this way, the relationship between the writer and his reader is similar to the relationship between Maple's father and his daughter.

APPENDIX

"MAPLE"

Her teacher's certainty it must be Mabel
 Made Maple first take notice of her name.
 She asked her father and he told her, "Maple--
 Maple is right."

"But teacher told the school
 There's no such name."

"Teachers don't know as much 5
 As fathers about children, you tell teacher.
 You tell her that it's M-A-P-L-E.
 You ask her if she knows a maple tree.
 Well, you were named after a maple tree.
 Your mother named you. You and she just saw 10
 Each other in passing in the room upstairs,
 One coming this way into life, and one
 Going the other out of life--you know?
 So you can't have much recollection of her.
 She had been having a long look at you. 15
 She put her finger in your cheek so hard
 It must have made your dimple there, and said,
 'Maple.' I said it too: 'Yes, for her name.'
 She nodded. So we're sure there's no mistake.
 I don't know what she wanted it to mean, 20
 But it seems like some word she left to bid you
 Be a good girl--be like a maple tree.
How like a maple tree's for us to guess.
 Or a little girl to guess sometime.
 Not now--at least I shouldn't try too hard now. 25
 By and by I will tell you all I know
 About the different trees, and something, too,
 About your mother that perhaps may help."
 Dangerous self-arousing words to sow.
 Luckily all she wanted of her name then 30
 Was to rebuke her teacher with it next day,
 And give the teacher a scare as from her father.
 Anything further had been wasted on her,
 Or so he tried to think to avoid blame.
 She would forget it. She all but forgot it. 35
 What he sowed with her slept so long a sleep,
 And came so near death in the dark of years,
 That when it woke and came to life again
 The flower was different from the parent seed. 40
 It came back vaguely at the glass one day,
 As she stood saying her name over aloud,
 Striking it gently across her lowered eyes
 To make it go well with the way she looked.
 What was it about her name? Its strangeness lay 45
 In having too much meaning. Other names,
 As Lesley, Carol, Irma, Marjorie,

signified nothing. Rose could have a meaning,
 But hadn't as it went. (She knew a Rose.)
 This difference from other names it was
 Made people notice it--and notice her.
 (They either noticed it, or got it wrong.) 50
 Her problem was to find out what it asked
 In dress or manner of the girl who bore it.
 If she could form some notion of her mother--
 What she had thought was lovely, and what good.
 This was her mother's childhood home; 55
 The house one story high in front, three stories
 On the end it presented to the road.
 (The arrangement made a pleasant sunny cellar.)
 Her mother's bedroom was her father's still,
 Where she could watch her mother's picture fading. 60
 Once she found for a bookmark in the Bible
 A maple leaf she thought must have been laid
 In wait for her there. She read every word
 Of the two pages it was pressed between,
 As if it was her mother speaking to her. 65
 But forgot to put the leaf back in closing
 And lost the place never to read again.
 She was sure, though, there had been nothing in it.
 So she looked for herself, as everyone 70
 Looks for himself, more or less outwardly.
 And her self-seeking, fitful though it was,
 May still have been what led her on to read,
 And think a little, and get some city schooling.
 She learned shorthand, whatever shorthand may 75
 Have had to do with it--she sometimes wondered.
 So, till she found herself in a strange place
 For the name Maple to have brought her to,
 Taking dictation on a paper pad
 And, in the pauses when she raised her eyes, 80
 Watching out of a nineteenth story window
 An airship laboring with unshiplike motion
 And a vague all-disturbing roar above the river
 Beyond the highest city built with hands.
 Someone was saying in such natural tones 85
 She almost wrote the words down on her knee,
 "Do you know you remind me of a tree--
 A maple tree?"

"Because my name is Maple?"

"Isn't it Mabel? I thought it was Mabel."

"No doubt you've heard the office call me Mabel. 90
 I have to let them call me what they like."

They were both stirred that he should have divined
 Without the name her personal mystery.
 It made it seem as if there must be something 95
 She must have missed herself. So they were married,
 And took the fancy home with them to live by.

They went on pilgrimage once to her father's
 (The house one story high in front, three stories
 On the side it presented to the road)
 To see if there was not some special tree
 She might have overlooked. They could find none, 100
 Not so much as a single tree for shade,
 Let alone grove of trees for sugar orchard.
 She told him of the bookmark maple leaf
 In the big Bible, and all she remembered
 Of the place marked with it--"Wave offering, 105
 Something about wave offering, it said."

"You've never asked your father outright, have you?"

"I have, and been put 'off sometime, I think."
 (This was her faded memory of the way
 Once long ago her father had put himself off.) 110

"Because no telling but it may have been
 Something between your father and your mother
 Not meant for us at all."

"Not meant for me?"
 Where would the fairness be in giving me 115
 A name to carry for life and never know
 The secret of?"

"And then it may have been
 Something a father couldn't tell a daughter
 As well as could a mother. And again
 It may have been their one lapse into fancy 120
 'Twould be too bad to make him sorry for
 By bringing it up to him when he was too old.
 Your father feels us round him with our questing,
 And holds us off unnecessarily,
 As if he didn't know what little thing 125
 Might lead us on to a discovery.
 It was as personal as he could be
 About the way he saw it was with you
 To say your mother, had she lived, would be
 As far again as from being born to bearing." 130

"Just one look more with what you say in mind,
 And I give up"; which last look came to nothing.
 But though they now gave up the search forever,
 They clung to what one had seen in the other 135
 By inspiration. It proved there was something.
 They kept their thoughts away from when the maples
 Stood uniform in buckets, and the steam
 Of sap and snow rolled off the sugarhouse.
 When they made her related to the maples, 140
 It was the tree the autumn fire ran through
 And swept of leathern leaves, but left the bark
 Unscorched, unblackened, even, by any smoke.

They always took their holidays in autumn.
Once they came on a maple in a glade,
Standing alone with smooth arms lifted up,
And every leaf of foliage she'd worn 145
Laid scarlet and pale pink about her feet.
But its age kept them from considering this one.
Twenty-five years ago at Maple's naming
It hardly could have been a two-leaved seedling
The next cow might have licked up out at pasture. 150
Could it have been another maple like it?
They hovered for a moment near discovery,
Figurative enough to see the symbol,
But lacking faith in anything to mean
The same at different times to different people. 155
Perhaps a filial diffidence partly kept them
From thinking it could be a thing so bridal.
And anyway it came too late for Maple.
She used her hands to cover up her eyes. 160
"We would not see the secret if we could now:
We are not looking for it any more."

Thus had a name with meaning, given in death,
Made a girl's marriage, and ruled in her life.
No matter that the meaning was not clear. 165
A name with meaning could bring up a child,
Taking the child out of the parents' hands.
Better a meaningless name, I should say,
As leaving more to nature and happy chance.
Name children some names and see what you do. 170

NOTES

¹ The Poetry of Robert Frost, ed. Edward Connery Lathem. All quotations from Frost's poetry are taken from this text.

² Selected Prose of Robert Frost, eds. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem, p. 41. Further references to this work will be designated SP.

³ The need to organize one's identity around a name is a need that haunted Frost all of his life. As Thompson, points out, Frost shaped his own boyhood identity around the heroic qualities of General Robert Lee, the soldier-hero for whom he was named (Early Years xiii).

⁴ Morris indicates that the source of this trial by ordeal is Laws 5.25, but since there is no book ordinarily entitled Laws in the Old Testament, I have taken the liberty of assuming that he means Numbers 5.25, which contains the only reference of a wave offering in connection with a trial by ordeal for suspected adultery that is to be found in the Bible.

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