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Robert Frost An interpreter of rural New England

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ROBERT FROST
AN INTERPRETER OF RURAL NEW ENGLAND

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
RUTH WHITAKER

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Most prominent among the contemporary New England poets is Robert Frost, who has interest not only in the physical beauty of the "Florida of the North" but also has found appeal in its racial stock and its peculiar characteristics. In describing the scenes and homely occupations of rural New England, particularly the regions of Vermont and New Hampshire, the work of Robert Frost has filled a void in our literature which was in great need of treatment. Under the guise of a speaking poetry from the speech of more or less untutored farmer, he has expressed many shades of rural life in a manner which shows the keenest observation. The importance of such work is understood by those who know how rapidly the old rural conditions are passing away. There are, already, many customs which are almost archaic in American life, and to preserve a pictorial and literary record of them will very much assist us in securing the rotundity of history. Inasmuch as Robert Frost shared and experienced the quiet tragedies and the quieter comedies of neighborly New England, he expresses with a richness and a simplicity unsurpassed in American poetry, the spiritual action beneath its physical actualities. Hence, in this study the author is concerned with Robert Frost as an interpreter of rural New England. Throughout the treatment, an attempt is made to show that his exquisite etchings of New England are real portraits of important aspects of sturdy New England life and neighborliness. To approach the problem, the writer will give some critical opinion and analysis concerning literary New England, a description of the region which for nearly two centuries has produced a long lineage of writers who have given inestimable portraits of New England life and character, and, finally, discuss Frost's genius as an artist of the rural New England scene.
The writer acknowledges indebtedness to the members of the library staff for kindly assistance in securing books, and to Mr. G. Lewis Chandler for the loan of books, helpful suggestions, valuable information, and untiring interest.
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CHAPTER I

A NOTE ON NEW ENGLAND, ITS GENERAL NATURE
AND LITERARY HERITAGE

"It has been sometime since Boston has been referred to as "The Hub of the Universe,"¹ but in the days of Emerson, Holmes, Longfellow, Whittier, Thoreau and many others, Boston was the central point around which most of our literary expression and culture of America revolved. After this period of literary productivity such events as the Civil War, followed by the New Industrialism and a gradual trek of the New England flock to the Westward frontier, obviously enough, curtailed for a short period, the literary and artistic growth of the New England mind. It is fair to remember, moreover, that at the end of the last century, no literary field in any part of America was conspicuously fertile. Yet, because New England was witnessing a period of cultural decay, "Oliver Herford, whose wit is never stale, called Boston the abandoned farm of literature."² Similarly natives from other sections of the United States began "to regard New England as a museum of romantic relics."³ Likewise, Barrett Wendell declared repeatedly, "the New England tradition has produced its best results; its literature is already a literature of a past that could never return."⁴ In a droll manner others

Hereafter this entry will be referred to as "New England Recalls American Heritage."


³Ibid.

claimed, "in the expression of life if not in life itself, the New Engander declined." Inasmuch as these critical views reflect the changing attitudes in America toward literary New England, they likewise betray an almost universal fault: "the belief that whatever is true or nearly true one day must remain true from everlasting to everlasting."2

Unfortunately, what these critics failed to note was the fact that the earlier writers of New England found their inspiration and themes in the old world, or in "historical and colonial New England, which was only a single element of the old world transplanted."3 They did not realize the "whole Boston school was from the first to the last essentially European."4 Inasmuch as they seemed to be conscious only of the fact that the genial little caste, the Brahmin, who represented the cultural zenith of early nineteenth century literary New England had passed, they feigned complete ignorance of the real reason of the decline of New England supremacy. It was merely this: the poetry of Bryant, Longfellow, Holmes, Lowell, Whittier and Emerson, was "scarcely American at all but for its habitat."5 In other words, "the New England group did not owe nearly as much to New England as to Old England."6

For this reason, any literature of any country based upon the models, and "without any national roots always dies down at last into an era of Claudian."7

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1 John Macy, op. cit., p. 617.
3 St. James Gayzette, "American Literature and Boston Literature," Living Age, XXXII (March, 1881), 765.
4 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 6.
7 St. James Gayzette, op. cit., p. 765.
In brief then even though at first sight, the middle decades of the nineteenth century saw the cooling of the fiery core of Puritanism, the rising of a cosmopolitan era with its machinery and great financiers, and the struggling of the states in an industrial, political and social battle—all of which lent themselves primarily to a decline in aesthetic thought—yet, out of the soil of "one of the most unlovely of American historical periods" trickled a new consciousness of the American regions. Behind and beyond the epoch of seeming decay of this wholly English Boston literature, there was a little surface seething, here and there, of a native literature, racy, virile and of the temper of New England. The decline of the Golden Age saw not only the springtide of a new group of New England writers, but also a definite revival of the New England life, scene and characteristics as revealed by those who are truly Americans. When Whitman, the voice of America's Declaration of Literary Independence, cried out in protest against those who were seeking glamour not in man's life but in other men's books, he precipitated the American character. "It is largely to his credit—and, to a greater extent than has been acknowledged—that our literature has become frankly indigenous." Since his time the old realm of American Art became a dying ember and the new interpreters began to see the need of a new orientation in poetic thought, diction and form.

Inspired by Whitman, the later writers, Sarah Orne Jewett, Amy Lowell, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edwin Robinson, and Robert Frost have severed connections with the romantic tendencies and joined together again the regional

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2Louis Untermeyers, op. cit., p. 4.
patterns of New England, broken by the Civil War, in realistic pictures, perhaps the finest that any artist has yet produced in America. Just at the moment when the rest of the country was relegating New England poetry to the company of the ancient dead, putting Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes and Lowell safely away into libraries, a new brood of New England poets broke their shells and came out in the cold clear light of Boston, and Derry, Burlington and Cambridge, piping a new kind of music.¹ With the contemporary group, the interpretation of New England has swung to actuality, to heartiness and lustihood and away from pontifical rhetorics and the tag-end moralizing of the nineteenth century. Notwithstanding the fact that the pioneer writers of the New England scene had vision, indomitable courage and a rare artistic perception, their present day successors have raised their virtues to a higher level.²

From the time of Sewall until the present day "there has always been that about New England, vivid and compelling"³ which created poets and inspired them to record her scenes for posterity. New England is a world surrounded with an aura of hope. She is founded upon an ideal, built on a principle. She is a region where character came in before cash and where men united for the freedom of democracy but not for conquest.⁴ Since "New England is a region with a soul,"⁵ and the only section where nature

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³Mary Alden Hopkins, "Whom The Lord Loves," *Atlantic*, CXXIX (May, 1922), 196.
⁵Ibid.
herself is a puritan shrouded in the mysteries of aloofness and coldness, she produces, by her atmosphere and geography, an intoxicating stimulant upon her inmates who become drunk with her life and scenes to the extent that they must reveal them to the world.

New England—the lean, sinewy, virile and generally wholesome land,¹ about the size of Florida and composed of six states in the Northeast section of the United States, south of the Saint Lawrence and east of the Hudson²—is by its very geographical isolation a major influence in developing regional poets. Comprising a mere two per cent of the total area of the United States, a fifth of its cities and a larger percentage of its total population, until recently, New England was cut off from the rest of the country by natural barriers which tended largely to develop certain homogeneous characteristics that stamped the country as different. The surface of the country is so rugged and boulder strewn that most of the northern half is forested, and fully half of the southern portion consists of woodlands.³ However, in the valleys hedged in between the mountain ranges, lie the thickly settled villages and cities. This amassing of many people in an isolated country whose foaming rivers afford access to no regions, accounts, to a large extent, for the homogeneous characteristics native to the Yankee land. The compact settled villages encouraged the development of the neighborly attitudes and cooperative actions, fostered the

³Philip Emerson, "General Truths In Geography as Illustrated by New England Relief and Life," The Journal of Geography, XC (September, 1911), 20.
organization of institutions and promoted the growth of a social and cultural consciousness. In fact, the concentration of the population had a stimulating effect upon the development of regional writers in this Florida of the North.

Likewise, the baffling climate and the picturesque scenes of her countryside are vitalizing forces which inspire the artist to create. "There is so much weather to the square mile in New England," that, according to Philip Emerson, "at one season of the year it apes the tropics," and at another it bathes itself in the bleak ghostly whiteness which inspired Whittier's "Snowbound" and Frost's "Our Singing Strength." But still, there are in the New England hill towns, other subjects that fit the artists' frames in an intriguing variety of ways. They are "the soft flowing hills, hazed with purple, quiet lakes of clear cut green and blue, towering pines and slim dancing birches" as well as the straddling granite ledges covered with elms and fields and tragic characters.

While the climate, scenes and characters of this Yankee country are naturally main themes for the native poets, there is one other factor that plays a major influence upon the general characteristics and economic development of rural New England character, the soil. In the same way that the compactness of the population largely produced the humanitarian Yankee, the nature of the soil helped to produce the shrewd, witty, canny, thrifty, self-sufficient financial wizard, and the Jack-of-all-trades qualities which

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4 John Farrah, "Robert Frost and Other Green Mountain Writers," *English Journal*, XVI (October, 1927), 583.
made him especially efficient in the early stages of industrial development.\(^1\) The land in which the whole Puritan fathers lived in perpetual conflicts, contained streaks of fat and lean like slices of bacon.\(^2\) While the Yankees wrested a living from the soil, yet "they were never reconciled to being farmers."\(^3\) Then, too, since each family was forced to provide for its own wants, the soil produced a people of singular ingenuity and resourcefulness, but without specialized skills. In every respect, however, there is a moral discipline in such a life which subsoils human character to its lasting good.\(^4\)

Although social life in the rural New England village presents an interesting reminder of the last stage of a passing history, there still lingers about her tragic people and their traditions a mild flavor of a vanishing culture.\(^5\) As in all rural settlements, the diversions and social contacts are of the simplest sorts and, moreover, the churches are the epitome of many social gatherings. Its convivial life consists of the church meetings which afford festive occasions for all ages and classes, the annual outing to a fall fair, the commonest of small neighborhood events: births, deaths, and burials,\(^6\) and the still time honored gathering at the village store where the middle aged fathers gather on rainy afternoons to discant on the question of the hour.\(^7\) Since agricultural villages are

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\(^1\)Walter Yust, *op. cit.*, p. 287.
\(^2\)Ibid.
\(^3\)Mary Alden Hopkins, *op. cit.*, p. 620.
\(^4\)Ibid.
\(^6\)Mary Baldwin, "The Passing of New England" *Atlantic*, CXXIX (February, 1922), 191.
\(^7\)John Sterling, *op. cit.*, p. 526.
numerically the dominant types of villages in America, and they constitute three fourths of all villages, such events as mentioned above, are, after all, prototypes of a vast number of rural sections in the United States. In the following selection, Wallace Nutting portrays many of the social characteristics of the rural New Englander:

In a rural New England village there are just the right number of people for each to know the other. Here the restraining influence of the morally sane is felt more powerfully than any other human commodity. The very shame arising from living on the stage, in the sight of all one's fellows, holds the naturally unlovely mortal to an outward conformity to common sense ideals. The village may have its miser, but he is not wholly abandoned to his ideals. A common need, and a knowledge that all his neighbors know he is holding out against help, is the most moving social and moral force to mellow his crusty soul. In the village, virtue and grace shine with quiet splendor. Here the saint, the nurse unpaid but loved, the good and the well-to-do citizen, all live in the presence of their brothers, like Job of old.¹

Likewise, there is, in the village the proper intellectual and social stimulus good for the average mind. The common man there feels the simple humor of life and responds to its gentle stimulus. Neighbor touches neighbor with its sallies of pleasant wit, not too biting, not too brilliant. In fact, the New England village is a world in a nutshell with its play of passion.² There are found the good qualities of shrewdness without its taints of selfishness, prudence and caution which can be daring when it is ready to strike, a quiet drollery which is irresistible and the gentle interplay of neighborly kindness—all admirable features of the New England farmer.

