

**BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION:
A RECURRING THEME IN THE
POEMS OF ROBERT FROST**

BARBARA DODSON COTA

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION: A RECURRING THEME

IN THE POEMS OF ROBERT FROST

An Abstract

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Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

by

Barbara Dodson Cota

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ABSTRACT

Psychologists, sociologists, novelists and poets have emphasized the feelings of loneliness and isolation as problems of the twentieth century man. Robert Frost illustrates through his dramatic poetry the necessity for man to accept individual differences in people and the barriers that prevent complete understanding of his fellow man.

Frost utilizes the simplest form of communication--dialogue--to point to man's need to understand the person as well as the words that he speaks. Words alone do not convey all the real feelings or attitudes that a person has. He further indicates the importance of experience as an aid to the development of objectivity needed to recognize the factors that influence the outcome of attempts to communicate. His dramatic poems may be divided into two primary groups: those poems in which the characters attempting to communicate are a husband and a wife, and poems in which the characters attempting to communicate are not bound by legal or emotional ties to each other. The marriage ties present both positive and negative conditions that affect the degree of communication possible between a husband and a wife. The emotional ties make the failures in communication more devastating to the individual and the successes more inspiring. Frost offers examples of couples who face different problems and resolve them according to their different resources of shared experience and to the extent of their concern for each other. Persons not bound by marriage face similar problems of communication but do not have the same obligation to solve the problem as a marriage partner has.

Frost often places a rather obtuse character in juxtaposition with an objective persona to deal with barriers--prejudice, inherited and self-imposed ideas--that prevent communication. It is significant that Frost's perceptive persona does not force his ideas upon the other if it means destroying the other's individuality. As a result, mutual communication does not occur, but there is communication on a superficial level.

Frost is aware of man's innate desire to communicate his feelings and ideas to others, but he does not assure him that he will achieve and sustain perfect communication. He hopes that man may learn to accept the inevitability of failures to communicate and thus become reconciled to the people and the world around him.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Barbara Dodson Cota entitled "Barriers to Communication: A Recurring Theme in the Poems of Robert Frost." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Lewis C. Tatham

Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
recommend its acceptance:

Edward E. Irwin

Second Committee Member

Charles M. Waters

Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Council:

Wayne E. Stamps

Dean of the Graduate School

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The terms alienation, isolation and loneliness have become as common to the Twentieth Century man's vocabulary as they have to his experience of living in a world enlightened by education, made smaller by rapid transportation, and saturated by mass communication. Psychologists, sociologists, novelists, and poets have emphasized the feelings of loneliness and isolation as problems that man faces in this complex world. David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd has become the definitive statement of the alienation that contemporary man faces. Commenting on the title of Riesman's work, Sidney Finkelstein in his book, Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature states,

The "crowd" is made of people so linked together as to give it its own organic life. In the "lonely" crowd the individuals are estranged from one another, so that the links chafe like manacles, and communication and mutual understanding are replaced by estrangement and hostility.¹

This alienation is not a reaction against some social situation or against exploitation in its many forms, but is rather "an internal conflict, a hostility felt toward something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defense but an impoverishment to oneself."² Feelings of alienation or

¹Sidney Finkelstein, Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature (New York, 1967), p. 136.

²Ibid., p. 137.

loneliness are not restricted to any age, class, or area. They are found wherever man is unable to relate in a positive way to his environment and to the people around him.

Recently, man's feelings of alienation have been blamed on the machine that has taken from him the satisfaction of creativity and given him the impression that he is a mere extension of that machine. The place where a man lives has received its share of criticism, but man can feel loneliness on a farm as well as in a crowded ghetto in the city. No one cause may be held responsible because the causes are as varied as there are individuals. Alfred Kazin, in his essay "The Alone Generation: A Comment on the Fiction of the Fifties," sees the problem as especially serious in America. "American society is remarkable for the degree of loneliness (not solitude) in which the individual can find himself. In our mass age, the individual's lack of privacy, his unlimited demand for self-satisfaction, his primary concern with his own health and well-being have actually thrown him back on himself more than before."³ Certainly the pressure to conform to the picture of the ideal given by society forces man constantly to evaluate his own achievements in light of the ideal. It is possible to lose sight of the real values of life by this absorption with self. He tends to lose his perspective, and it is at this point that the novelist and the poet may help man to regain a balanced view of himself and his environment.

The contemporary poet feels concern primarily for the individual; more specifically, he fears that his individuality will be destroyed or

³Alfred Kazin, "The Alone Generation: A Comment on the Fiction of the Fifties," Writing in America, ed. John Fischer et al. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1960), p. 15.

overwhelmed by things, machines, programs, and pressures to conform. Robert Frost began to write long before Riesman explained man's relationship to the crowd. He wrote to the individual about personal responses to nature, life values, progress, and ordinary men and women. He recognized man's need to communicate in order to preserve his individuality. He stated his purpose of speaking to man through poetry in the preface to the Complete Poems of 1949: "A good poem, like love, ends in a clarification of life--not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion."⁴ Many critics would say that Frost's greatest contribution is as a poet who recommends that man turn to nature in his fight against loneliness, for he is to many, a nature poet in the tradition of Wordsworth. Marion Montgomery, however, in his essay, "Robert Frost and His Use of Barriers: Man Vs. Nature Toward God," points out that "his best poetry is concerned with the drama of man in nature, whereas Wordsworth is generally best when emotionally displaying the panorama of the natural world."⁵ Frost himself in a television interview in 1952 denied the label of "nature poet," "I guess I'm not a nature poet, I have only written two poems without a human being in them." The close reader of Frost will discover that animals and natural objects are addressed, but always in the presence of man. Montgomery states, "Frost is describing the animal and vegetable natures in man, not reading man's nature into the animal and vegetable worlds, as Wordsworth was inclined

⁴Robert Frost, Complete Poems (New York, 1965), p. 6.

⁵Robert Frost, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. James M. Cox (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.), p. 138.

to do."⁶ Frost places man in relationship to nature but the subject of his interest is always man first, nature second.

He chose to write about a rather limited area of the country and the people who lived there. New England is primarily a section populated by farmers who by the characteristics of their environment are dependent upon the whims of nature for their very existence. The people living there are often characterized as being very individualistic and as isolated by the weather and by their independence. According to Montgomery, Frost believes that man remains a stranger in this world until through understanding himself he understands the world around him. "With understanding comes love which makes him respect the chaos of the world with which he is in conflict, the material with which he works. The same love makes him respect and accept differences between men also. He respects others' individual differences and expects that others will respect his."⁷ This acceptance of the differences that exist between men is illustrated especially in Frost's dramatic poems. He uses everyday conversation to make it easier for the reader to identify with the characters--ordinary farmers, not industrialized puppets--of his poems. Man's efforts to communicate with another are hindered by the barriers inherited or self-imposed, and thus his isolation is emphasized. To convey his ideas, Frost employs dialogue which gives the ideas an immediacy and a reality that the third person point of view could not have achieved as well. Dennis Donaghue in his article, "A Mode of Communication: Frost and the 'Middle' Style," makes this point:

⁶Ibid., p. 141.

⁷Ibid., p. 148.

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Frost communicates through a shared sense of "the way things are"; he counts on nothing more than humane axioms, self-evident truths incapable of proof. Our sense of these truths, what we all know simply by being human and extant, provided the "theoretic form" of Frost's poems. . . . Robert Frost is an inveterate talker. He wants the poem to speak to us, to hold us interested, bewildered, amazed. We know he takes pain to make his verse render--phrase by phrase--the "dramatic tone of voice" to make the sound of voices testify to the reality of his persons.⁸

The simplest and most direct way of establishing any relationship with another person is through speech. Yet, the words we say do not always convey the meaning that we intend. It is this failure to communicate that causes feelings of isolation and loneliness in a crowd. There are many barriers that prevent man from even attempting to communicate or to establish productive relationships; some he is aware of, some he is not. Despite his inability to achieve perfect communication man continues to have the desire to say something to another person and to be regarded as an individual worthy of consideration by that person. The desire to relate to another is motivation for friendship, neighborly association, business contacts, club membership, patriotic allegiance, marriage and family involvement.

