

American Humor in Promoting the Talk over the Wall with a Focus on Robert Frost's Poems

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Abstract: *The Yankee is an American national phenomenon. He had leapt into national stature when slipped outside of his local character. A myth was woven around him and a cult of the Yankee developed by the permeation of the Yankee characteristics in many different characters who played tricks or told stories and entertained their audiences. The present article is an attempt to observe the Yankee myth, its origin, evolution and its incarnation in Robert Frost. It takes us to a journey back to the beginning of American history when the nation was about to find an identity for its own and to the native soil where its national funny figure sprang. Humor as the accommodating genre that hosts the Yankee myth is to be studied of its essence and manifestations. Frost as an icon of Yankee values representative of the mood and minds of the nation and the humor in his poems are to be focused on. The image of Frost as an American poet who very often receives appraisal for the terrifically tragic portraiture of life and whose poems are said to yield most fully to a design of darkness will be looked upon beside an image of him as the poet of many brilliantly comic poems who with serious artistic intent can give us a literate laugh. Frost's philosophy of boundaries and borders and their worth, the optimal distance, respect to each other's ideas, cooperation, importance of communication and many more of his universal concerns put into his poems are to be reviewed and his homey poem "Mending Wall" taken as an epitome of his works is isolated to be studied of its successful coupling of serious and comic that equip us with insights.*

Keywords: *Yankee characteristics, American history, Mending Wall, humor.*

Introduction

In fact, humor in American literature is a fragrance, a decoration, one of "those riches which are denied to no nation on the planet." (A. B. Paine, ed. Mark Twain's Letters, 1917, 798) It is often merely an odd trick of speech and of spelling. In most of the American literary works there is found a balanced seriousness and humor, believing that humor is a perfect vehicle for conveying serious ideas. Humor began to emerge in the United States soon after the American Revolution in written and spoken form. Candidate for the 'founding father' of American humor is Mark Twain, the man Ernest Hemingway credits with the invention of American literature. It should be stated that humorists existed in the United States before Twain, for example Augustus Baldwin Longstreet collection of Southern humor came out when Twain was five years old, but Twain is seen as a founding figure in creating an "American voice" to humor.

Ambrose Bierce, Samuel Minturn Peck, Hayden Carruth, Dorothy Parker, SJ Perelman and Robert Benchley, P. J. O'Rourke, Louis Harding, Erma Bombeck, Dave Barry and many others continued the tradition and strengthened the genre whose names are reviewed by Clark as: "...a very substantial cerebral vein is to be traced through Irving, Twain, Melville, Hawthorne, James, West, Faulkner, and is still nurtured by the intellectual gamesmanship of Pynchon and Bath, ... E B White, Donald Barthelme, and Woody Allen such a tradition definitely thrives upon species of witty ..." (Clark, John R. p. 442) the list is long though not complete yet. A number of American literary men kept the tradition of humorous writing alive, held the American flag and the torch of humor in their turns and then passed them to Robert Frost. The vitality of American identity and consciousness continued to survive in Robert Frost. The following quotations reveal his humorous view well: "Forgive, O Lord, my little jokes on Thee, and I'll forgive Thy great big joke on me," "I never take my side in a quarrel", or "I'm never serious except when I'm fooling."

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One of the globally concerned serious issues is to portray a world without borders and to move toward establishing a peaceful world. The wars are desired to be avoided and an end be put to the conflicts by establishing permanent peace, a global unity, and bringing all nations together to solve problems in local, national and international levels, and find solutions for the collective terrors and threats. The new technology as a means to get to the ideal portraiture of the world is effectively there to cure as well as to kill and it leaves its power in the hands and intentions of its users. So far, sad to say, modern technology including the advances made in mass media has been taken advantage of in keeping the fire of conflicts among nations alive. Samuel Huntington the American political scientist presented the thesis of *the conflict of civilization* and pessimistically forecasted how nations will be kept in fighting with each other leaving no more civilization and any good heritage for the later generations. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, the former president of Iran, called for the common issues of worry in nations and optimistically invited all to solve the problems by communication in a humane way using logic and compassion. Truth as a central value in all nations and what is faded, if not lost, more than ever in the history of human beings can be brought back by communication. The notion of communication -simply as to understand others and to be understood by others in the dialogues- seems to be of the recovery power for the current world's wounds and distances. Since the year 2001 was named as the year of *Dialogue among Civilizations*, so many institutes have been established to further the causes of the dialogue. Despite the fact that the world was receptive to the thesis of the dialogue among civilizations and so great agreement was achieved over its articles, the lack of progress is witnessed in implementing it. The actualization of the universal dialogue may take many years, many efforts on the part of the experts in all areas such as politicians, sociologists, economists, philosophers, and ... and it seems to remain one of men's desire to be achieved to the last day. This idea of having a peaceful world functions as a collective dream for having a utopia, a global society. As we see the wars are still burning around the world and the flames deteriorate the living condition of the people on earth, the need for the dialogue seems more necessary. To achieve an optimal dialogue that can lead to an understanding among nations, the commonalities should be addressed to bring conflicting sides together to negotiate, and humor can help to trigger the nations to try to solve the problems happily.