The regional claim for New England's priority in the production of

²Ibid., p. 33.
poets is not only based upon the geographical seclusion of the country but also on a distinctive atmosphere of a culture peculiar to the "historical cradle of the New World." New England is old in comparison to the rest of the country and herein lies her charm. While she is an older region of the American colony, "yet her culture, particularly American literature, is a debtor culture" with its roots embedded deep in the soil of old England. This fact can be seen in the works of Samuel Sewall whose writings, which appeared in the last decade of the seventeenth century, mark the Nadir of American literature. Though indigenous, it was based on a certain motor impulse and this impulse received its stimulant from old England. To account for this fact the founders of New England, "with the exception of the pilgrims, included in their rank a remarkable high proportion of university men" seeped in the culture and the life of the mother country. For this reason, New England was probably stocked with men of strong minds and assertive dispositions. It was settled by men who possessed well formed opinions regarding some of the most important aspects of religion and social life. Even the Pilgrims, who came, for the most part, from the lower middle of society, were deep thinkers

5 Ibid., p. 81.
6 Ibid., p. 15.
who, with pride, displayed their precious books which they brought from England.\textsuperscript{1} William Brewster, a former student of Cambridge, for example, left at this death in 1643, a library of nearly four hundred books;\textsuperscript{2} and the old soldier, Miles Standish, left about fifty.\textsuperscript{3} Among the latter are such interesting titles as:

- The History of the World
- Turkish History
- A Chronical of England
- The History of Queen Elizabeth
- The State of Europe
- Caesar's Commentaries
- Homer's Iliad
- The Swedish Intelligence
- The French Academy
- The Country Farmer
- Calvin's Institutions\textsuperscript{4}

A view of this collection, plus the fact that a very few of the Pilgrims were without books, indicates that, from the beginning, New England possessed the potential stock necessary to produce artists: a cultural background, intelligent curiosity and a current library.

Again, the early settlers of New England were not only educated and fairly well stocked with books, but in many cases came from families of

\begin{footnotes}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., p. 25.
\item Edward Arber, \textit{The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers} (Boston, 1897), p. 189.
\item Thomas Goddard Wright, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 25.
\item Ibid., p. 25.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotes}
distinction, title and even of considerable wealth. For example, John Winthrop had been a magistrate and a man of affairs in England. Likewise, he was a man of wealth. John Harvard left an estate of 1600 pounds, besides his books, and Edward Breck left an estate, the value of which ran into hundreds of pounds sterling, a large sum for his day. While these facts give evidence of the refining qualities of the early New Englander, yet the "Winthrop Journal" cites another reason for his growth in intellectual faculties:

And they possessed one other element of their culture at a surprising early period in their history: A printing press was brought over and set up at Cambridge in 1638, before Boston was ten years old.

Parallel with the beginning of printing, a potential force in the spread of culture, was the establishing of the first University, Harvard, in 1636,—the dynamic cradle of culture. With these two events, the intellectual and cultural leadership of New England, a supremacy which she held for two hundred years, was born. New England, now, had reached the crawling stage of the great influence which she wielded over the country at a later date.

Another factor that counted much in the cultural patterns of the New England forefathers was its idealism. These early dwellers had behind them moral convictions which helped New England for a season, to do the thinking for the rest of the world." In a way the Puritan idealism,

1Ibid., p. 76.
2Ibid., p. 78.
4Francis Gribble, "John Greenleaf Whittier," Living Age, CCLVI (February, 1908), 287.
which was in the veins of the people, helped to mold the peculiar attitudes not only of the characters of New England but also of the later writers who championed great moral movements as well as attempted to distill the beauty and charm of the New England life, scenes and weather. Puritanism, which disciplined the passions and renounced the wider sweep of human experiences, put its stamp upon the country and gave it its peculiar atmosphere, which is a dominating stimulus for the production of regional writers.

In many ways, the climate, topography, natural resources, and cultural atmosphere are important determiners of regional mores and regional writers. New England, because of her assets and liabilities in a precipitating social environment, has produced great men and powerful regional writers. Her scenes, characters and atmosphere have long produced incentives to her Yankee dwellers and instilled in them the desire to reveal its region to posterity. From the time of Sewall on through the present age, New England has produced many spokesmen indigenous to the soil. Only four of her multitude of artists, however, lie within the range of great regional poets.

The pioneer interpreter of the New England life and scene was John Greenleaf Whittier. While he was not one of the royally endowed, far shining myriad minded poets of his day, yet he was the first American to feel that poetry should be rural and regional. It is doubtful if modern readers will find him as richly suggestive as they have Robinson and Frost, but he

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has a tenacious hold upon certain realities of life: first, upon the soil of New England of whose legions and history he became such a sympathetic interpreter; next upon the good old cause of freedom. Because he wrote in New England when Puritan ideals were strong and poetry bore the tag-end quotation of a moralist, he did not escape its influence. He was a spokesman of Puritan New England, and he presented pictures of Puritan New England life. Although he represents a New England of bygone days, yet, his idealistic poems, written in a romantic vein—"Snow Bound," "The Bare-foot Boy," "Skipper Ireson's Ride," and "Barbara Frietchie"—will always be refreshing portraits of New England of yesteryears.

While Whittier obtained enjoyment from contemplating nature and went to her for solace and for moral observation, he did not, however, love her as a true artist. He even resented Bryant's estimates of her. In this respect, therefore, he fell short in his writings as a poet of rural life. He hated realism and naturalism and he tended to be untrue to life in his art. For example, he avoided painting depressing scenes. Unlike Robinson and Frost, who depict the tragedies of lowly life as they observe them, if Whittier describes poverty he praises it as shown in the following couplet:

And blushed as she gave it, looking down
On her feet so bare, and her tattered gown.

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3 Ibid.
4 John Greenleaf Whittier, "Maude Muller," *The Complete Works* (Boston, 1898), p. 47. All subsequent references to Whittier's poems are made to this edition.
or in this quatrain:

Unploughed, unseen, by scythe unshovned,
The poor forsaken farm field lie,
Once rich with golden corn
And pale green breaths of rhy.

If he draws tragedy, he shows his protagonist gaining happiness because he once suffered. An illustration follows: Mable Martin, the daughter of Susanne Martin who has been tried and convicted for practicing witchcraft, is made a recluse and an outcast because of this event. While her former neighbors are casting epithets at her and wanting to flog her, Esek speaks:

"Good friends and neighbors!" Esek said,
"I'm weary of this lonely life;
In Mabel see my chosen wife!"

......

On Mabel's curls of golden hair
On Esek's shaggy strength it fell,
And the wind whispered, it is well!"2

For the reason that Whittier did not portray life as a stark realist, he had little or no influence upon the great modern poets who unflinchingly record the harsh realities of life. It is only as a humanitarian, however, it might be said, that he did influence poets as Edwin Markham, who combined propaganda with art. Yet, in spite of his faults, Whittier will always be remembered as the New England poet of "Snow-Bound" and the New England Champion of liberty.

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Emily Dickinson, the next great interpreter of the New England scene, came between 1865 and 1900. The simple and central fact about her is that she lived in Amherst during the middle year of the nineteenth century. This means that she came into the Puritan heritage at the moment it was becoming invalid.\(^1\) With her, poetry lost its clearly defined tendencies and became various, experimental and sensuous. In so many respects is her poetry modern that it is only by an effort that we remember that she belonged to a generation which had come of age before the Civil War, and was to do her work in the decades immediately following.\(^2\) She was a poetess who, even though she anticipated the imagist and other writers of the modern school, never lost the impress of the period. Three of its strongest currents came to a confluence in her poetry: "the Puritan tradition in which she was nurtured; the Yankee or more broadly American drollery and the spiritual unrest, typified by Emerson, which everywhere was the meeting frost of custom."\(^3\) While her province is New England, she is particularly concerned in portraying the New England mind, vividly and intensively. For the first time on the New England scene there appeared a poetess who has Puritan talent for psychic reconnaissance. Inasmuch as she disregarded form for feeling and thought, and displayed in her lyrics qualities of New England speech, laconic brevity, directness and cadence, she may be called a rebel.

Emily's poems fall into three types: first, Platonic poems which are

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\(^1\) George F. Whicher, *Bibliography of Emily Dickinson* (Amherst, 1930), p. 11.
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 14.
\(^3\) Ibid., p. 153.
predominantly concerned with ideas. The following is an example:

Success is counted sweetest
By those who never succeed,
To comprehend the nectar
Requires sorest need.\(^1\)

And in another in which she defines her theory of life:

If I can stop one heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain;
If I can ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again
I shall not live in vain.\(^2\)

The second type of Emily's writings is the Imagist or physical poems in which there is a minimum of idea but clearly drawn impression. The imagery of Dickinson, which is sharp and distinct, is expressed with rigid economy of style and is more significant in that it anticipates the school of Amy Lowell. In this type, her poetry is saturated with the atmosphere of the local countryside where she lived. Though not a local colorist in the obvious sense, she expresses in quaint symbols, dynamic images of her favorite characters, the bee, the breeze, the sun and flowers:

Blazing in gold and quenching purple,
Leaping like leopards to the sky,
Then at the feet of the old horizon
Laying her spotted face to die.\(^3\)

And the third type is the metaphysical in which she infuses imagery and the idea:

I never saw a moor;
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,

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\(^1\)Emily Dickinson, "No. I" The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, (ed.) Martha Dickinson Bianchi (Boston, 1924), p. 3.
\(^2\)Ibid., "No. VI" p. 6.
\(^3\)Emily Dickinson, op. cit., "No. XLIII", p. 102.
And what a wave must be.\(^1\)

Although Emily was inattentive to superficial polish and she wrote at a time when poetry was like furniture—put together with putty, gilded and heavily upholstered—she preserved in her writings the same instinct of the sound clipper,\(^2\) the Connecticut clock and the New England doorway objects of beauty. As a New England poetess, she speaks New Englandly while she distills Puritan "drollery and transcendent mysticism in her gnomic verse."\(^3\)

Next on the scene as regionalist of New England are Robinson and Frost, "who found their accounts in the old New England with its desperate passions and wild regrets."\(^4\) Their country is a strangely changed New England from the one Whittier knew. It is sometimes even lonelier than when the Indians held it. And even in the great cities that machinery has built greater, in a Boston larger than Emerson's there is something very vital gone.\(^5\) In the nineteenth century New England was a land of economic good health. The American doctrine of unlimited opportunity for every mother's son was in its fullest bloom. Mills were humming, small farms all the way North from Boston to Canada\(^6\) were like beehives and the broad fields were filled with the sounds of children's voices or pregnant

\(^1\)Ibid., "No. XIV" p. 188.
\(^2\)George F. Whicher, op. cit., p. ii.
\(^6\)Ibid., p. 12.
with the glow of yellow corn. Just the opposite is the picture of rural New England of the twentieth century. Here we find a country haunted by black and fallen houses left vacant by the men who, seeking richer soil, swamped to the westward frontier less than a century ago. Here the wild trees that the farmers pushed into the gullies, have taken strength and are marching back, taking back the land of their ancestors. There are fewer farms than there were fifty years ago. There is more wild life in Maine than there was one hundred years ago. Above all, to the tragic characters left in these decaying settlements, this thing happening to New England is a horrible thing for them to see and a terrible thing for those whose bodies are too old and spent to fight over that which their forefathers won from the forest. Rural New England today, for the most part, represents in comparison to the Golden Age of the previous century, a decaying world of silence and despair and in such a province Robinson and Frost have found new music for a very ancient art.