Important as the desire to communicate is, even more important to successful communication is the learned skill of communication. Skill results from individual study, observation, and experience. It is the experience or process that Frost invites the reader to observe in his narrative poetry in which the characters speak, act, and react. These

⁸Dennis Donaghue, "A Mode of Communication: Frost and the 'Middle' Style," Yale Review, Vol. 52 (Winter, 1963), pp. 205-219.

observations are not viewed in any typical laboratory situation but are found outside the protected environment of the classroom, seen as true-to-life happenings in the lives of ordinary people. He deals with the most sacred of relationships, marriage, brushing away the film of romantic illusions of love as a catalytic agent. His characters deal with the walls that separate farms and people and Frost encourages the reader to draw objective conclusions about these barriers in the hope that the reader may learn from the experiences of these "others."

A study of Frost's dramatic poetry reveals to the reader what the poet has said about the theme of communication and man's ability to achieve perfect understanding. In several of his poems, alienation and loneliness result from a failure to communicate. The poems are arranged in two primary groups: first, those poems in which the characters attempting to communicate are a husband and a wife; and, second, poems in which the characters are not bound by any legal or emotional ties to each other. In each of these groups, the underlying barriers and the contributing forces to communication will be considered.

CHAPTER II

"'TWIXT THOSE THAT LOVE"

Frost looks at the relationship of men and women in marriage sympathetically, allowing the reader to see the possibilities for understanding and misunderstanding that may be expected in the experience of living as husband and wife. The real problems of communication between a husband and wife are complicated by the assumption that marriage brings together two people who, because of their love for each other, will be able to communicate easily. Some think that no matter what the issue is between a husband and wife, they will be able to understand each other because of their emotional ties; Frost's "Home Burial," though, is a poignant example of a husband and wife's failure to communicate. Both "Death of a Hired Man" and "In the Home Stretch" contain examples of husbands and wives who do speak to each other through words and actions, and even though there is understanding, it does not happen without effort on the part of the couple.

"Home Burial" tells the reader about Amy's and her husband's reaction to the loss of their first-born child. The husband wants to help Amy by sharing her grief, but she refuses his help. She thinks that he is not only incapable of understanding her grief but also empty of any grief for his own child since she interpreted his ability to engage in trivial conversation right after he had dug the child's grave as evidence of his insensitivity. He, on the other hand, cannot understand why his love for her cannot help her leave her sorrow and return to their life together.

The following passages reflect Amy's belief in his inability to share or understand her grief:

She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and a while he didn't see.
But at last he murmured, "Oh," and again, "Oh."
"What is it--what?" she said.

"Just that I see."

"You don't," she challenged. "Tell me what it is."¹
(69, 15-20)

Amy was confident that even though he looked out the window, he would not see what she was able to see--the thoughts triggered by watching him dig the grave of his own child. He could not possibly see as she does, with her mother love--the love for the child that she had carried and given birth to.

Her attitude is also evident in her response to the husband's right to speak of the child that he, too, has lost.

"Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?"

"Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.
I don't know rightly whether any man can."
(70, 37-40)

Amy wants to be free not just from her husband's indifference to grief, but from the inability of any man to understand a woman's feelings about grief.

"You can't because you don't know how to speak.
If you had any feelings, you that dug
With your own hand--how could you?--his little grave."
(71, 75-78)

¹Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1965), hereafter cited by page and line at the conclusion of each passage.

She thought he could not speak because he was incapable of any depth of emotion. To the reader it is evident that Amy is unwilling to accept any other reaction to grief than her own. She wants her husband's sympathy and acknowledgment that her grief is special. The conversation that he engages in after digging the grave seems to her to display a callousness with which the world reacts to death. She fears that, if she allows him into her grief, he may destroy her feelings which are all-important to her. Normal life cannot go on for her, and she speaks out against the other's insensitivity to grief:

"Friends make a pretense of following to the grave,
And 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.
But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"
(72, 106-111)

As we examine the reactions of the husband we can see in them a clash between masculine nature and feminine nature.² Early in the poem when he is trying to understand Amy he says,

"A man must partly give up being a man
With women-folk."
(70, 52-53)

His reluctance in giving up being a man reveals the conception of his masculine role in this experience that they face. The idea that a man is not expected to show his grief is demonstrated in the fact that he was able to dig the grave and then participate in everyday conversation. As head of the family, he assumes that he should be the source of strength for his wife in bearing her grief, as revealed in the following passages:

²John Robert Doyle, Jr., The Poetry of Robert Frost (New York, 1962), p. 38.

"Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs."
(70, 41-42)

"Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me a chance."
(71, 60-64)

He offers his love as consolation for her loss, acknowledging her right to grief as a mother, but expresses criticism of her rejection of his love by pointing out her responsibility, as wife, to share it with him. He wants to believe that their talking may have helped her and that now they can resume their life. His reaction is partly motivated by his desire that those outside their home believe that he is in control of the situation.

"There, you have said it all and you feel better.
You won't go now. You're crying. Close the door."
(72, 112-113)

"The heart's gone out of it; why keep it up.
Amy! There's someone coming down the road!"
(73, 114-115)

As the poem is concluded they are no closer than before. In what she says, she demonstrates that she still does not understand him; his reply shows that he still does not understand her. Even though they love each other they have found no common ground on which to reconcile their differences.

"You--oh, you think that 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--"
(73, 116-120)

Each stands apart, unwilling to look at the other's reaction to death, unwilling to acknowledge the other's need to share this experience because the words and actions, as well as the roles that they believe are theirs to play, prevent them from communicating their real feelings. There is a definite failure to communicate even though many words are spoken.

Actions, of course, play an important part in the art of communication. In actual conversation, words are stressed and there are facial expressions and gestures to clarify the words spoken. Frost, in this poem, adds action and force to the words by describing the action and repeating words to add the force. Actions become either a reply or motivation for a spoken response.

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.
(70, 47)

Several passages deal with the wife's action while the husband answers with words.

She moved a little. "Don't--don't go."
(71, 59)

"If--you--do!" She was opening the door wider.
"Where do you mean to go? First tell me that."
(73, 118-119)

When words are repeated they become harsh and almost seem to rise in a crescendo. Strong emotion thus comes through to the reader as he can "feel" the force with which the words are spoken.

"Don't, don't, don't, don't" she cried
(70, 32)

"There you go sneering now!"
"I'm not, I'm not."
(71, 70-71)

"I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed."
(72, 93-94)

Amy says:

"But the world's evil. I won't have grief so
If I can change it. Oh, I won't, I won't!"
(72, 110-111)

This repetition of words indicates the desire on the part of the speaker to make the listener understand his feelings. It is an effort to penetrate verbally the wall that exists between the two, but paradoxically, it tends only to intensify the impossibility of understanding between Amy and her husband. Each exchange builds the wall higher, making it very difficult for the words that they utter to translate their grief into any further basis for understanding.

In "Death of the Hired Man" a married couple's different points of view are shown, but at the conclusion of the poem the reader senses that the couple has learned to accept their differences. Their basic outlooks upon life are similar to those of Amy and her husband--Mary is sensitive, and Warren is practical. There are points at which they do not communicate, but each is willing to listen: they seem to complement each other. Perhaps they are able to communicate better than Amy and her husband because they are older or because they are dealing with a problem outside themselves. They are also dealing with death, but it is the death of someone outside their family. Silas, a former hired hand of theirs, has come home to die. His right to choose their home is challenged by Warren, as he remembers past experiences that they have had with Silas. Although Mary listens to Warren's arguments, she remains willing to accept Silas' need of a home, ignoring the question of Silas' rights.

Mary cautions Warren at the beginning of the poem to "Be kind" (49, 7). He responds defensively, "When was I ever anything but kind to him" (49, 11)? Through Warren's expressions of defense there is evidence of a man who is able to detect motives and is able to face the truth of life. Mary does not argue with Warren, but suggests that he think of Silas in another way: "He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove" (50, 33). . . . and he's changed/ Wait till you see" (50, 38-39).

As they talk about the time when Silas worked for them, they both contribute to the discussion without any suggestion of criticism of each other. Words that reflect the apparent balance of Warren and Mary in their approach to life are the often quoted definitions of "home."