Robinson, even though a "poet of marked individuality of steel and grit, refreshingly bracing, shows a preference in portraying character sketches of men who have gone through the mill." The misfits of existence, as he found them in his deplorable New England villages, their frustrations, successes and failures, fill his canvas. His manner of painting has always been that of the inspired reader of life, the attentive observer of character, the searching explorer of the conflicts of the heart. Like

1 Ibid., p. 17.
Emily Dickinson, Robinson has carefully studied the primary conditions of all poetry: brevity; and his best efforts are those gained with the utmost economy of means. With graphic words, he reveals a man's heart and mind as well as his appearance. An English critic says, "Robinson notes the wrinkles in the soul as well as in the skin." As a writer who dips his plume into the psychoanalysis of character, Robinson is a pioneer on the New England scene painting with dignity a New England province of poverty. Although he is also a conscious interpreter of the Arthurian Romances, it is in the etchings of pessimistic and psychological probings into cynical attitudes that Robinson is at his height. In this respect "his poetry has a tremendous influence upon the whole generation of American poets that it has taught them not only to see the true countenance of American life, but to care deeply about it."

Thus far, merely a brief note on New England has been struck. It has been indicated that New England, hedged in between rivers and mountains, has, by its atmosphere and geography, stimulated the production of outstanding poets. Such a country, balked by soil, topography and climate and inhabited by a comparatively stationary and conservative population, intellectually curious and humanly sympathetic, tends to produce in its citizens homogeneous characteristics necessary to make writers and thinkers. While the regional claim for New England priority in yielding authentic interpreters of her land and characters is due primarily to her

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atmosphere of culture, yet many modern critics assail the fact that New England is conspicuously fertile with recorders of her life and scene. Prior to the Civil War, however, although New England poets frequently reflected the New England scene, there was nothing uniquely American about the form. Of the four great New England interpreters, three of them, Whittier, Dickinson and Robinson distinctly portrayed the American scene in the Northeast corner of the United States. With the advent of Frost, however, the tragedy and comedy of rural New England hillsides are most quietly revealed and delicately colored. In the next chapter Frost is presented as a skillful artist painting the beauties of his hillsides as well as the neighborly and dourly characteristics of his hill men.
CHAPTER II

FROST, A SKILLFUL ARTIST OF RURAL NEW ENGLAND

To the foregoing background which shows New England as a fruitful province that, by its atmosphere and geography, produces artists who give color and diversity to the regional pattern, this chapter adds the part Frost plays as a regional artist. Since there can be no more useful function which a poet of a country can perform than to interpret his particular section so that it may be understood by others, the discussion of this chapter, then, will be occupied, mainly, with portraying Frost with a palette1 large enough to present in striking tones the most truly and individual impressions of rural New England life.

In the first place, it is well to consider Frost's theories of art as important principles that underlie his method of artistic interpretation. To further understand his paintings it is necessary to know the framework into which his poems are placed. To begin with, Frost says, "a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom."2 He further illustrates this idea fully:

It begins in delight, it inclines to impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life....It has denouement. It has an outcome that thought unforeseen was

1 Palette was used by Frost in the lines given to indicate his method of painting.

The colors are kept unmixed on the palette
Or better on the dishplates around the room,
So the effect when they are mixed on canvas
May seem almost exclusively designed.


2 Ibid., ii.
predestined from the first image of the original mood and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last. It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad—the happy sad blend of the drinking song.

On one occasion Frost remarked, "art serves life by clarifying realities." He continues with his comments on the purposes of poetic art by stating, "performance and prowess are the objectives in the field of art." On another occasion, Frost says, "poetry is words that have become deeds." The central plank in this platform only shows, then, that he makes the height of poetry a performance in words and thinking. Using these two aspects, words and thoughts, as guides for his poetic art, Frost combines, as few poets do, perfect naturalness in painting his country scenes with a rare insight into their enduring charms and beauties.

In the second place, it is important to know a few facts about the temperament of Frost before a detailed consideration of his work is attempted. For this purpose, an autobiographical sketch clarifies his position as an artist perfectly:

1 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
5 Reginald L. Cook, "Robert Frost as a Teacher," College English, VIII (February, 1947), 255. All subsequent references to Cook's articles will be entered without the magazine title and volume.
I'm what is called a sensiblist1
Or otherwise an environmentalist.
I refuse to adapt myself a mite
To any change from hot to cold, from wet
To dry, from poor to rich, or back again,
I make a virtue of my suffering
From nearly everything that goes on round me.
In other words, I know wherever I am,
Being the creator of literature I am,
I shall not lack for pains to keep me awake.2

This observation shows that Frost is a poet influenced by his environment. It also reveals that New England life is apprehended by a "sensiblist" whose experiences are rich and spacious for him to paint his art as he pleases. Obviously enough, however, he is so impressed and sensitive to his environment that in every respect he paints the fact.

Needless to say, living in the country as a farmer and a poet of New England plays a large part in bringing Frost to the gnarled heart of the country side.3 It enables him to become a true Yankee interpreter.

1 Frost, in making this statement, seems to attempt to fulfil Wordsworth's definition of a poet:
He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be among mankind. William Wordsworth, Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. William Knight (New York and London, 1896), I, p. 57.


3 By a curious circumstance, Frost was born in San Francisco, March 26, 1875, of New England and Scotch parentage. The boy was named Robert Lee after the Southern general, for the father was a keen Southern sympathizer. After the death of his father in 1885, Frost came East, where for eight generations, his foreparents had established themselves. His formal education was by no means regular, broken as it was by the urgency of making a living. Before he finished school in 1892, he was writing poetry, and soon began to submit poems to periodicals. It was his life in New England as an editor of a country newspaper, as a teacher and as a farmer which gave him an intimate knowledge of the country which he loves and interprets.
Moreover, living in New England\(^1\) where he frames his rural idyls, mostly in the form of lyrics and monologues,\(^2\) Frost proves to be no mere dilettante or amateur ruralist. He is himself what he sings, a part and parcel of rural life:

I choose to be a plain New Hampshire farmer
With an income in cash of say a thousand
(From say a Publisher in New York City).
It's restful to arrive at a decision
And restful just to think about New Hampshire
At present I am living in Vermont.\(^3\)

Thus, Robert Frost, a son himself of the New England soil, is able to fulfil his purpose of art "by clarifying realities" as he interprets New England life and its neighborliness.

The stand which Frost exemplifies in the woven cord of modern poetry is poetic realism.\(^4\) His own statement furnishes a good aspect of this phase of his art:

There are two types of realists: The one who offers a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real one, and the one who is satisfied with the potato brushed clean. I am inclined to be the second kind. To me, the thing that art does for life is to strip it to form.\(^5\)

Because Frost's poetry adheres so closely to the facts in rural New England life, of him a critic has coined this paradox: Frost is a most

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\(^2\)Frost confines his art to ballads written in human couplets, narratives in a loose blank verse, and personal and dramatic lyrics. His odes have excellent qualities.

\(^3\)"New Hampshire," p. 212.


\(^5\)Gorham B. Munson, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
romantic\(^1\) person and as such a realistic person.\(^2\) Although he is not, however, the alienated artist cut off from his people, his love of Nadir goes so deep that he is tempted neither to paint pretty pictures of it nor record into it an animism one does not find.\(^3\) Thus, with artistic assurance the small insignificant scenes of his New England are pictured with poetic instinct for life-like qualities and sensibility of impression. No casual scene emerges on his canvas, no meaningless genre-picture; but, on it, instead, the life of New England—its nature, its seasons, its people—are realistically portrayed. That Frost chooses to interweave his theory of poetic realism into not only the landscape etchings of his hillside country but also into the character portraiture of his hillside neighbors is revealed in "New Hampshire":

If I must choose which I would elevate  
The people or the already lofty mountain  
I'll elevate the already lofty mountain.\(^4\)

In considering Frost as a painter, in the meantime, one should consider two aspects of his art. First, it is the outgrowth of his power to observe closely the details of objects which come before him and paint them truthfully. Second, it is the result of his ability to hear completely the sounds of his province and recapture them as living words for his verses. As a result, Gorham Munson says:

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\(^1\) A qualifying difference between realism and romanticism follows: A realist loves life for its difficulties and hardships, because of its rudeness and vigors, even more in spite of them; while the romanticist is in love with ideas about life—ideas which everyone loves, a more obvious beauty, a less mysterious beauty. Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 17.


It is the poetry of observation, an emotional response, lyrical, dramatic, humorous, tragic to what he has seen and heard.

To be able to paint realistic pictures of the life about him, Frost believes that a poet must lean hard on facts, so hard, sometimes, that they hurt. In "Mowing" for example, he writes, "the fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." Leaning hard on facts enables the poet to reveal life as it is with every essential detail in just relief. For this reason his pictures are close to actuality and filled with brilliant recognizable reminders of everyday experiences. One specimen of his reliance upon close observation in painting is the picture of the rock strewn land of Vermont:

I farm a pasture where the boulders lie
As touching as a basket full of eggs.

He does not try to give ornaments. He presents facts only. Another is of the moth that chooses to light upon his hand:

Here's first a gloveless hand warm from my pocket,
A pearled and resting place twixt wood and wood,
Bright-black eyed silvery creature, brushed with brown
The wings not folded in repose but spread.

Likewise, he never pretends to see what isn't there, but he sees the facts and presents them with truth, tenderness and love. He justifies this statement by saying: "We love the things we love for what they are." The secret of his success as an interpreter of New England, then,
is accounted for by his adhering to facts. This truth may be observed, again, in the effectiveness of the landscape paintings found in "Birches":

```
... Often you have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and then turn many colored
As the stir cracks and crazes with their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them crystal
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.1
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The artistic effectiveness of the above picture is accomplished through the art of the painter whose palette is filled with a mingling of similes and metaphors, which, with a touch of sight and insight, are remarkable colors for such creative imagery.

Later the observation gives way to sheer imagination and the poem develops into a fantasy of trees arching in the woods. The daring figures in the fantasy are full of movements, lively and vigorous:

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You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterward, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hand and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.2
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It is difficult to analyze the delicate art of the poem which describes

1"Birches," p. 152.

Frost gains effectiveness in painting by using words not only for their pictorial value but also for their auditory value. Notice the effectiveness of the specific words: "click," "cracks" and "shattering."

2"Birches," p. 152.

There is a decided similarity between the sharp imagery of Dickinson and Frost. Dickinson was so venturesome that Amy Lowell considered her a precursor to the Imagist School. James D. Hart, Oxford Companion to American Literature (New York, 1941), p. 194.

Her imagery in the following attains dazzling proportions like those of Frost:

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I'll tell you how the sun rose
A ribbon at a time
The steeples swam in amethyst
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these snow laden birches which, in later years, will stand as beautiful ornaments in the New England fields. This lively fantasy has a romantic touch; it is a new guise in which to present the eternal search of every human being with a mind or a heart—the search for the meaning of life. Needless to say, Frost with his eyes fixed firmly upon the birches, performs with words\(^1\) to reveal his North of Boston scenery with conscientious efforts and prowess. Finally, in his characteristic manner, he implies his truths or clarifications of life: "One could do worse than be a swinger of birches,"\(^2\) and "earth's the right place for love."\(^3\) In the next little picture, the subtlety by which Frost sounds spiritual overtones above the actual theme by barely implying a moral is given:

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree
Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of the day I rued.\(^4\)

The contrast of colors, black and white, is merely suggested. Likewise, the lesson is barely implied: The smallest things in life often give happiness. Certainly, then, "one can see with the poet's own swift eyes and follow the trail of his glancing thought."\(^5\)

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\(^1\)Note: Frost's sensibilities are as strong as his words. He defines poetry as words that have become deeds. That fact is portrayed with such seriousness that his whole style is centered around words and concentration.


\(^3\)Ibid.

\(^4\)"Dust of Snow," p. 170.

The second significant aspect of Frost's art is his ability to picture what he hears. Here again is the artist who extends our literary borders not only with fresh signs but with fresh sounds.\(^1\) To use words and phrases in such a way that will reinforce the subtle magic of verse is after all the aim of the poetic artist. Frost accomplishes this feat by using, first of all, words that are not generally onomatopoeics; yet they recall natural sounds\(^2\) which are let in from the walks of his everyday life as:

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove length sticks of wood.\(^3\)

Again:

There was never a sound besides the wood but one
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.\(^4\)

And again:

You nick my spruce until its fiber cracks
It gives up standing straight and goes down swishing.\(^5\)

And, second, Frost is able to picture what he hears by his aptitude for giving concrete images as may be seen in the illustrations given above; and third, by presenting his pictures in phrases and verses known for "their dramatic aptitude and economy of statement."\(^6\) In this way, then, Frost captures in verse the actual sounds and tones of his Yankee neighbor's

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\(^1\)Louis Untermeyer, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 26.
\(^3\)"Out, Out," p. 171.
\(^4\)"Mowing," p. 25.
\(^5\)"To a Young Wretch," \textit{A Witness Tree}, p. 44.
speech. Frost's word magic in which he conveys not only what he sees, but also what he hears, enables him to take the stand as an eminent interpreter of New England.

Using his native faculties, the optical and auditory senses along with his theories of "the figure a poem makes," Frost vivifies his countryside and induces in his readers a nostalgia for New England. His clear paintings of rural North of Boston present no evidence of labored, self-consciousness, or any new twisted theory of art. They are merely lucid designs of a man who has recorded what he has seen and heard: seen with a revelatory and critical vision, heard personally and intently. It becomes necessary now to observe a few of Frost's paintings which reveal the landscapes of New England in lines that are definite and concrete. The spiritual antidote which follows, a picture of little pools of water from the winter rain and snow, is a gentle reminder that, through Frost, New England will always be with us:

These pools that, though in forests still reflect
The total sky almost without defect,
And like the flowers beside them, chill and shiver
Will like the flowers beside them soon be gone

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1 In an interview with Newdict, Frost made the following statement: There are only three things, after all, that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear and what we call the heart or mind. It is the most important of all to reach the mind of the reader. And the surest way to reach the heart is through the ear. The visual images thrown off by a poem are important, but it is more important still to choose and arrange words in a sequence so as virtually to control the intonation and pauses of the reader's voice.


2 "The Figure a Poem Makes," p. ii.

And yet not out by any brook or river,
But up by roots to bring dark foliage on.

Everyone acquainted with the country has seen little flowing brooks growing smaller and smaller until finally there is no stream at all. Frost's picture of a New England brook is a veritable mirror of brooks found in many places.

By June our brooks run out of song and speed
Sought for much after that, it will be found
Either to have gone groping underground
Or flourished and come up in jewel weed,
Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent
Even against the way its waters went.
Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat.

These lines above show Frost's aptitude for recording exactly what he sees, and suggesting, with images cast into the verse form of a spoken iambic pentameter, a picture familiar to everyone who has seen a brook. As it moves on, the poem ends, as Frost says poems should, in "a clarification of life or a series of revelation." That fact may be noted in the next lines when the best thought is the last—the happy sad blend of the drinking song.

A brook to none but who remember long.
This as it will be seen is other far
Then with brooks taken otherwhere in song,
We love the things we love for what they are.

That Frost has the faculty to interpret what he sees in New England accurately and precisely is demonstrated by a few other of his landscape etchings. The huge hills are felt as things hard, unyielding and almost

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2 "Hyla Brock," p. 149.
3 Ibid.
sinister at times. Frost's reaction to the atmosphere that the mountains
often create is seen in this photographic picture:

The mountain held the town as in a shadow
I saw so much before I slept there once;
I noticed that I missed stars in the west,
Where its black body cut into the sky.¹

A familiar sight in New England is the orchards pregnant with fruit which
is almost too much to gather:

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still
And there's a barrel I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.²

The old stone walls stretching for miles throughout the country is a repre-
sentative sight of rural New England. Frost builds the picture of the
wall on the background of the neighborly New England chores:

The Gaps I Mean
No one has seen them or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go
To each the boulders that have fallen to each
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spill to make them balance.³

The charm of the above picture rests in the aspect of Frost's spirit of
neighborliness. The old woodpile is also a common sight in New England.
Occasionally, a farmer spends his energy cutting the wood of the forest
and then, forgetting the cord, leaves it to burn itself out in the woods:

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¹"The Mountain," p. 56.
³"Mending Wall," p. 47.
The wood was gray and the bark warping off it
And the pile somewhat sunken. Clematis
Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.¹

The lonely black houses left vacant by those who followed the Western
trail of adventure stand as spokesmen of a once glorious day:

The little cottage we were speaking of,
A front with just a door between two windows,
Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black.²

Another typical sight of the New England scene is the great stretches of
blue berry patches lying in the sun:

Blue berries as big as the end of your thumb,
Real sky blue,³ and heavy and ready to drum
In the cavernous pails of the first one to come!
And all ripe to gather not some of them green
And some of them ripe!⁴

New England is noted for her many rare flowers. Frost not only paints
these flowers in all of their beauty but he also gives many references
of trips he makes in search for the purple Fringed, rose Pogonias and
the Ram Horn orchises. When he describes the flowers, the artist's words
actually become deeds:

A thousand orchises;
For though the grass was scattered,
Yet every second spear
Seemed tipped with wings of color
That tinged the atmosphere.⁵

³ The water colors which Frost splashes equally throughout all his
paintings constitute the most impressive element of his landscape pic-
tures.
⁴ "Blue Berries," p. 78.
⁵ "Rose Pogonias," p. 19.
One other picture of his flowers—a reminder that Frost is a conscientious New England painter—is this of a New England orchid:

There stood the purple spires with not breath of air
No head long bee
To disturb their perfect poise the live long day
'Neath the alder tree.1

A moving picture of a young colt afraid of the snow because he isn't winter broken possesses all of Frost's realistic touches.

A little Morgan had one forefoot on the wall,
The other curled at his breast. He dipped his head
And snorted at us. And then he had to bolt.
We heard the miniature thunder where he fled,
And we saw him, or thought we saw him, dim and grey,
like a shadow against the curtain of falling flakes.2

It is surprising to note how often Frost mentions trees in his poems. To him they stand as a symbol of life. For this reason he exercises the greatest care in recapturing their lines and graces:

The birch begins to crack its outer sheath
Of baby green and show the white beneath
-----------------------------------------------
It was a thing of beauty and was sent
To live its life out as an ornament.3

The sights of New England would be incomplete without a representation of a snow scene. In "Our Singing Strength," Frost gives one of the most realistic views of a spring snow written:

It snowed in spring on earth so dry and warm
The flakes could find not landing place to form.
Hordes spent themselves to make it wet and cold,
And still they failed of any lasting hold.
They made no white impression on the block.
They disappeared as if earth sent them back

1 "The Quest of the Purple-Fringed," The Witness Tree, p. 30.
3 Robert Frost, "A Young Birch," Steeple Bush (New York, 1947), p. 3. All subsequent references to this book will be entered without the name of the author.
Not till from separate flakes they changed at night
To almost strips and tapes of rugged white
Did grass and garden ground confess it snowed,
And all go back to winter but the snowed road.
Next day the scene was piled and puffed and dead.
The grass lay flattened under on great tread.
Borne down until the end almost took root,
The rangery bough anticipated fruit
With Snowballs cupped in every opening bud
The road alone maintained itself in mud,
Whatever its secret was of greater heat
From inward fires or brush of passing feet.

Each picture above is a concrete experience which reduplicates itself upon the mind of the reader. Frost, the artist captures the magic words of his imagery and blends them in the spoken forms of couplets and blank verses. Whittier could probably dispute Frost's preeminence as a painter of the most beautiful snow idyllic but the imagery of the Quaker poet is marked by no peculiar delicacy or originality of style; he is too naive. Frost, on the other hand, has blended the actual tones of Yankee speech with a delicate atmospheric imagery. Like the average Yankee of the best stock, Frost is so deeply versed in country things that his paintings are but reflections of country life. Needless to say, then, he reaches his magic through the door of actuality. "Sight and insight" he says, "are the whole business of a poet." Let him see clearly enough

1"Our Singing Strength," p. 297.
2Amy Lowell, op. cit., p. 112.
4Note: A few lines from "Snow Bound" are given for comparison:
The sun that brief December day
Rose cheerless over hills of gray
And, darkly circled, gave at noon
A sadder light than waning moon.
John Greenleaf Whittier, op. cit., p. 399.
and understanding will be added.¹