Warren:

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

Mary:

"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."
(53, 122-125)

Mary's definition seems to complement Warren's. Each allows the idea of the other to stand, showing a mutual trust and acceptance of the other's right to his own interpretation of a basic idea. Warren's definition is short, blunt, and direct while Mary's is long, indirect, and gentle, reflecting the point of view of each of the speakers. Throughout the poem, Warren speaks more harshly than Mary. The words used by each convey the manner in which he speaks and thus adds meaning to his individual point of view. This choice of words is true in "Home Burial" as well, but the overall impression is violent while in "Death of a Hired Hand," there is a semblance of serenity.

At the end of the poem there is evidence that there is communication between Mary and Warren. She says to Warren just before he goes in to see Silas,

"His working days are done; I'm sure of it."
 "I'd not be in a hurry to say that."
 "I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself."
 But, Warren, please remember how it is:"
 (54, 160-163)

When Warren returns:

Warren returned--too soon, it seemed to her
 Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.
 "Warren?" she questioned.
 "Dead," was all he answered.
 (55, 172-175)

Warren's taking Mary's hand as he sits down beside her without an elaborate explanation of how he had found Silas re-emphasizes that there is communication between them and that they will share this experience together. Words are not always needed to communicate thoughts and understanding.

We have thus far considered two couples in two poems and their attempts to communicate their feelings and thoughts through words and action. In one poem there is a rather violent impasse in the communication process, but in the other a successful attempt between Warren and Mary. The incidents described, for the most part, involve immediate reactions, not the repeating of past actions, to communicate feelings. In contrast, in the poem, "In the Home Stretch," there is an emphasis on past experiences that serve as patterns for present action and understanding. Joe and his wife face the immediate problem of moving from the city to the country. This disruption in their life causes them to consider the inevitability of the separation by death, faced by many

older couples. The reader sees their reactions to the immediate problem of resettlement in light of their past interaction, and he expects the future will be faced on the basis of their past shared attitudes.

Joe and his wife, like Warren and Mary, seem to complement each other, but their roles are reversed. Joe is presented as the dreamer who is at last realizing his dream of a small acreage in the country for his retirement years. His wife is more realistic as she stands "amid the wreckage of former home" (145, 195) and looks out the kitchen window. When Joe asks what she sees, she responds:

"What I'll be seeing more of in the years
To come as here I stand and go the round
Of many plates with towels many times."
"And what is that? You only put me off."
"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."

(139-140, 27-35)

Her answer is an accurate description of the view she sees from the window, but Joe knows that she sees more--that it suggests other thoughts to her. When pressed to reveal what this view means to her, she adds,

"No, for besides the things I tell you of,
I only see the years. They come and go
In alternation with the weeds, the field,
The wood."

"What kind of years?"

"Why, latter years--

Different from early years."

(140-141, 49-55)

Symbolically the everyday chore of washing dishes emphasizes the reality of interpretation of the view she sees from the windows. Her view of their remaining years together is ended with the woods. Joe can

"see" the space as years but he wants to know if she can count the exact numbers they have left. She answers,

"No the further off
So run together that I didn't try to.
It can scarce be that they would be in number
We'd care to know, for we are not young now."
(141, 58-61)

Both are concerned about postponing the separation caused by death. This is suggested by Frost in his use of light and dark imagery. It is the wife's concern that they have light, almost in an effort to hold back the darkness of death. She wants to reestablish the basic framework of their home: stove, lamps, food. She urges her husband to get the movers to help him set up the stove.

"We've got to have the stove
Whatever else we want for. And a light.
Have we a piece of candle if the lamp
And oil are buried out of reach?"
(142, 86-89)

Joe recognizes her need for this form of security by setting up the stove and lighting the fire for her and suggesting that they symbolically "rend the bread," purchased in the store on their way to their new home.

While Joe's wife is concerned with implications for the future that she sees in their present experience of beginning a new life in a new house, Joe is concerned with this change as it relates to the past. Joe's desire for security takes the form of seeking reassuring answers from his wife. He wants to be sure that she wants this new home as much as he does.

"And yet you think you like it, dear?"

She answers,

"That's what you're so concerned to know! You hope
I like it."
(140, 37-38)

Joe's wife knows what is behind the questions. After the stove is up and they are left alone, Joe again comments,

"It's all so much what I have always wanted,
I can't believe it's what you wanted, too."
"Shouldn't you like to know?"

"I'd like to know
If it is what you wanted, then how much
You wanted it for me."

(145, 177-182)

Her sharing of his dream means much to him, but even if she wanted it only for him, it is still a kind of affirmation of her love for him.

Joe wants to reconstruct his dream, making sure that it is their dream. In this way he may be reassured that this move is right.

"But who first said the word to come?"

"My dear,
It's who first thought. You're searching, Joe,
For things that don't exist; I mean beginnings.
Ends and beginnings--there are no such things.
There are only middles."

(145, 186-191)

She is wise enough not to commit herself, knowing that if she voices her own doubts his doubts will become real. She knows that there are some thoughts and ideas that cannot be shared completely in order to preserve their relationship. Beginnings and ends tend to destroy dreams.

The past and the future come together as they look about in the lantern light at the items of furniture that are not new. Again Joe's wife goes beyond the tangible to the intangible:

"Our sitting here by lantern light together
Amid the wreckage of former home?
You won't deny the lantern isn't new.
The stove is not, and you are not to me,
Nor I to you."

"Perhaps you never were?"

"It would take me forever to recite
All that's not new in where we find ourselves.

(145, 194-201)

Now is a word for fools in towns who think
 Style upon Style in dress and thought at last
 Must get somewhere. I've heard you say as much.
 No, this is no beginning."

"Then an end?"

"End is a gloomy word."

(146, 202-207)

Again she refuses to label this stage in their life as either a beginning or an end, emphasizing the continuity of their life. There is no disagreement, just a repeating of ideas that have been theirs for many years. There is a strength that cannot be shaken for more than a brief time by the movers who would have no part of a life out in the country.

The poem concludes with Joe back to his dream of his wonderful farm, a little regretful that, because of the darkness, they cannot take a tour of it to reassure him of their good fortune. His wife suggests that they must first go to bed to be ready for the new day. Their environment has changed but they are the same as a result of years of love and understanding. Their past experiences are as familiar as things within the house that surround them. The reader senses hope for their future, not frustration, as in the conclusion of "Home Burial."

Frost helps the reader to a greater understanding of the art of communication through parts of other poems that demonstrate similar attitudes or conditions affecting the outcome of attempts to communicate. One of the most serious barriers to communication between a man and a woman is the role that they think they are expected to play in marriage. In many relationships there is a resigned acceptance of the inability on the part of a man to understand the way a woman thinks and feels. In "West Running Brook" the young husband states,

Oh, if you take it off the lady-land,
 As't were the country of the Amazons,
 We men must see you to the confines of
 And leave you there, ourselves forbid to enter,--
 (328, 36-39)

He will not attempt to enter her area of thought if she makes the experience relate only to herself, admitting to man's assumed inability to comprehend a woman's reactions.

The conception of a man's role is definitely involved in "Home Burial." Amy's husband realizes that his words do not convey his thoughts--that she does not understand him or he, her. He finally concludes that he might learn to understand her or could be taught, but it would mean giving up being a man.

"I don't know how to speak of anything
 So as to please you. But I might be taught
 I should suppose. I can't say I see how.
 A man must partly give up being a man
 With women-folk."

(70, 49-53)

He places her into the role in which he sees all women-folk--unreasonable, difficult to understand, demanding the sacrifice of his manliness.

He further acknowledges that perhaps the only way that they can go on to build their life again would be to admit that there are areas into which each would not be permitted to trespass. This is a desperate attempt to find some way to go beyond the grief that they both feel but cannot share, an unsatisfactory way to settle their problem--a compromise.

"We could have some arrangement
 By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
 Anything special you're a mind to name.
 Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
 Two that don't love can't live together without them.
 But two that do can't live together with them."