Another important fact about Frost's nature poems is that he universalizes² the meaning of nature. Since he is both a New England farmer and a New England poet, he perhaps, reaps all the advantage there is in being true to his landscapes, its stone walls, its birches, its mountains, its pools and its snow storms. He not only paints them with the atmosphere of New England but also he makes them applicable to the universe. In the same breath, he is a poet of and for the world.³ One does not need to have lived in New England to understand him because his vignettes produce a New England homesickness to anyone who attempts to understand them.

In brief, then, it is necessary to mention the two channels through which Frost attains universal appeal. The first, through the use of magic words, he sets up emotional feelings and reaction into his readers; second, through the use of symbols he stimulates the impression given. Since his power to use crystalized words that create ripples of similar

¹ Reginald S. Cook, "Frost's Asides on His Poetry," p. 351.
² Frost explains the universal application of poetry in the lines given:

As you throw a picture on the screen
The meaning of it is all out of you;
The voices give you what you wish to hear.


³ Frost makes a personal reference about the universal application of his poetry:

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


images in the minds of others has been touched, the discussion will now center on his symbolism. Commenting on symbols in poetry, Frost states, "poetry is simply made up of metaphors." This acknowledgment accounts for the fact that his nature picture can be found in our own back yard. Further he comments on symbols:

Every single poem written regular is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion and there be judged for whether any original intention it had has been strongly spent or weakly lost.

Being a symbolist, then, Frost selects a tree, a brook or a tuft of flowers and makes it a symbol of something else which is larger or deeper than itself. As a result, his figures become a series of a never broken chain of thought that recalls, with a flexibility, an image in the mind of the reader. Notice, for instance, Frost's "Canis Major":

The great overdog
That heavenly beast
With a star in one eye
Gives a leap in the east

He dances up right
All the way to the west
And never once drops
On his forefeet to rest

I am a poor underdog
But to-night I will bark
With the great over dog
That romps through the dark.

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1 Note: Symbolism, the art of representing an object for an idea, attained its apogee in the Middle Ages when animals and objects had their hieratic significance. Robert Frost, "The Constant Symbol," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXX (October, 1947), 115.

2 Ibid.


These three quatrines compose a great lyric which clearly reveals Frost's ability to symbolize. In fact, it proves his power to take the common in experience and develop it in an unusual way to show his sympathetic understanding of life in general. The great over dog, the heavenly beast, represents the moon; while the underdog stands for man. Through this symbol, as well as through all others, he gains his universal appeal. In "Canis Major", he is suggesting, no doubt, that men as well as children take a delight in watching the stars and romping in the dark.

The importance of the above discussion is obvious. It points out the fact that Frost's poetry, through the use of imagery and symbols, deals in indirection. "Poetry is implication," says Frost. "Let implication be implication. Don't try to turn it into explication."¹ Since his poems are applicable to this theory of implication, it will be noted then, that their meanings are adaptable to the universe. In other words, Frost's paintings, moreover, will inspire a new and different meaning for each reader. For instance, in the first part of the poem "After Apple Picking," Frost shows the physical weariness of the farmer. Then he comes to the lines that signify the universal application of the poet's personal experience:

For I have had too much
Of apple-picking; I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.²

It is apparent the poet has been talking about a concrete experience, but he implies that this experience is symbolic of the harvest of life.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" reveals a meaning which is

both personal and universal, concrete and therefore general:

The woods are lovely dark and deep
But I have promises to keep,
And miles and miles to go before I sleep
And miles and miles to go before I sleep!

Certainly here is a fusion of word magic with the song of sleep. While the beauty of the woods seems to hold him, the insistent call of death seems to weigh upon his mind. Strange voices lure him away to nature, friendly voices call him back to men. Whichever call he heeds, he sleeps at last. In the same manner, often enough to-day, in tragic indiscision, confused by the conflicting voices, men fall asleep murmuring of the miles they have to go.2

One other of his many metaphors is "Directive". The poem seems to imply Booker T. Washington's philosophy, "Let down your buckets where you are":

Here are your waters and your watering place
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.5

Frost is one American poet who not only universalizes nature but everything he touches. Inasmuch as he is intensely local, his landscape etchings convey a definite scene of the universe. So it is with the work of any artist who attempts to interpret in forms of suitable beauty the truths of a definite locality. The fact remains that Frost, as an interpreter of New England, is not only concerned with presenting pretty scenes of his section but also in clothing them with a signification which reveals "a clarification of life."4 By leaning hard on fact he

2Richard Thornton, op. cit., p. 127.
4"The Figure a Poem Makes," p. ii.
casts familiar experiences in a new and significant light.

With the same performance and prowess with which he paints his landscape scenes, Frost makes portraits of New England village folks, his neighbors, whose lives have been shaped by a special environment. In this phase of his work, first of all, he shows particular deftness in painting certain eccentricities that an isolated and ingrowing life of the back country encourages; and, second, he exhibits the same genuine interest in his characters in that he is concerned in reproducing exactly what he sees. Sensitive to both the physical and the mental climate of his own land, the poet is skillful in recreating its frosty winters of the soul. At no moment, however, can one guess from the subject or the way it is treated, the opinion of the painter who has wielded the brush, One feels instantly, nevertheless, the artist is portraying his people in truth and as they are.

As proof to the fact that the inhabitants of rural New England possess certain eccentricities, the character sketches of two writers will be considered. Boynton says:

They live in a country which has come to old age on arid tradition. They are unacquainted with mirth in song or play. Their human contacts have not been varied or they are far from the main traveled road. And the summer visitors who do not understand, call them natives....Hard pride and grim endurance have lined their faces, their labor has bowed their backs and in breeding has done the rest.

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Nearly a century ago, Whittier also gave a similar veracious sketch of the homely rural population:

Church-goers, fearful of the unseen power  
But grumbling over pulpit-tax and pew rent,  
Saving as shrewd economist, and their souls  
And winter pork with the least possible outlay  
Of salt and sanctity; in daily life  
Showing as little actual comprehension  
Of Christian charity and love and duty  
As if the "Sermon On The Mount" had been  
Outdated like a last year's almanac.¹

Whittier continues with a description of women which bears comparison with Boynton:

And, in sad keeping with all things about them,  
Shrill, querulous women, sour and sullen men,  
Untidy, loveless, old before their time  
With scarce a human interest save their own  
Monotonous round of small economics  
Or the poor scandal of the neighborhood.²

Frost's men and women are essentially the same as those described above. Of them he says:

Yankees are what they always were.³

Again:

They are tireless folk, but slow and sad  
Though two, close keeping, are lass and lad  
With none among them that ever sings,  
And yet, in view of how many things,  
As sweet companions as might be had.⁴

Into narratives, which have all the qualifications of a modern short story, Frost presents, not in so sharply drawn physical sketches as the

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² Ibid., p. 84.  
³ "Brown's Descent," p. 175.  
Note: The last verse in "Ghost House" portrays Frost's tender feeling for his New England neighbors.
nature scenes are painted but in silhouettes, the typical and spiritual rural New Englander. Though he merely gives the impression, the characters reveal their mental selves, their emotions, fears and hopes usually in a blank verse representative of their own Yankee drawl. A fair specimen of his art in representing a sensitive, selfish and reckless farmer in action is given below:

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

"What is there wrong?"
"Something you just said."
"What did I say?"
"About our taking pains."

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
James would take time, of course, to chew it over
Before he acted: he's just got round to act.¹

Another thing that gives his characters so potent an illusion of reality is the absence of the guiding hand of the creator.² The figures live and breathe of their own desire and necessity. One of his characters declares: "I go no where on purpose, I happen by."³ It is the keynote of Frost's interpretation of the Northeast section. Because he permits things and people to have their own way, he is the recording instrument; and the artist appears after the performance and lets the

²Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 21.
characters take all the bows.  

Frost has given possibly in "The Death of The Hired Man" the finest piece of genre painting ever attempted in our language. From the dialogue between Mary and her husband, Warren, the picture of the hired man evolves and proves to be a real typical character of every community:

What good is he? Who else will harbour him  
At his age for the little he can do?  
What help he is there's no depending on.  
Off he goes always when I need him most.

Then Mary who has a warm tender feeling for the old shiftless helper tries to vindicate him:

He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,  
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,  
So he won't have to beg and be beholding.

Suddenly Warren, who is angry because the old man returns to his farm in a helpless condition, exclaims:

Silas has better claim on us you think  
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles  
As the road winds would bring him to his door  
Silas has walked that far no doubt to-day.  
Why didn't he go there? His brother is rich,  
A somebody - director in the bank.

In Mary's answer, a picture of a grim haughty old farmer who possesses inward pride and a disdainful spirit is revealed.

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

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1 Alfred Kreymborg, op. cit., p. 23.  
2 Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 23.  
3 "The Death of the Hired Man," p. 49.  
4 Ibid.  
5 Ibid., p. 53.  
6 Ibid.
Mary who has a woman's intuition of a foreboding tragedy begs her husband to go to Silas. He does and returns. At the heightened moment the catastrophe is presented suddenly and in a final monosyllable:

"Dead," was all he answered.

It is the effective denouement which gives the setting the power of an immense and moving actor in the lives of folks it over shadows. Through suggestive words Frost shadows his characters. Here he has presented the typical affectionate farm wife, the husband who is stern with his helpers, the evasive but sensitive hired man whose life has been wasted and who has scruples against his rich brother in a moving type of character portrayal.

Many of Frost's portraits of Yankee folks reveal a people left over of the old stock, morbid, pursued by phantoms slowly sinking into insanity:

The sound was behind me instead of before,
A sleepy sound, but mocking half,
As one who utterly couldn't care.
The Demon arose from his wallow to laugh

---

1 Frost's statement concerning the figure a poem makes follows:
   The figure is the same as for love. No one can hold
   that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place.
   It has denouement. It has an outcome that unforeseen was pre-
   destined from the first image of the original mood—and indeed
   from the very first mood.
   "The Figure a Poem Makes," p. ii.

2 Kreymborg says:
   "The Death of the Hired Man" ushered in a new movement in
   our literature: in stories, novels and plays, as well as
   poetry. The renaissance in fiction and drama owes part of
   its advance to the pioneer effort of Robert Frost.
   Alfred Kreymborg, op. cit., p. 323.

2 Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 21.
Brushing the dirt from his eyes as he went;
And well I knew what the Demon meant.¹

And one other example of this morbidity:

I have my fancies; it runs in the family
My father's brother wasn't right, they kept him
Locked up for years back there at the old farm
I've been away once—yes, I've been away.²

Then he shows how a drab life and a barren environment will throw the
mind back upon itself until it becomes unsettled. In this case the hill
wife had been insane once and now she is drifting again:

It's rest I want — there I have said it out
From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them — from doing
Things over and over that just won't stay done.³

Next is a portrait of a woman whose moral degeneration is leading
her on the road to insanity. She is obsessed by a fear that her hus-
band whom she has left to live with another man might apprehend her. As
she and Joel approached the dark house, she is startled by a sense of
guilt and dread:

'I saw it just as plain as a white kite'
She said, as the light on the dash board ran
Along the bushes at the roadside—'a man's face
You must have seen it too.'

"I didn't see it."
"Are you sure"—
"Yes, I'm sure!"
"—it was a face?"

¹"The Demiurge's Laugh," p. 35.
²"A Servant to Servant," p. 84.
³Ibid., p. 83.

Referring to insanity which finds a definite place in Frost's in-
terpretations of rural New England life, Amy Lowell says:
Mr. Frost's book reveals a disease which is eating the
vitals of our New England life, at least its rural com-

The New Republic, II (February, 1915), 81.
"Joel, I'll have to look. I can't go in, I can't, and leave a thing like that unsettled."

Refusing to let Joel go with her, she takes the lantern and goes down the road only to encounter her husband, the object of her fear. The tragical denouement is unexpected.

Strange to say, Frost seems to have a keen fascination to certain abortive lives of his province who suffer from certain forms of inhibitions. Notice the sketch of the eccentricities of a temperamental but strongly characterized woman whose spirit recoils against her husband because he was able to dig the grave for their first born. The poem is tragic to the core because the husband cannot understand how he has caused an offense:

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

---

1"The Fear," p. 112.

While Frost singles out for interpretation primarily the women of rural New England, Robinson is essentially a poet of New England men. One poem, a little biography entitled "Richard Cory," gives a picture of a cynic who found that living was unbearable:

Whenever Richard Cory went to town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was rich - yes, richer than a king -
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

1"The Home Burial," p. 70.
2Frost's poems are saturated with loneliness, a specific force in his New England hills—lonely hills, lonely trips, lonely people and deserted houses are mentioned frequently.
3"The Black Cottage," p. 75.
4Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 21.
He flicked and flung the flower,  
And another sort of smile  
Caught up like finger tips  
The corners of his lips  
And cracked his ragged muzzle

Often, he gives insight into the characteristics of the Yankee by letting him speak for himself. The Yankee is a high-minded, sober man who exhibits pride in his New England background. One character says proudly:  

Yankees are what they always were.2

In nearly every clannish rural country settlement inbreeding is a disease. Frost portrays the same illness in the Yankee province North of Boston.

"I only mean my mother was a Stark  
Several times over, and by marrying father  
No more than brought us back into the name."3

The chilling spirit of New England asceticism is a slow poison that saps the vitality of a community that could grow. Instead, life is modified by its presence:

The ground work of all faith is human woe4

It so happens that Frost has shrewd eyes for everything in rural New England. He looks on many sides and into the depths of his Puritan country and brings to light rural North of Boston. Nothing escapes his glance. Among the many portraits he places on his canvas, he draws also for local coloring, a picture of a gossipy old woman approving the immoral conduct of her daughter,5 a young girl, no longer a girl, living

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1"The Subverted Flowers," The Witness Tree, p. 25.  
2"Brown's Descent," p. 175.  
4"The Lesson for To-day," The Witness Tree, p. 48.  
5"The House Keeper," p. 103.
with a man without benefit of clergy, and an old man driving an ox team around the base of the mountain all his life; yet he knew nothing of the beauties on it. He also gives sketches of a peasant coming from church and of a farmer talking about the severe laws of compulsory education for youths. Likewise, Frost's canvas does not ignore the advent of modern conveniences which his farmers view with skeptical eyes. The attitude that the rural New Engander gives on the electric light:

Between us two it's not a star at all
It's a new patented electric light.

And the train:

Here it comes breasting like a horse in skirts,
gives a clearly defined picture of a Yankee possessing an incredulous state of mind. Striking views of men whose faces are lined with doubt may be seen in the character sketches of the farmers who air their opinions on the telephone and the telegraph, the aeroplane and the factories as interfering institutions in their mode of living.

The vignettes of Frost also show a tender expression on the passion for neighborliness which pervades his work. Even a simple friendly salutation is treated with an intense, vigorous touch.

1Ibid.
2"The Mountain," p. 56.
5"The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," The Witness Tree, p. 87.
7"The Line Gang," p. 178
8"A Trial Run," p. 402.
"Now are you neighbor? Just the man I'm after."¹

Another charming glimpse into the friendly spirit of Frost's neighbors is revealed in the speech of a peasant who says:

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hold,
And shout from where I am "what is it?"
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade end up and five feet tall
And plod; I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.²

In the paintings of Frost there is a sensitive revelation of not only the contours of New England, but also its movements. He presents a picture strikingly alive. A mere journalist could, from the observation of a few vacation trips, fabricate a caricature of a Yankee farmer; but it takes a genius who has shared their lives to describe living individuals with just so much distinctive Yankee characters as real people of a region possess.³

A poet of the minutiae of a locality, a painter of Yankee moods, Frost succeeds in being both national and universal because of the stark motivation of simple minds.⁴

Through a most notable innovation—that of writing verses that imitate the casual speech of his protagonist—Frost has become the interpreter of the New England soul. In New Hampshire and Vermont, Frost has long been in touch with New Englanders still living in the native tradition, farmers who thought for themselves and spoke their minds with tragic and humorous indirection.⁵ He has long listened to cadences of actual

¹"The House Keeper," p. 111.
²"A Time to Talk," p. 156.
³Richard Thornton, op. cit., p. 151.
⁵Richard Thornton, op. cit., p. 100.
speech of his New England farmers. "Out of their idiom he has molded much of his verses"¹ of spoken rhythm which leans intently upon the tones of actual speech. As a result, his living verses contain the absolute rhythm of actual speech,²—the very vernacular, the slow Yankee drawl³ indigenous to the Northeast section. With such a medium Frost is well qualified to interpret the whole gamut of New England emotions, love, fear, hate, anger, hysteria and tenderness. And this he accomplishes with a master's touch.

An excellent impression of Frost's art may be gained from Harriet Monroe's description:

...He transmutes them (his poems) almost always into a freely moving iambic measure, usually blank verse in the longer poems, and in the shorter ones rhyming couplets and stanzas. His metrical patterns are according to precedent; he tries no free verse experiments, but there is a subtle originality, a very personal style in his weaving of cadences over the basic meter...⁴

The kindly Yankee has something to add concerning his verse meters:

"particularly in our language there are virtually but two, strict iambic

¹ Ibid.
² Randall Jarrell, op. cit., p. 589.
³ Frost states in his Preface to King Jasper by Robinson the following concerning verses in the present age:

   It may come to notice of posterity that our age ran wild in the quest of new ways to be new. Edwin Arlington Robinson, King Jasper (New York, 1935), p. ii.

⁴ From this observation it is noticed that Whittier wrote New England poetry, but he was hampered by the traditions of his day; Robinson held to the old meters but used the new subject matter and the new diction; Frost saturates his meter with a new form, a spoken meter.

⁴ Harriet Monroe, Poets and Their Arts (New York, 1922), p. 56.
and loose iambic."\(^1\) And they are spoken in "three chief tones,"\(^2\) the spoken tone, intoning and a combination of both tones. Because of his capacity for self criticism, Frost is then able to create rhythm in his verses which represent the rhythm of the slow cautious New England speech.\(^3\) For this reason his dictum comes closer than Robinson's to the language of common Yankee speech.\(^4\)

Frost, like Wordsworth,\(^5\) insists that "all poetry should be the reproduction of the tones of actual speech,"\(^6\) moreover he believes in taking care of the sound because he says, "the sense will take care of itself." For, as Mr. Edward Garnett has pointed out, "words of art live or die by the manner of their telling rather than by their content."\(^7\) In answer to Reginald Cook's query, "How to start a Poem?", Frost further states: "You can feel a little system start to make like a crystal forming on water in the cold and then set."\(^8\) Being the conscious self critic that he is, Frost spends utmost time, then, in capturing the idiom and tone of the casual Yankee drawl and placing this tone and drawl in

\(^1\) Reginald S. Cook, "Frost's Asides on His Poetry", p. 354.
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Fred D. Millet, Contemporary American Authors (New York, 1940), p. 135.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Wordsworth speaks of the same principle of poetry in the phrase, "the perception of similitude in dissimilitude" which expresses his idea of a natural poetic diction. William Wordsworth, op. cit., p. 68.
\(^6\) Reginald L. Cook, "Frost's Asides on His Poetry", p. 353.
\(^7\) Amy Lowell, op. cit., p. 112.
\(^8\) Reginald L. Cook, "Frost's Asides on His Poetry", p. 353.
verses flavored with his peasants' speech.1

Frost's most noticeable innovation, then, is the substitution of a spoken for a written rhythm. He does this by writing for the most part in blank verses which do not hesitate to have an extra syllable put in or one left out.2 At first, Frost was assailed by his contemporaries for attempting this innovation. Finally, nevertheless, he was justified in taking liberties with an ancient and dignified meter upon the grounds that the blank verses of many a master are hard to scan.3 "Now a half century after his first efforts to bring sound and color of actual speech to poetry, a whole countryful of poets are discovering what Frost has been dealing in."4

1 Ibid.
2 Amy Lowell, op. cit., p. 128.
3 Ibid., p. 129.
4 Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 29.

Note: "The Road Not Taken" is probably a reference to Frost's new way of poetic expression:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as far that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

"The Road Not Taken," p. 131.
This spoken verse, it is observed, is a very effective medium for one to use who has assumed the responsibility of acting as an interpreter of the emotions and moods of a country. It is found in the midst of his casual speech; many of the poet's lines are quotable. In the finest sense, he is the most quotable of all of our modern writers. His simple lines, written in a Yankee spoken idiom, catch the essence of New England atmosphere and reveal a series of vignettes filled only with the serene hopeful philosophy of the rural New England peasant. In fact, his wise sayings are so numerous it would be possible to fill a calendar with the gems of his Yankee spoken thoughts that would be comparable to "Poor Richard's Almanac." Having his characters present their gems of wisdom in their own Yankee drawl is, finally, one way of knowing that Frost is in close contact with his rural neighbors and that he takes pride in mirroring them to the world.

What we live by we die by.  

......

Our very life depends on everything  
Recurring till we answer from within.

......

The best way to hate is the worse.

......

Most of the change we see in life  
Is due to truths being in and out of favour.

1 Alfred Kreymborg, op. cit., p. 321.
3 "Snow," p. 185.
5 "The Black Cottage," p. 77.
Take care to Sell Your Horse before He Dies
The Art of Life is Passing Losses on.¹

......

All those who try to go it sole alone,
Too proud to be beholden for relief,
Are absolutely sure to come to grief.²

......

We're either nothing or a God's regret.³

......

Art and religion love the somber chord⁴

It has been the object of this chapter to present Frost, by quotations and analysis, not only as an artist of the rural New England landscape but also of the rural North of Boston Yankee. Broadly speaking, it is found that he is a skillful artist of rural New England because of these findings: First, he possesses a large capacity for self criticism; second, he is native to his inspirational background; third, he weaves into his work a scrubbed and brushed realism; fourth, he has a good reporter's eye to paint what he sees and hears; fifth, through the use of imagery and symbols, he universalizes the meaning of nature; sixth, he presents with insight the Yankee farmer; seventh, he masters his vehicle of expression, especially the spoken blank verse of which he is the creator; and last, he reaches down into the gnarled heart of a stern Puritan morality and reveals some of the Yankee gems of wisdom. As

²"Haec Fabula Docet," Ibid., p. 51.
³"The Lesson for To-day," The Witness Tree, p. 50.
⁴Ibid., p. 49.
a result, his paintings—whether of silver birches, blue berries ready
to drum, a brook run out of song and speed or of the woman going insane
from loneliness—reveal an aromatic raciness which is New England. While
Frost is an interpreter of the physical setting of New England, he is
also an interpreter of the spiritual atmosphere of the country. The
next chapter will portray Frost as a spokesman of certain New England
characteristics which are native to his province.
CHAPTER III

FROST AS AN EXPOUNDER OF CERTAIN NEW ENGLAND IDEALS

In the preceding chapter, Frost is presented as an artist of the New England province. While he portrays the scenes and the picturesque characters, dramatic and tragic, he also expounds in the undertones of the shrewd Yankee on certain New England ideals. The purpose of this chapter, then, extends beyond the elements of Frost's art to a discussion of his treatment of certain Yankee characteristics and ideals.

To generalize briefly, it is first of all necessary to examine the forces that account for certain definite thoughts or ideals that grew out of the New England environment. Contrasted with the rest of America, even in colonial times, New England became a section different from the others socially, economically and psychologically. There were no influences making for suppleness. There were no softening effects of climate. Indeed, some of the New Englander's preoccupation with hell-fire may be accounted for in the severity of the winter and the depth of the snowflakes.\(^1\) The inhabitants, a group of pious Puritans living in the small villages North of Boston, had learned "the resignation of the pine and the wisdom of the rocks."\(^2\) From such a background, as time went on, certain definite traits and ideals became associated with the Yankee inhabitant. They are the spirit of neighborliness:

A mighty farmer flung the house door wide,  
He and a lot of children came outside  
And there on an equality we stood.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) "The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus," *The Witness Tree*, p. 86.
The doctrine of self-sufficiency:

The miles and miles he lived from anywhere
Were evidently something he could bear.
He stood unshaken, and if grim and gaunt
It was not necessarily for want.
He had the oaks for heating and for light.