(70-71, 53-58)

He shows accurate perception in the last two lines as he realizes that such a compromise would open their relationship to possible further danger. People who don't love use infringement on "off-limit" areas as their reason to inflict revenge, and in a rather perverse way, this type of confrontation nurtures their relationship. He fears that their love would be destroyed by such an arrangement; however, because he believes that he must give in to her particular celebration of grief, he would be willing to agree to such a compromise. He demonstrates in action as well as words his complete resignation to his idea that a man must give in to a woman and forfeit his own grief to hers:

"You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
 God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
 A man can't speak of his own child that's dead."
 (71, 72-74)

The relationship is no longer between Amy and him, but rather, between the impersonal roles of a man and a woman. The emotional bonds that hold them together contribute to the hostility that they feel towards each other. They cannot walk away when they are disappointed with the imperfection that they see in each other, but are forced to resolve the problem in some way.

In other poems of Frost are found examples of the accepted ideas of roles and the expected responses of men and women. In the poem "Snow" there is one such example. The wife is very domineering, but the husband, who seems quite resigned to her ways, makes some pointed statements concerning women in general as he reacts to her concern for Brother Maserve.

"Only you women have to put these airs on
To impress men. You've got us so ashamed
Of being men we can't look at a good fight
Between two boys and not feel bound to stop it.
Let the man freeze an ear or two, I say--
He's here. I leave him all to you. Go in
And save his life."

(184, 114-120)

Mr. Cole almost seems to envy Brother Meserve his determination to go out into the blizzard. It seems "manly" for him to attempt it and Mrs. Cole's efforts to dissuade him represent the age-old "smothering" of man by woman, taking from him his male role or his masculinity, all done under the guise of protection or of knowing what is best for him.

Mrs. Cole carries out her expected role by saying to Brother Meserve,

"If you were the kind of man
Paid heed to women, you'd take my advice
And for your family's sake stay where you are."
(188, 234-236)

Brother Meserve represents a challenge that Mrs. Cole cannot resist. She is almost self-righteous as she sees herself representing all wives concerned for the well-being of their husbands. Recognizing that he is not accustomed to listening to his wife, or any woman, she raises the question of what it is that wants him to go out into the snow at this time of night. She is stopped by the answer that defies further discussion. To avoid "being cornered by a woman" (256), he resorts to accepted male reasoning by saying,

"Well, there's--the storm. That says I must go on.
That wants me as a war might if it came.
Ask any man."

(189, 260-263)

Mr. Cole admired Meserve's way with words and his way of putting his wife in the place where he wants to put her--the role of the wife subservient

to the man of the house. The two men go off to the barn together as men agreeing that women do not understand the challenge of adversity that men feel.

The pictures a man has of how a woman should act and how he should respond to her are very much a part of the resources that he brings to his marriage. His wife, too, brings her own image of the roles of husband and wife as a part of her dowry. Unless these pictures are similar, little real communication can take place until the pictures can be sympathetically accepted and understood. It is a gradual process, and if one member forces his ideas upon the other there is little hope that the relationship will be a happy or even a tolerable one.

Is it possible that Frost sees the marriage relationships as a series of bumbling attempts at communication? Or does he, by presenting couples at different stages of their lives and confronting various experiences, suggest to the reader that there is hope of communication? It is known that communication is not dependent upon only one experience but is rather the sum total of words, action, experience, assumed ideas, and degree of involvement in the experience. Greater communication is possible when two people know each other and have shared meaningful experiences. The reader may find in Frost's poems examples of most elements that promote communication--sensitivity, knowledge, experience, and love.

One very moving example of a shared experience that could serve as a solid foundation for future communication is found in the poem, "West Running Brook." The couple is young, and the wife, especially, is full of the exuberant joy of living every moment to the fullest. She wants to make every experience "theirs."

"We've said we two. Let's change that to we three.
As you and I are married to each other,
We'll both be married to the brook."

(327, 15-17)

She realizes that the brook is running not east but west, not as brooks are supposed to run on the coast, toward the ocean. She sees this phenomenon as something especially for them at this particular moment in their life. She uses it to express her confidence in their relationship.

"It must be the brook
Can trust itself to go by contraries
The way I can with you--and you with me--"

(327, 8-10)

Their differences are not a problem to her, for she seems to be in a rather idyllic state. She sees beauty all around her; the world is theirs!

He, on the other hand, does not view the brook as made for them, but, rather, believes that they are made for it as it represents life--their life.

"It flows between us, over us, and with us.
And it is time, strength, tone, light, life, and love--
And even substance lapsing unsubstantial;
The universal cataract of death
That spends to nothingness--and unresisted,
Save by some strange resistance in itself,"

(329, 56-61)

As the river seems to resist the natural flow to the ocean he sees in this example of opposition a possible significance for their life, that they, too, must resist the easy natural flow and reach back to the source. Life does not flow naturally but requires reevaluation from time to time as to the direction it is taking.

"It is this backward motion toward the source,
Against the stream, that most we see ourselves in,
The tribute of the current to the source.
It is from this in nature we are from.
It is most us."

(329, 71-75)

There is a rock in the stream that causes the water to form into a small wave, seeming to run counter to itself. In this he sees the realities of the problems that they must face and that may separate even them, for a "panic moment."

Significantly drawing attention to their sharing of this experience, as well as to the inspiration of such communication, are the concluding five lines of the poem:

"Today will be the day
You said so."
"No, today will be the day
You said the brook was called West-running Brook."
"Today will be the day of what we both said."
(329, 75-80)

Frost gives the reader hope in this poem that individuals can share ideas if they have a desire and a confidence in each other.

This young couple seem to be at the threshold of their relationship. Perhaps there is more willingness to try to understand or communicate at the beginning of a marriage when love seems great enough to carry them along. Sometimes it is only the emotional ties that can sustain a marriage when a couple is forced to face death, as in "Home Burial."

The reader assumes that Amy and her husband are young because it is the death of their first-born child that they are facing, but the reader finds little evidence of any willingness or ability to understand each other. Death is difficult to face at any point in life, but to a young couple, confident and full of dreams, death must be more difficult to accept because they lack the life resources of an older couple. These resources--mutual confidence, understanding of each other's reactions and needs--cannot be available to a young couple because such

assets come from living together for a period of time. Perhaps the facing of death presents too great an obstacle to the process of communication. Realistically, life goes on and the couple must achieve some level of communication so that their relationship may continue and so that they can use this experience as a basis for greater understanding later. Their commitment to each other enables them to temporarily accept their failure to communicate.

It is the event of death that Warren and Mary face in "Death of a Hired Hand," but it is outside their individual relationship. Neither loses any part of himself in his involvement with Silas. Mary seems the more perceptive, but it is because she has seen Silas and understands his loneliness as he is facing death. She wants to make it as easy as possible for Silas and therefore wants to tell Warren what to expect. She has confidence in Warren or she might have suggested that he not see Silas at all. In contrast to Amy and her husband, this couple has the resources of past experience upon which to draw, and they are older and perhaps not so anxious about the roles they play. For example, Mary does not react to Warren's defensiveness; she allows him to develop his own plan of action. The result of both their efforts was to join hands in a silent acceptance of the finality of death. Rather than assuming an attitude which would destroy the other's reaction, each complemented the other; thus, facing the death of Silas became a shared experience.

In the poem, "In the Home Stretch," Joe and his wife have individual reactions to the disruption in their lives. Death is farther away from them, but the impending loneliness is a reality of the future. Age again seems relevant, for they have many resources upon which they

can draw to help them support each other through the experience. From their past life each knows what gives the other security. This concern for each other gives them a freedom to communicate that Amy and her husband do not have. This kind of concern comes about as the result of knowing the partner well and knowing the personal satisfaction that results from being able to meet another person's need. This type of awareness can come only through experience.

The desire to meet another's need and the ability to recognize that a husband or wife has particular needs is extremely important in achieving communication. Sometimes the partner recognizes a physical need (such as food and lodging) of the other person, and meets that need, thinking that this is the most important and, in some cases, all that is necessary. It may even be that the partner interprets this concern for the other's physical needs as an expression of love. Society judges the success and sometimes the depth of a relationship by visible expressions of love. These needs, then, seem to take on more importance than the intangible needs for companionship, respect as an individual, or freedom from fears, imaginary or real. These intangible needs may be ignored because of ignorance of their existence. Here again, communication is the key to the awareness of the other's needs.