He had a hen, he had a pig in sight.
He had a well, he had the rain to catch.
He had a ten by twenty garden patch.¹

The quality of Puritan seriousness:

Earth's a hard place in which to save the soul.²

And shrewdness:

I lay my hand on his hand on his staff
Lean back and have my confidential laugh
And tell him I had read his epitaph³

And finally, the cadenza of poignant Yankee humor:

He didn't even offer me a drink
Until I asked for one to steady him.⁴

In expressing these traits of rural New Englanders, "Frost becomes the only interpreter of the backwash of Puritanism found in New England."⁵

In fact, his feeling for both the life in his own region and for the region beyond his New England horizon justifies the comment: No poet since Whitman has been more native and in his very localism more universal.⁶

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¹ "The Figure In The Doorway," p. 378.
² "The Lesson for To-day," The Witness Tree, p. 49.
³ Ibid., p. 51.
New England Neighborliness

Frost has been able to envisage far more positively than others the human spirit of neighborliness that pervades the atmosphere of his province. What really unifies many of his poems of man in relation to each other is the sympathetic spirit of laboring together. Obviously enough, Frost portrays this characteristic of a people, disciplined by loneliness and the severity of its winters. Perhaps the most characteristic poem which presents the theme social sympathy is "The Tuft of Flowers." In it, Frost shows sufficiently the quality which makes him a spiritual interpreter of his countryside. The poem raises a significant question: Are men self-dependent in their work, or do they work together in mutual helpfulness?

The butterfly and I had lit upon, 
Never-the-less, a message from the dawn, 
That made me hear the wakening birds around 
And hear his long scythe whispering to the ground, 
And feel a spirit kindred to my own; 
So that henceforth I worked no more alone.2

The butterfly that discovered a tuft of flowers spared by the mower made the worker realize that he did not work alone. In this passage Frost seems to point out that the desire for comradeship is a normal human impulse. Friendship can be developed by touching the right chords with sympathy and understanding. The credo of fellowship is found in the last two couplets:

And dreaming, as it were, held brotherly speech 
With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach.

---

1 George R. Elliot, "The Neighborliness of Robert Frost," The Nation, CIX (December, 1919), 713.
2 "The Tuft of Flowers," p. 32.
"Men work together," I told him from the heart, 
Whether they work together or apart.1

Its sequel "Mowing" takes up the theme where "The Tuft of Flowers" left off:

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.2

This "fact" has particular significance in that it implies social sympathy in work. It is a symbol for the spirit that enables people to work together more or less fruitfully in a common task. It is, in truth, a definite force that builds friendship through cooperative action as well as a sympathetic response.

Sympathy with and respect for the rights of others is one note found in "The Death of the Hired Man". When Mary tells her husband that the never-do-well Silas had returned to the farm, Frost portrays human sympathy not only as a delicate substance but also as the solidest thing of life:

"Be kind," she said.3

Mary, knowing that a curt reproach might stimulate an unpleasant emotion in a sensitive old man who had returned "home /I5/ the place, where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in," remarks:

"Sh! Not so loud: he'll hear you."5

Thus, Frost appears to have a feeling that human relationship lies in social

1Ibid.
2"Mowing," p. 25.
3"The Death of the Hired Man," p. 49.
4Ibid., p. 53.
5Ibid., p. 50.
sensitivity. He echoes this text: "a sympathetic feeling for others" in the next lines:

But Warren, please remember how it is:
He's come to help you dig the meadow
He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.1

The same genial and understanding nature repeats itself in "Snow."

Often in the New England winters, it is necessary for the farmers to seek shelter from the blinding snow storms. Concern for the welfare of those caught in the storms is a connecting link that binds the ties of New England community life. Each home has a welcome door mat and a light to guide a neighbor to safety. In one instance, Meserve, the neighborhood preacher is cordially received by his friends who display genuine anxiety for his well being:

"But the horses
Are rested and it's time to say good night,
Sorry I had to break in on your sleep."2

The loom of Yankee friendliness appears in the reply:

"Lucky for you you did. Lucky for you
You had us for a half-way station
To stop at."3

While Frost strikes often a note of harmony—a subdued harmony—blending sympathy with labor as a means of attaining true brotherhood,4 he also touches often the keys of discordant obstacles which keep men from grasping an ideal fellowship. One other pendant to this poem is "Mending Wall" which hints at the eternal conflict that interferes with

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1Ibid., p. 54.
2 "Snow," p. 188.
3 Ibid.
4 George R. Elliot, op. cit., p. 713.
man attaining a perfect brotherhood. The poem presents two neighbors, one a conservative holding stoutly to the opinions and customs of his father, and the other a more inquiring person who questions the purposes of old customs and traditions.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass against.

......

But at spring mending time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk a line
And set the wall between us once again.

......

He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbours'

"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there
Are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.

......

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."

In this poem, Frost presents the eternal conflict that grows out of human relationship. He discerns the infallibility of man's approach to a perfect understanding and to a perfect peace. Of Frost's implication in "Mending Wall", Elliot says:

Walls are indispensable and yet our progress toward human brotherhood seems sadly cramped by walls. That this paradox

is solvable in the spirit of true neighborliness, but the solution of it is laborious and exacting, is what one is made to feel keenly in reading Mr. Frost's poetry. On the one hand, he displays constantly the rank-growing selfishness which finds shelter behind human walls; on the other hand, he shows unfailing respect, continually looking out through quaint humor, for all walls, however mean, which have some discernible utility in the neighborhood.1

In other words, Frost seems to be advocating that conventions are useful only when they do not hamper the progress of man, race or nation in acquiring the spirit of true neighborliness. When they become barriers, they should be dispensed with.

Another conflicting element which hampers the growth of friendship and neighborliness is hate:

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.2

Likewise, indifference is also a social enemy that creates friction among men:

That row of icicles along the gutter
Feels like my armory of hate;
And you, you...you, you utter...
You wait;3

Inhuman practices and inconsideration are other forces which crush the spirit of man and retards the growth of friendship:

But these are flowers that fly and all but sing;
And now from having ridden out desire

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1George R. Elliot, op. cit., p. 714.
2"Fire and Ice," p. 269.
3"Beyond Words," Steeple Bush, p. 45.
They lie close over in the wind and cling
Where wheels have freshly sliced the April mire.¹

The lines from the lyrics "Fire and Ice," "Beyond Words" and "Blue Butterfly Day" show Frost's moments of optimism and pessimism, of stoic resignation to fate.² At times, he looks for help to the stars and then turns back to nature. In one instance he is turbulent, troubled, annoyed; in the next, he is pacific, soothing and understanding.³ In all, however, he is a discerning poet who touches not only the impulses that strengthen neighborliness but also the defects that hinder its growth.

The aspiring poetry of human love and fellowship which has been flowering and reflowering for many centuries find, no doubt, many new expressions in the words of Frost.

Eyes seeking the response of eyes
Bring out the stars, bring out the flowers.⁴

In the above couplet, he expresses the central theme of all successful human relationship—that of gaining sympathetic response from those we love. This theme which provides the substance for a wider brotherhood is expressed again:

Seek converse common cause and brotherhood.⁵

To this wider ideal, Frost is by no means insensible; but he always distills it into local terms. Hence the neighborly spirit which Frost reveals in the little communities North of Boston ripples out to the larger ideals

³Ibid.
⁵"Lesson for To-day," Ibid., p. 46.
of human brotherhood which are now being put to a test based upon world brotherhood. In the discussion between Tityrus and Meliboeus, Frost is hinting at the possibility for a wider brotherhood:

"Is socialism needed, do you think?"

"We have it now. For socialism is an element in any government. There's no such thing as socialism pure except as an abstraction of the mind."  

Frost's method of expounding an ideal is merely to give deep insight into the significance of a fact. One cannot immediately term him a humanitarian; but, of course, it is not to be supposed that he is quite without humane sentiments. His poetry is never used to preach the gospel of social well-being or to dash the deplorable injustices that afflict men.  

He is more concerned in portraying the fine qualities of rural neighborliness. Being a friendly spirit and sociable man, he is sincerely interested in the small affairs that make up his neighbors' lives and always ready to stop for a friendly chat.  

Frost is a friendly poet who, as Amy Lowell says:

...writes almost as a man under a spell. As though he were the mouthpiece of something beyond himself, only conscious of the necessity of stating what is in him.  

Perhaps no poet of the American scene has put the Yankee neighborly spirit into his work so completely, so happily as Robert Frost. Whittier, the democrat in our New England life, was concerned mainly with championing the cause of human liberty. While Robinson, psychologically probing into

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1 "Build Soil: A Political Pastoral," p. 423.
2 Richard Thornton, op. cit., p. 225.
3 Amy Lowell, op. cit., p. 106.
the lives of New England misfits was interested, primarily, in presenting studies of characters who had failed in life. Frost, on the other hand, depicts with rare faithfulness the deeper significance of the spirit of brotherhood.

Yankee Self-Sufficiency

The life of the New England farmer, to Frost's way of thinking, asserts the dignity of individual life in its struggle against nature. In this rugged country, the people had to turn to other means for the accumulation of capital. Work and thrift were not only virtues but economic necessities. In the absence of large enterprises in the rural communities, the Yankee farmer had to get ahead by his own exertions and ingenuity. As contrasted with his fellow Americans in more favored settlements, the rural Yankee had all factors—the grudging land and harsh climate—to make him think long and carefully over the advisability of the least expenditure. Out of this soil, the self-sufficient New Englander is born. Frost, being an admirer of self-sufficiency, found his province an acceptable place to live. He exclaims:

"Me for the hills where I don't have to choose."  

It is characteristic of Frost that when he found himself obliged to earn a living, he went to farming, not to writing, advertising or selling books or real estate. While Frost is happy in his choice of "Milieu," he is likewise pleased to emphasize the self-sufficient spirit of his Yankee neighbors whose rural world is indubitably in a chronic state of

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3Richard Thornton, op. cit., p. 212.
Like the people of whom he writes, "he is untouched by the rage for self-advancement." His idea of his province might be the expression of the infirmed mother who speaks of her farm:

"No one will ever live on it again.
It's too run down,"

These Yankees who remain in the isolated and forsaken territory must, with difficulty, eek out a living from a soil that is in need of nourishment. Though they are men dominated by Puritan pride, yet with all their ability to draw in their belts, the Yankees have not learned to live on scenery. Such an unyielding soil which they had to cope with produced the conservative Yankee. Many illustrations of the conservative nature of the Yankees are found in the works of Frost. One follows:

It's knowing what to do with things that counts.

Not only does Frost find the conservative traits interesting subjects for presentation but he portrays the thrifty New Englander as well.

He seems to be thrifty; and hasn't he need,
With the mouths of all those young Loren's to feed?
He has brought them all up on wild berries, they say,
Like birds they store a great many away.
They eat them a year round, and those they don't eat
They sell in the store and buy shoes for their feet.

As an expounder of Yankee self-sufficiency, Frost portrays his neighbors resigned to a fate which they unquestionably accept. He shows them attending to their irksome tasks uncomplaining. Practically shut off

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1 Henry W. Wells, op. cit., p. 111.
2 Richard Thornton, op. cit., p. 212.
6 "Blackberries," p. 79.
from the rest of the world. Frost pictures them as a people possessing enough ingenuity to provide for their own needs. They are found farming and gathering the products:

There were three in the meadow by the brook
Gathering up windrows, piling cocks of hay.1

They are found raising their own meats:

Our hens and cows and pigs are always better
Than folks like us have any business with.
Farmers around twice as well as we
Haven't got as good.2

They are found raising sheep and potatoes:

I'm done forever with potato crops
At thirty cents a bushel. Give me sheep.
I know wool's down to seven cents a pound,
But I don't calculate to sell my wool.
I didn't my potatoes. I consumed them.3

They are found cording wood:

It was a cord of maple, cut and split
And piled--and measured four by four by eight.4

They are found gathering gum:

What this man brought in a cotton sack
Was gum, the gum of the mountain spruce
He showed me lumps of the scented stuff
Like uncut jewels, dull and rough.
It comes to market golden brown;
But turns to pink between the teeth.5

They are found selling flowers:

"But your flowers, man, you're selling out your flowers."6