Frost deals with the tragedy of such failures to communicate intangible needs in two poems, "The Hill Wife" and "The Housekeeper." Unfortunately in "The Hill Wife" the awareness came to the husband at the grave of his wife of both the finality of their relationship and death. The reactions that Frost presents in this poem are mostly presented from an observer's point of view. This objective point of view

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emphasizes the detachment that existed between the couple. The husband is a farmer who works hard in the field but is completely unaware of his wife's loneliness and fears. The emptiness of their relationship is revealed in two sections, "Loneliness" and "The Smile," which are her recorded thoughts.

In the first section, she realizes that they are more concerned with the comings and goings of the birds than they are with each other. She thinks the inadequacy of her marriage must be evident to those outside their home, even to the passing beggar. Her fear of the dark house and pine bough scraping the window creates anxieties for her, but the husband is unaware of these fears. She does not want to be alone with something that she cannot see or understand. The extent of her withdrawal is given in the last section, "The Impulse." She had little to do, so "followed" him to the field where he was working.

And once she went to break a bough
Of black alder.
She strayed so far she scarcely heard
When he called her--
And didn't answer--didn't speak--
Or return.
She stood, and then ran and hid
In the fern.

(162, 13-19)

It is too late when he calls to her, for the extent of her withdrawal is too great; she cannot answer. Her withdrawal from him was not planned; she seemed to drift into her isolated situation as a person may do if there is no one to call him back to reality or to a personal relationship. A spectacular event does not necessarily precipitate such withdrawal; it may be a gradual build-up of many failures to relate to the world and to communicate to special people within that world. Frost

indicates that the ties were "light" that gave way and that the man "learned" of the seriousness or "finalities/Besides the grave" (162,27-28).

Not as dramatic a severance as in "The Hill Wife" occurs in the relationship of John and Estelle in the poem "The Housekeeper." The final step that Estelle takes is marriage to another, after having been John's housekeeper for fifteen years. The poem records the conversation between John's friend and Estelle's mother. The mother tells her view of the situation that precipitates the decision that John and Estelle now must face.

'The strain's been too much for her all these years:
I can't explain it any other way.
It's different with a man, at least with John:
He knows he's kinder than the run of men.
Better than married ought to be as good
As married--that's what he has always said."
(106, 85-90)

John's friend comments,

'I wonder why he doesn't marry her
And end it.'
'Too late now: She wouldn't have him.
He's given her time to think of something else.
That's his mistake.'
(106, 92-96)

John evidently believes that providing Estelle and her mother a home and being kind to her are "as good as" the standing in the community that marriage would have brought Estelle. Even though John seems to the reader very insensitive to Estelle's intangible needs, Estelle conforms to his ideas of a satisfactory relationship for a long period of time. The mother reveals through her comments that she was aware of the strain under which her daughter lived and on some occasions discussed the matter with John, but there is no record of any communication between

John and Estelle about their situation. The mother's concern for her own well-being entered at times into her acknowledgment of John's right to treat Estelle in this manner, by virtue of his being a man and because of his "kindness" to them. She brags to the visitor that it is really she and Estelle who have made the farm prosper, and that they shared with John the pride he had in the chickens they raised. The reader senses that there is a communication between John and Estelle on an impersonal level.

Estelle's position in the community is revealed as the conversation continues,

"But why, when she's well off? Is it the neighbors,
Being cut off from friends?"

(109, 180-81)

Despite the mother's defensive response that they have friends, there arises in the reader's mind a doubt as to the extent of Estelle's acceptance into the community. Another point as discussed by John and the mother is that of children. The mother had accepted John's suggestion that she was "too old to have grandchildren" (109, 189), which would probably indicate his attitude toward Estelle and his having children that a legitimate marriage might have provided.

The amazement on the part of John's friend that someone would want to marry Estelle now indicates further the degraded position that Estelle has in the community. Even though he believes that she is "bad" to do this to John, that she is ungrateful, he does not want to offer his sympathy to John directly. He is prevented from escaping by the return of John, who invites his friend outside.

"I've got some news that maybe isn't news.
What are they trying to do to me, these two?"

(111, 228-229)

John has successfully convinced himself that he has met the needs of Estelle and her mother, that nothing more should have been required; and now they have turned on him. The mother correctly evaluates his action and reveals her real estimate of him in the concluding line of the poem:

"Who wants to hear your news, you--dreadful fool?"
(111, 232)

Had John been aware of Estelle as a person, rather than being chiefly concerned with himself and his standing in the community, he would have married Estelle. He would have acknowledged her need for respect and position from him and the community. Both the Hill Wife and Estelle needed to be regarded as valuable by someone. In the process of communication there must be mutual respect so that one person will trust another with his ideas and feelings.

The legal and emotional ties in marriage present both positive and negative conditions that affect the outcome of efforts to communicate made by the husband and wife. Taking too much for granted may result in less real effort to understand the other person and his needs. These same ties tend to force the couple to resolve the problems in communication that could otherwise be left unresolved. The emotional ties make the failures in communication more devastating to the individual and the successes more inspiring. To gain more understanding of the process of communication the reader will want to consider Frost's poems that involve the experiences of persons not bound by marriage.

CHAPTER III

"WE KEEP THE WALL BETWEEN US AS WE GO"

Thus far we have been concerned with the relationship of the husband and wife and their efforts to communicate: now we will consider other efforts of people not joined in any such permanent relationship. The reactions are similar but not as deep as those between a husband and wife. Within these poems are barriers or walls; some are self-imposed and some exist because of inexperience or lack of education. In some encounters it is the subliminal communication that is more important than the surface communication. The self-imposed walls will be considered first.

"Mending Wall" by its very title suggests barriers to communication and other efforts to achieve understanding. In this poem there is a physical wall, but there is another wall between the two neighbors, as well. The two farmers have met to celebrate an annual spring occurrence: the rebuilding of the wall between their two farms. They are conforming to the tradition of setting limits to their land so that there will be an arbitrary line that will "wall in or wall out" the other. The speaker reflects upon the task of restoring the wall that has been knocked down by winter weather, or by hunters, or by the mysterious "something that doesn't love a wall,/ That wants it down" (48, 35-36). He recognizes the purposelessness of a wall between the pine woods and the apple orchard.

"My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines," I tell him
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."
(47, 25-27)

The speaker wonders why walls make good neighbors and wishes his neighbor would question this old idea, but as he watches his neighbor come up with a stone in each hand, he thinks,

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."
(48, 41-45)

The farmer finds security in the wall and with ideas, simply stated, that support his actions, not only his action but those of his ancestors. The wall protects him from any encroachment of the world; he feels safe in following his father's teaching. His unwillingness to adjust to the times or consider new ideas is suggested in the comparison the speaker makes between him and "an old-stone savage" (48, 40). They are building one wall of stones but another wall already exists, the one self-imposed by the farmer by his unwillingness to think about the reasons for his action.

The speaker is able to see more than his neighbor in the ritual of building a wall, but he does not force his ideas on him. He wonders if he "could put a notion in his head; Why do they make good neighbors" (47, 29-30)? When he ponders the possibility of his structuring a conversation to make the farmer aware of the narrowness of his view he concludes that he would prefer that the farmer become aware of his own need. He respects his neighbor's right to think as he wishes and will not destroy the wall that protects the farmer's individuality. The two men will be able to complete the job they have come to do, but the invisible wall will prevent any mutual understanding about the reason for walls.