They are found selling Christmas trees:

3"Build Soil: A Political Pastoral," p. 421.
"A thousand Christmas trees!—At what a price?"
He felt some need of softening that a piece:
"A thousand Christmas trees would come to, thirty
dollars!"

They are found storing apples:

And I kept hearing from the cellar bin
The running sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.

Frost's chronicles of country living have one and all the accents of New England, the fresh earthiness of back country places where the picturesque-ness of practices and institutions long followed have not yet been worked out by the all inundating tide of city life. Such brief glimpses into the chores which make rural New England a self-sufficient country are scattered throughout Frost's poems. As an intellectual spokes-
man for a rural community, Frost is, of course, highly sensitive to New England's most pronounced ideas which, at the same time nourish her manners and are nursed by them. Too, he is particularly acute in present-
ing his message in a "doorsy" kind of poetry which opens in sugges-
tion like a door into a room or outer world. His "doorsy" kind of teaching is the kind that makes human experience the end, and art the means.

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Puritan Seriousness and Shrewdness

Living in New England, Frost could hardly remain untouched by the

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1"The Christmas Tree," p. 133.
3Richard Thornton, op. cit., p. 73.
5Reginald L. Cook, "Robert Frost As Teacher," p. 255.
flow of serious wit and Yankee shrewdness which have been handed down from generation to generation as a kind of family possession. As a matter of fact, again he stands foremost as an eloquent spokesman of certain New England traits which are the result of repression of the Puritan forebears. It might be added, these characteristics, the outgrowth of the New England conscience, are as native to New England as the chill fogs and the frozen suns of its climate. Likewise, they are as native to Frost's poetry.

In a voice of experience widely known by mankind, Frost speaks of the Puritan mind overshadowed by the valley of the shadow:

We are doomed to broken-off careers,
And so's the nation, so's the total race.

The next verse reiterates the same idea:

The groundwork of all faith is human woe.

Many qualities of the rural New Englander's serious acceptance of life are echoed in Frost's poems. He points out the New Englander's wholehearted resignation to fate:

Let what will be, be.

He speaks of the soul crying against, yet accepting fate:

But something must be left to God

He tells of the Yankees clinging to old beliefs:

What we live by we die by

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1 Henry W. Wells, op. cit., p. 92.
2 "Lesson for To-day," The Witness Tree, p. 48.
3 Ibid.
Oh, blood will out, it cannot be contained.\(^1\)
Such outbursts of the soul are acquainted with people "that have come to an old age on an arid tradition."\(^2\) Through Frost, who dwells on his theory of implication, an esoteric note on the aridity of the Yankee soul is sounded and the quaint wisdom of his people are written in verses for posterity.

Yankee shrewdness is another characteristic which Frost reveals. The foresighted husband who refuses to overburden his wife's mind with the village news is a case in point:

When after talks with other men
A man comes back to a woman again
He tells her as much of blood and dirt
As he thinks will do her not too much hurt.\(^3\)

The collector for the "Weekly News" shows his cleverness in political affairs:

My business is to find out what people want:
They pay for it, and so they ought to have it.\(^4\)

That Frost is able to give a humorous caricature of a poker face—in this case it is poor Loren who tries to consume all the blackberries of the neighborhood fields—is shown:

He went on:
"I'm sure--I'm sure"—as polite as could be.
He spoke to his wife in the door, "Let me see,
Mama, we don't know any good berrying places?"
It was all he could do to keep a straight face.\(^5\)

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\(^1\) "The Flood," p. 323.
\(^3\) "The Discovery of Madeiras," The Witness Tree, p. 35.
\(^5\) "Blackberries," p. 80.
One clever fellow in the village

...burned his house down for the fire insurance
And spent the proceeds on a telescope
To satisfy a life-long curiosity
About our place among the infinities.¹

Finally, Frost presents a discerning picture of the keen intelligence
and shrewd wit of the Yankee hill men:

To show the level of intelligence
Among us: It was just a Warren farmer
Whose horse had pulled him short up in the road
By me, a stranger. This is what he said,
From nothing but embarrassment and want
Of anything more sociable to say:
You hear those hound-dogs sing on
Well they remind me of the hue and cry
We've heard against the mid-victorians
And never rightly understood till Bryan
Retired from politics and joined the chorus.
The matter with the mid-victorians
Seems to have been a man named John L. Darwin.
"Go 'long," I said to him, he to his horse.²

In the verses of Frost are found many other qualities of shrewdness,
cleverness and striking clashing of New England wit. Apart from being
true to his landscape, he gropes with the New England mind, and puts the
ideas and ideals of that mind in verses. He is not using themes that
anybody could have cribbed out of Ovid.³ His avowed theme is the mind
of New Hampshire.

North of Boston Humor

That humor is connected essentially with the development of Yankee
caracter and of the Yankee view of the outside world is explained by
Stephen Leacock as follows:

(December, 1914), 127.
A strange hybrid, indeed, did circumstance beget in the new world upon the old Puritan stock, and the earth never before saw such mystic practicalism such niggard geniality, such calculating fanaticism, such cast-iron enthusiasm, such sour faced humor, such close fisted generosity.¹

In the poems of Frost, this sour faced humor of which Leacock speaks is twisted with sweet sanative humor in such a way as to make Frost stand apart, in this respect, unrivalled by his American contemporaries.² Because of his genius to depict Yankee traits in a real live speaking poetry, often and in many instances, he gives free rein to his winged horse and allows the reader to enjoy his winesap humor.³

"No room," the night clerk said "unless"—
"You say 'unless.'"
"Unless you wouldn't mind
Sharing a room with someone else."
"Who is it?"
"A man"
"So I should hope. What kind of man?"⁴

This passage undoubtedly suggests that Frost has a pervasive humor, the humor of things as they are, not that of an author trying to be funny, or trying to point out the ludicrous phase of some incident. Frost does not rely on sheer presentation.⁵ His personal make up and style give his humorous understatements their flavor. Notice the dry humor skillfully made to heighten the effect of his satirical reflections on society life:

The only other witch I ever met
Was lately at a cut-glass dinner in Boston

²Gorham B. Munson, "Robert Frost and the Humanistic Temper," Bookman, LXXXI (July, 1930), 419.
³Richard Thornton, op. cit., p. 259.
⁵Ezra Pounds, op. cit., p. 129.
There were four candles and four persons present
The witch was young and beautiful (new style),
And open-minded.1

Observe the flashing perception in this caricature:

She shoulders with wings so strong
She makes the whole flock move along.2

Through the use of the simile, Frost makes a generous sort of mirth:

He stooped and struck a little huckle berry
The way a player curls around a football.3

Layfayette makes a thoroughly diverting comparison when he speaks about
his horse, Jemima, who knows every turn of the country roads:

She’s got so she turns in at every house
As if she had some sort of curvature.4

Frost’s sure touch in drawing a picture intensifies the humorous perception
interwoven in the next lines:

A slim door got in past my guard,
And hit me a blow in the head so hard
I had my native simile jarred.5

Frost’s wit comes into play as he describes the little girl making her
first garden:

She wheeled the dung in the wheelbarrow
Along a stretch of road,
But she always ran away and left
Her not nice load.6

Here his mirth takes on a sweet healing tone as he presents partial likeness
in a minor degree:

The rose is a rose,
And was always a rose.
But the theory now goes
That the apple's a rose,
And the pear is, and so's
The plum, I suppose.
The dear only knows
What will next prove a rose--
You of course, are a rose--
But were always a rose.¹

Frost approaches Robinson in his caricature of La Fontaine:

A blindman by the name of La Fontaine,
Relying on himself and on his cane,
Came tap-tap-tapping down the village street,
The apogee of human blind conceit.²

There are three outstanding personages identified with American humor—the Negro, the Irishman, and the Yankee. For the most part, each in turn was presented as a caricature to create rollicking comedy. Frost, on the other hand, shows that the rural Yankee humor is not the kind that gives way to wholehearted laughter. It is not a mirth maker. But it is a kind of subtle dry wit. That this kind of humor pervades in Frost's works proves again that he is an indigenous poet of New England.

In American literature, territorial frontiers have mainly disappeared, but frontiers of customs, habits and ideals remain to be explored. Under the apparent monotony of American life lies a thousand divergences of habits, prejudices, conditions and traits which differentiate one section from another and give color and diversity to that particular region. Needless to say, New England is one section with many divergences. One product of her severe climate and grudging soil is the Yankee who possesses well defined traits. That Frost chooses to use the Yankee farmer on his

¹"The Rose Family," p. 305.
palette has been pointed out. Although he takes great delight in painting the common occurrences of the country life about him, he takes pride also in presenting in a speaking "poetry possessing the surcharged economy indigenous to the New Engander,"\(^1\) New England neighborliness, Yankee self-sufficiency, Puritan shrewdness and seriousness and North of Boston drollery.

CONCLUSION

Nearly a century ago Whittier made the whole nation conscious of rural New England through his idylls, "The Barefoot Boy," "Snow Bound," "Maud Muller," "Telling the Bees" and many other poems too numerous to mention. Because his art was restricted, he never achieved the final majesties of the grand style. But within limits, he is genuinely good. His verse lacks some of the virtues, and by compensation, it is free from some of the vices of his university bred contemporaries who wrote so often with the pen of the English masters that they did not learn firmly to grasp their own. Whittier, however, wrote poems indigenous to the soil as purple fringes and silver birches; and they are the voice of a very significant man. Through a medium which he did not master fully, he was able to convey, with power and force, the rural New England of a past century.

For several decades after Whittier, New England regionalism was fading into literary decline when, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, Emily Dickinson appeared upon the scene. Through her unusual treatment of imagery, she was immediately recognized as a powerful and original voice in American life. Like Whittier, however, she had not mastered her art. Her weakness lies in rugged lines and imperfect rhythm, but her strength lies in her courage to be original. In fact, it may be said she anticipated the bold symbolism, airy impressionism, stringent realism and restless inconsistencies of the twentieth century poets.

Though she does not fall into the category of a great interpreter of rural New England, yet, she is a part of it. In her poems she grapples with the great spiritual mysteries of all times: life, love, death, God and immortality. Through them, she sounds an exotic note on her lyre as she sings New Englandly.

With the turn of the twentieth century two other New England poets appeared on the scene, Robinson and Frost. Robinson's shrewd appraisals, his constant questionings, instead of placid acceptance, his reticence that screens a vigorous analysis are qualities that reveal the spirit of the early Puritan operating with the technique of the modern psychologist. On the other hand, Frost is chiefly concerned with revealing the complexities of the New England hillside in clear cut portraits, portraying the tragic characters of the North of Boston country as living vignettes and "envisaging far more positively than others the human spirit of friendliness." Though different in their treatment of the same province, "Robinson and Frost share twin summits in New England poetry—eminence to which no American poet since Whitman has ever attained."

New England, for Robinson, is a thing remembered composed of childhood memories and race atavism; while for Frost, it is daily environment. Robinson presents characteristics which are a composite of New England for three centuries; while Frost typifies rural New England to-day almost in its entirety.

Since Whitman, therefore, Frost is one of the rural North of Boston poets.

1 Louis Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 42.
2 Ibid.
3 Amy Lowell, op. cit., p. 81.
who will indubitably belong to the world.¹ His life as an artist, in its
resolute integrity, has been a constant example of performance and prowess. His works of art stand as pictures clarifying the life of his pro-
vince.

Intermittently, Robert Frost, the interpreter of rural New England, has been working on his masterpiece for over a half century. During that
time he has been creating for the world a lyrical mural woven in New Eng-
land rhythms and colored with native organic dies. He paints on his can-
vas realistic pictures,—the rocky pastures, stone walls, wild young
animals, lean Yankee farmers and lonely peasant wives—in verses that por-
tray the living speech of the rural Yankee characters. However, there is
one aspect of New England life which he does not reveal and that is the
social activities such as sleigh rides, skiing, barn dances and other
such events. Otherwise, his province like Robinson's is a decadent New
England of deserted houses, dried up streams and tragic characters filled
with fear. Yet, as a provincial artist, Frost's poetry burns fire. In a
manner unlike any other interpreter of rural New England, he reveals the
neighborliness, Yankee self-sufficiency, Puritan seriousness and shrewd-
ness and North of Boston drollery of the people not only toward their de-
cadent province but toward the universe. Frost's poetry is packed with
thought and feeling; it is not verbose. As a conscious slow-working
artist portraying such moving sympathy for the dramas of lowly New Eng-
land lives, he ranks among the foremost living American poets.²

² Reuben Post Halleck, op. cit., p. 279.
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