Closely related to the self-imposed barrier is the kind of barrier that arises from prejudice, envy or even the exclusiveness of codes. The barrier may be a consequence of narrow-minded conceptions that are based on environment, city or country, or a profession. For example, ignorance of a code results in a failure of communication between a hired hand and a town-bred farmer in Frost's poem, "The Code." James, a hired hand, suddenly thrusts his pitchfork into the ground and goes home. He takes exception to the town-bred farmer's comment about the uselessness of "cocking the hay" when a storm is imminent. Another hired hand explains the reason:

"You didn't know. But James is one big fool.
He thought you meant to find fault with his work.
That's what the average farmer would have meant."
(90, 17-19)

James had made his judgment based upon his experience of working for the farmers in the area, not for a town-bred farmer. He thought that his work was being criticized, so he quit his job, acting according to the code:

"The hand that knows his business won't be told
To do work better or faster--those two things."
(91, 24-25)

James had pride in his work, and expected others to recognize his ability and judgment. He saw only his side of the situation. It is doubtful that he would have admitted that he was wrong in acting without making any attempt to discover if the words had been criticism. He heard only words and responded by walking away.

In contrast, the helper acknowledges that he, too, might have acted similarly to James if he had not realized that the town-bred farmer was ignorant of their ways or "the code." To illustrate the existence

of such a code and the naturalness of James' reaction, he tells the farmer of an experience that he had once with a farmer named Sanders. This farmer was a hard-working man himself, but was resented by those who worked for him because he continually tried to get more work out of them. The point of the illustration came when Sanders urged the story-teller to unload the load of hay he had packed. The story-teller unloaded it--right on top of Sanders--then drove out of the barn. When asked where the old man was, he answered,

"I left him in the barn under the hay.
If you want him, ye can go dig him out."
(92, 87-88)

They searched for the old man in the hay while one went to the house to keep the wife out of the barn. Before going in, he looked in the window and there sat the old man. The story-teller evaluated Sanders' action in this way.

Apparently I hadn't buried him
(I may have knocked him down); but my just trying
To bury him had hurt his dignity.
He had gone to the house so's not to meet me.
(93, 105-108)

When asked by the town-bred farmer if Sanders had discharged him, he answered, "Discharge me? No! He knew I did just right" (93, 117). To the outsider, the "code" might seem senseless and unreasonable, but to those who abide by it, it becomes a way of preserving certain patterns of action that are thought important. It is a form of communication that may become exclusive, and can be a barrier to one who is ignorant of it. If the town-bred farmer wishes to abide by it, he will be accepted. James is obviously less perceptive than the story-teller, but both believe in the "code." The story-teller knows that it works and wants

the new farmer to see its value. In this poem, Frost gives the reader examples of spoken and unspoken communication.

Another example of a barrier that may exist between a rural and a city person is found in "Christmas Trees." The first two lines set the mood of the separateness of the two groups.

The city had withdrawn into itself
And left at last the country to the country.
(132, 1-2)

A stranger from the city comes to buy the Christmas trees on the speaker's farm, breaking into the stated separation of the town and country.

"I hadn't thought of them as Christmas Trees.
I doubt if I was tempted for the moment
To sell them off their feet to go in cars
And leave the slope all bare,"
(132, 15-18)

He had not thought of them as saleable at that particular time, but as a good farmer he knew that he could not be overly sentimental, for "The trial by market everything must come to" (132, 24). The buyer's offer of thirty dollars for the one thousand trees is far below the farmer's expectations and therefore cannot be accepted.

The reader can see that they do not discuss the real values that each sees in the trees. The stranger sees in the trees the profit he can make. The farmer sees them as an example of the dependence of the city on the country.

A stranger to our yard, who looked the city,
Yet, did in country fashion in that there
He sat and waited till he drew us out
A-buttoning coats to ask him who he was.
He proved to be the city come again
To look for something it had left behind
And could not do without and keep it Christmas.
(132, 5-11)

Even though the stranger acts like one who lives in the country, the farmer decides he is from the city.

Throughout the conversation the farmer's thoughts allow the reader to see that the spoken words only cover, superficially, his real thoughts.

I dallied so much with the thought of selling.
Then whether from mistaken courtesy
And fear of seeming short of speech, or whether
From hope of hearing good of what was mine,
I said, "There aren't enough to be worth while."
(132, 25-29)

The farmer wants praise for the trees but receives the opposite in the price he is offered. The amount offered for the trees seems to belittle their value--"Worth three cents more to give away than sell" (134, 59). The real significance of this poem is not the stranger's failure to buy the trees but rather the importance of recognizing prejudice based on environment, that may act as a barrier to communication.

The walls that hinder complete communication are beyond the control of the individuals in the poems "Two Tramps in Mud Time," "A Hundred Collars" and "The Mountain." In all three, one participant is more perceptive than the other. In "Two Tramps in Mud Time," the persona is a man who is able to understand the "tramp" and the problem that prohibits their sharing their different views on vocation and avocation. The speaker is taking pride and enjoyment in splitting "good blocks of oak" and is hailed by one of the passing strangers, "Hit them hard!" It is at this point that he realizes that he will be forced to defend his right to split the wood in light of the obvious need of the "tramp" for work to sustain his life. He becomes aware of this necessity when one of the strangers drops behind and begins to observe his skill,

the tramp's only criterion for judgment of a man. Through his silence he communicates his assumed right to the work that the persona seems to enjoy as recreation. The persona, due to his experience and understanding, knows what the man is thinking, but knows that the man would not understand his doing physical work for the contribution that it makes to his enjoyment of life as a whole.

My object in living is to unite
 My avocation and my vocation
 As my two eyes make one in sight.
 Only where love and need are one,
 And the work is play for mortal stakes,
 Is the deed ever really done
 For Heaven and the future's sakes.

(359, 66-72)

The obtuse stranger in the poem is not himself imposing a barrier but lives behind one caused by limitations of his education and his concept of work. It would be difficult for him to conceive of any man looking upon work as recreation. The persona assumes that talk is not sufficient to overcome the barrier of the stranger's ignorance, and therefore does not attempt to explain his right to split the wood. His silence does not reflect a lack of concern but rather a realization of the impracticality of such knowledge for the stranger.

Generally, the more perceptive character in a Frost poem is so because of broader experience or education. But in "A Hundred Collars" it is the educated person who seems handicapped when forced to talk with an uneducated person. Perhaps Frost is calling attention to the rather limited definition of the word "educated" that society accepts.

Dr. Magoon is described as a "great man" born in the small town of Lancaster. He is regarded there as a great scholar and "a democrat, / If not at heart, at least on principle" (61, 12-13).

The action in the poem takes place not in Lancaster, but in a town where he is unknown, Woodsville Junction. Dr. Magoon is forced to wait four hours between trains and in desperation goes to find a place to sleep. The only available bed left in the only hotel in town is one in a room with "Lafe," or rather "Lafayette," as Lafe corrects the room clerk when introduced to Dr. Magoon. Lafe is a collector for the Weekly News, a position interpreted by him as a job commissioned by Editor Fairbanks to "feel out the public sentiment." He is an outgoing man and one whose education has been based on experience. He immediately sizes up the professor and makes some attempt at putting him at ease. Magoon misinterprets the gestures of friendship and is completely frightened by the "brute" he imagines Lafe to be. After offering him "more than a hundred collars, size fourteen," that are too small now for him, Lafe says to Magoon,

"What makes you stand there on one leg like that?
 You're not much further than where Kike left you.
 You act as if you wished you hadn't come.
 Sit down or lie down, friend; you make me nervous."
 (64, 78-81)

The exchange that follows indicates the reaction of Magoon to Lafe and Lafe's idea of the typical talk of a professor. When the doctor lies down on the bed, Lafe admonishes him,

"Not that way, with your shoes on Kike's white bed,
 You can't rest that way. Let me pull your shoes off."
 "Don't touch me, please--I say, don't touch me, please.
 I'll not be put to bed by you, my man."
 "Just as you say. Have it your own way then.
 'My man' is it? You talk like a professor."
 (64, 84-89)

Throughout the poem the reader's sympathy is drawn to Lafe, who understands more than Dr. Magoon does about this encounter. His teasing of

Dr. Magoon is not malicious and serves to make the reader aware of the inadequacy of Dr. Magoon in dealing with people. Meeting and talking with people is easy for Lafe but the reader could interpret the fact that he was drinking alone when Magoon entered as an indication of a loneliness on his part. He knows that the professor is above him socially as well as educationally, but desires recognition from this "great" man. When Magoon admits to knowing the Weekly News, Lafe is enthusiastic in his response:

"Then you know me.
Now we are getting on together--talking."
(65, 112-113)

Not wanting to presume, Lafe qualifies their "getting on together" by adding "talking." As the conversation continues, Dr. Magoon makes an attempt to be pleasant, encouraging Lafe to talk about the "important" position that he holds.

"You seem to shape the paper's policy."
"You see I'm in with everybody, know em all
I almost know their farms as well as they do."
"You drive around? It must be pleasant work."
(65-66, 131-134)

It is polite conversation but, at least on the surface, it seems to indicate that they are getting on, that Magoon no longer fears Lafe.

Just before Lafe leaves the room, he offers Magoon a drink from the bottle, but is refused. He returns to his original offer of the one hundred collars, asking him what address to use. Magoon answers, "Really, friend, I can't let you. You may need them" (67, 179). Magoon's "my man" has changed to "friend" but it remains impersonal: it is not the personal address of a friend--"Lafe." The suggestion that Lafe "may need them" becomes a rejection, to which Lafe responds, "Not

till I shrink, when they'll be out of style (67, 180). Magoon finally adds the real reason: "But really I--I have so many collars (67, 181). Lafe's response covers up his rejection.

"I don't know who I rather would have them.
They're only turning yellow where they are.
But you're the doctor as the saying is,
I'll put the light out. Don't you wait for me:
I've just begun the night."

(67, 182-185)

Lafe continues to play the role of host, as if it were possible for the two men to have been friends. His last gesture of friendship is leaving the bottle for Magoon before he goes out.

"Lafe shuts the door" and Magoon "slides down the pillow," relieved that the encounter is over. Communication did take place, but the reader knows the superficiality of it. Magoon never forgets who he is and Lafe knows who they both are.

Many such encounters take place daily, but because of feelings of inferiority or superiority communication remains on the surface; relationships do not develop which could be beneficial to both people. Lafe feels inferior to Magoon because he is an educated man, but he understands Magoon's reactions to the situation and tries to put him at ease. Magoon can see no possibility of any common ground existing between them and feels uncomfortable when Lafe makes overtures of friendship. Both men accept the conclusion of their meeting as unchangeable.

Within these two poems--"Two Tramps in Mudtime" and "A Hundred Collars"--are walls or barriers to communication that have been man-made. In the poem "The Mountain," we find a wall of nature that is accepted by those who live around it. This mountain casts its shadow on the valley, blocks the view of stars at night; and the streams rushing down its sides

in spring become destructive, washing away good soil. Residents make an attempt to farm the side of it but stop a short way up. In summary, the inhabitants of Lunenburg had accepted it as unchangeable and worked and lived within the limitations imposed by it.

"We were sixty voters last election.
We can't in nature grow to many more:
That thing there takes all the room!" He moved his goad.
The mountain stood there to be pointed at.
(56-57, 26-29)

The conversation found in this poem is between a visitor and a farmer. At the first presentation of the farmer as a slow-moving driver of oxen, the reader assumes that his mind will be slow-moving also. But, as the conversation continues, we discover a man with many thoughts and with pride in his surroundings, eager to point out the sights that he thinks would interest the visitor--the brook that is "always cold in summer, warm in winter," or a "Spring right on the summit." He has hunted and fished on the sides of the mountain and worked around it all of his life. It is evident through his references to several previous climbers that visitors have enlarged his knowledge of the mountain and their experiences have given him confidence to recommend the mountain pleasures to others. Significantly, he has never been motivated to go and see for himself the things that he tells about. His life is work-oriented, and unless there is practical reason for climbing the mountain there seems little value in it for him.

"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."
(59, 86-93)

The visitor seems to poke a little fun at the farmer when he agrees with him about the climbing.

"I shouldn't climb it if I didn't want to--
Not for the sake of climbing."

(59, 93-94)

A further indication of the dominance of the mountain over the village of Lunenburg is found in the following lines:

"You can drive round and keep in Lunenburg,
But it's as much as ever you can do,
The boundary lines keep in so close to it.
Hor is the township, and the township's Hor--
And a few houses sprinkled round the foot,
Like boulders broken off the upper cliff,
Rolled out a little farther than the rest."

(59, 97-103)

The people cannot get away from Hor even in their travel from one house to another, and even the houses seem to be a part of the mountain--

"boulders broken off." These comments also present a perceptive side of the farmer and the possibility of limited communication between him and the visitor. Proof of this possibility of communication is found as the farmer identifies with the visitor in his admission concerning the temperature of the brook.

"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."

(59, 104-108)

There is acceptance of the visitor by the farmer in this exchange; this is the extent of the communication that is to take place as he starts to move off with his oxen. The willingness of the visitor to listen and agree with the farmer was probably the key to the farmer's sharing this particular bit of knowledge. The visitor had made no attempts to change the mind of the farmer, was not critical of him, and listened attentively

to him. The farmer knew his limitations and accepted them, but refused to go any further than he was comfortable in doing. He had accepted the mountain and had made a good life for himself around it, but he would not permit an outsider to know any more than he wanted him to know about him or the mountain. He could be compared with the farmer who believes in fences in "Mending Wall" because he accepts the mountain without any close examination of it. Like the farmer who accepts the words of his father, he accepts the stories that he has heard instead of seeing for himself. Both seem to be content to work within walls--one man-made, one made by nature.

All of the poems that have been discussed are stories of unplanned efforts to communicate. Frost shows in "The Ax-Helve" and "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus" a deliberate effort to change the thinking of the listener. Impressions made during the process of convincing the listener are greater than the argument itself. A skillful person intent upon changing the other's mind will set up conditions which will enhance the idea, making it more attractive to the listener. The reader finds just such a determined person in the character, Baptiste, in the poem, "The Ax-Helve." Baptiste is a Frenchman, "cast away for life with Yankees," who uses his skill as a maker of ax-helves as a means of luring a "Yankee" into a position of indebtedness, obligating the story-teller to listen to what he has to say--not only about ax-helves but about education as well.

At the beginning of the poem, a woodchopper, the story-teller, is working at the chopping block when Baptiste reaches up to halt the swing of the ax. Surprised, the story-teller hands over the ax, not

knowing what to expect from his neighbor. Baptiste begins to criticize the ax-helve, made on a machine, and cut against the natural grain of the wood. The story-teller accepts the offer of another ax-helve and agrees to come to the house of Baptiste that evening. When he arrives, Baptiste welcomes him and brings out a quiver of ax-helves to assure his visitor of the honesty of his intentions.

A quiverful to choose from, since he wished me
To have the best he had, or had to spare--
Not for me to ask which, when what he took
Had beauties he had to point out at length
To insure their not being wasted on me.
(230, 65-69)

As he carefully points out the qualities, he makes a special point of comparing the importance of working with the grain.

He showed me that the lines of a good helve
Were native to the grain before the knife
Expressed them, and its curves were no false curves
Put on it from without. And there its strength lay
(230, 73-76)

The real reason for his being invited to the home of Baptiste becomes evident to the story-teller as the conversation turns from ax-helves to the subject of the education of the Frenchman's children.

"Do you know, what we talked about was knowledge?
Baptiste on his defense about the children
He kept from school, or did his best to keep--
Whatever school and children and our doubts
Of laid-on education had to do
With the curves of his ax-helves and his having
Used this unscrupulously to bring me
To see for once the inside of his house.
(230, 83-90)

This obvious turn in the conversation raises a doubt in the story-teller's mind as to whether he is being "desired in friendship" or just used as a sounding board for Baptiste's ideas. Despite Baptiste's lack of education, he thinks that he should have the right to determine the

amount of education his children are to receive. Baptiste uses his skill and knowledge in the making of good ax-helves to achieve recognition from his neighbor and ultimately hopes that this special skill might serve as a qualification for determining the kind of education his children should have.

The ax-helve is replaced, Baptiste has his say, and the story-teller listens. The reader may scoff at his naivete, but Baptiste structured the situation so that what he has to say would appear in its most favorable light and thus impress his listener. His implied comparisons of "laid-on education" to the ax-helve made by machine and the comparison of the natural education he might give his children to the ax-helve carved with the grain of the wood for added natural strength are well presented. Communication took place, but the ultimate conclusion drawn by the story-teller is left for the reader to decide.

Like the story-teller in "The Ax-Helve," the visitor in "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," received more information than he expected. The farmer is the type of conversationalist who takes a bit of knowledge, embellishes it, speaks with authority, and seizes every opportunity to display his "knowledge." The listener is faced with the choice of trying logically to speak on the subject or resigning himself to listening with feigned interest until the speaker is finished. No real communication is possible upon the subject, but the speaker conveys much information about himself to the listener. Unknowingly, the traveler knocks upon such a conversationalist's door.

"I stopped to compliment you on this star
You get the beauty of from where you are."
(509, 9-10)

from this beginning the visitor speculates that this bright light in the sky could be the sun, not set, then quickly moves on to the real purpose of his stop.

"And will you give me shelter for the night?
If not, a glass of milk will be all right."
(509, 21-22)

Ignoring the request for a hand-out, the farmer seizes the opportunity to dazzle the traveler with words and ideas, suggesting,

"Between us two it's not a star at all.
It's a new patented electric light,
Put up on trial by that Jerseyite
So much is being now expected of,
To give developments the final shove
And turn us into the next specie."
(510, 38-43)

He invites his visitor to share his ideas on what specie "we're turning into next."

The visitor attempts to rise to the occasion by implying that he is a liberal and then shares an unrelated idea gained at a public lecture on the Pueblo Indians. Returning to the main topic of conversation, he inquires,

"But come, enlightened as you in talk seem,
You don't believe that first-water gleam
Is not a star?"
"Believe it? Why I know it."
(511, 61-64)

The traveler doubts the enlightenment of the farmer's talk if he really does believe that the star is a light bulb. The farmer adds to his belief the conviction that this light is part of a plan to light,

"The whole night with one big blob
Of electricity in bulk the way
The sun sets the example in the day."
(511, 73-75)

Again the traveler tries to suggest the impossibility of such a plan occurring to any man. It is inconceivable to him that anyone would destroy the needed darkness, divinely provided, to give man time to rest and to reflect on the ideas of the day. Convinced that the visitor is an incurable sentimentalist, incapable of understanding the greatness of progress and ideas, the farmer continues with his monologue on the complexities of the physical and social world. The visitor's response is one of resignation to the impossibility of communication. His concluding remark is: "Marvelous world in Nineteen-twenty-six" (513, 162). The farmer's combination of information and fantasy is too much for the visitor and his own physical needs--shelter and food--are being ignored. The hopelessness of the situation must have been evident to the visitor when near the end of the monologue the farmer made some telling statements.

"No need for us to rack our common heads
About it, though. We haven't got the mind.
It best be left to great men of his kind
Who have no other object than our good.
There's a lot yet that isn't understood."
(513, 133-137)

He respected knowledge but did not know how to use it. He sought to use it to impress his visitor with the vastness of his acquired knowledge.

Communication involves being able to listen as well as speak. Baptiste and the Literate Farmer have something to say but they do not expect to listen. They can communicate their ideas but their ideas may not be accepted. Frost could be using these two examples to emphasize the value of an individual over an idea. Baptiste uses an ax-helve as a means to get his neighbor's attention and the physical needs of the

traveler are ignored by the Literate Farmer. Respect for the individual as a person is essential to communication.

CHAPTER IV

"TODAY IS THE DAY WE BOTH SAID"

In his poetry Robert Frost anticipates the current interest in man's ability to communicate, to retain his individuality, and to transcend his feelings of loneliness and alienation. He joins other twentieth century poets in clarifying man's relationship to his fellow man and to his changing world. He warns man about the barriers to communication, and he reveals ways in which men can attain mutual understanding.

Of particular interest to Frost are the barriers that are created by the role-playing of men and women. The commitment to the male or female role may become so strong as to obviate understanding of the other's role. Such is the case in "Home Burial," where Amy sees her husband as the embodiment of male insensitivity. At the same time her husband assumes that she cannot be reasoned with as he would with another man and therefore he believes he must give up being a man. Similarly, Mrs. Cole in the poem "Snow" is defeated by male reasoning. She is the stereotype of a 'mother-wife' as she treats both Meserve and her husband as the children of an all-wise mother. Mr. Cole reacts to her not as his wife, but as a representative woman. He knows her every move and motivation and rejoices when a man defeats her.

The codes and prejudices that control men's reactions also limit understanding and communication. Prejudices prevent consideration of the differences in people and the differences of their reaction to their

environment. In particular, he emphasizes the prejudice which exists between the city dweller and country resident, as found in "Christmas Trees," "The Code" and "In the Home Stretch." In "Christmas Trees" the men appear to exchange roles, the buyer acting like a farmer and the farmer assuming a pose of sophistication. But no communication occurs because they have no real tolerance of each other's position. Or the problem may be indifference. In "The Code," the town-bred farmer's indifference to local traditions reflects his lack of interest both in people and in the ways they react; as a result James misunderstands the meaning of the town-bred farmer's words. In "In the Home Stretch" Joe sees the country not as a dull, dreary, isolated place but as a panacea offering him an escape from the superficiality of the city. The movers look upon such a move as banishment; Joe recognizes this attitude and accepts it, refusing to allow it to destroy his dream. The defensiveness that usually occurs between those living in the country and those in the city forms a barrier when communicating ideas that are beyond either environment. On the other hand, an appreciation of the other person's viewpoint no matter where he lives or by what rules he governs his life will encourage the objectivity so necessary to communication. By using such a common prejudice--country versus city--in his poems Frost shows the part it can play in a failure to communicate.

Frost does indicate that man can learn to communicate on some level. The frustration that Amy and her husband experience in "Home Burial" would be discouraging to the reader if Frost had not presented examples of successful experiences of communication in "Death of the Hired Hand" and "In the Home Stretch." Whereas Amy and her husband have

less experience in dealing with serious problems, the other two couples have the advantage of a longer relationship in which they have learned to communicate. Frost offers the factor of age and experience to man as encouragement, especially in the marriage relationship, to persist in his effort to communicate and to accept whatever level of communication he can achieve at a particular time. All such experiences accumulate as resources for solving future problems in communication. By including examples of communication both inside and outside the marriage relationship Frost points to the special problems of emotional involvement present in marriage. There is a greater necessity for a husband and wife to communicate because of the permanence of the relationship as well as the expectations of society. A failure to communicate between two other people does not have the consequences that such a failure has between a husband and wife. For example, the visitor to the mountain community of Lunenburg has no real responsibility to change the farmer's limited view. He, like the farmer in "Mending Wall," can walk away from his neighbor without the kind of obligation Amy's husband feels toward resolving the differences of attitude and ideas between Amy and himself.

Through examples of characters who are perceptive and do possess an objective view of their encounters Frost shows the reader the forces that promote understanding and communication. This character recognizes barriers and evaluates their importance in the situation. Concerned about other persons, he can sense and accept their reactions without feeling threatened by them. His sensitivity is the result of broad experience with people in all kinds of situations and environments; and, also, a willingness to accept the people as they are, especially if changing them would destroy their individuality.

Most important, in all of the dramatic poems, it is evident that Frost does not believe that perfect communication is possible to sustain. He insists, however, that there are "momentary stays against confusion" that make failures to communicate tolerable. If a reader were to choose one poem that captures the essence of hope in an attempt to communicate, it would be Frost's "West Running Brook." The couple and the experience exemplify both the struggle and the attainment of communication that Frost wants his reader to perceive. The characters have the desire to communicate their feelings about the brook. Possible barriers are present--youthful inexperience, male and female roles--but the mutual trust that they have in each other enables them to share their different feelings. The wife would quickly and simply place a bridge over it, which would be a superficial consideration of its meaning. The husband sees the two of them as involved in the flow, not standing still "like a Pirouet" and not afraid of the stones that throw them back on the source of their life together. Communication demands involvement and some sacrifice of individuality; so when man comprehends and accepts the factors that contribute to understanding, he will not be afraid to attempt to communicate. Their life is rather like a "tribute to the source"--a coming together of two streams to make one. At the conclusion of the poem each reminds the other of what he has said about the brook and significantly, the poem ends with the line, "Today will be the day of what we both said" (329, 80).

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