The present research aims to point at such world concerning issues, three main themes of American humor, the idea of walls and distances, and communication, to help to create a borderless world in which equality, freedom and fraternity be shared among all the dwellers of the planet earth. Social conflicts are among the impediments on the way to realize the global public debate which I guess is a prerequisite to the realization of the dialogue among civilizations. To subside social conflicts, people must be invited to put aside biases, hostilities and to prepare themselves to talk their thoughts and desires to each other. Indeed, humorous writers have contributed a splendid analysis of political matters but the insights offered by them might have not been seriously utilized yet. The question of boundaries, barriers, distances and walls and their worth is directly applicable to Frost's poetry. Barriers confine, but they also encourage freedom and productivity by offering challenging frameworks. By taking a look at the functions of humor and examining the real intellectual possibilities that are contained within the speculations of Robert Frost, analysis will be done to offer insights in how to reestablish the optimal distances.

The Ontology of Humor

Mark Twain who is credited for being successful as a humorist in making people of many continents laugh was seated for an interview (*Morning Herald*, "Visit of Mark Twain/Wit and Humor", 1895, pp. 5-6) to talk about wit and humor in which he presented a direct definition of the sense of humor. 'What is humor?' he says with a laugh; 'What is humor? It is as difficult almost to answer as the more important question put by Pilate.¹ It is easy enough often to say what it is not; but an exact scientific definition -it seems like trying to transfix a sunbeam. I suppose no man ever knew why he had humor, and where he got it from, exactly what constituted a humorous idea, or in what way it first appealed to him. Life has been finely defined as 'a tragedy to those who feel—a comedy to those who think.'² That is a very fine definition of the main qualities that go to make the humorist. I maintain that a man can never be a humorist, in thought or in deed, until he can feel the springs of pathos. Indeed, there you have a basis of something material to go upon in trying to comprehend what this impalpable thing of true humor is. Trust me, he was never yet properly funny who was not capable at times of being very serious. And more: the two are as often as not simultaneous. Whilst a man sees what we call the humorous side he must have ever present the obverse; those who laugh best and oftenest know that background.'

¹ See Pilate's "What is truth?" in John 18:38.

² *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* cites from Horace Walpole, *Letter to Sir Horace Mann* (1770): "The world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel."

Twain's statement on humor emerged more systematic in his "How to Tell a Story" (1895). Conscious of humor's relationship with European counterparts, Twain started his article with a simplistic thesis: "The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, and the witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect upon the manner of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the matter." (Wikipedia.org)

Humor to be defined is juxtaposed with comedy and wit. The same story told for humor can also be true for wit and comedy: It is often easy enough to say what they are not; In such instances, reviewing the commonalities and differences of these three terms that are usually taken -or better to say mistaken- for each other due to their somehow similar functions and subtle differences, lightens some of the dark and indefinable aspects of humor to us. Some exploration on wit and its difference from humor is outlined by one of the most prolific scholars looking at communication and humor, Charles Gruner. In his article "Is Wit to Humor What Rhetoric is to Poetic?" (1965) he asserts that wit should be practical, situated in real events, appeal to the intellect, and have a "tendency to reinforce and strengthen already extant attitudes rather than . . . change those attitudes" (Goldstein, Jeffrey, and Paul McGhee, 1972).

From the definition we get to discern humor from wit by their functions. Humor is wit plus capability to change. In affirming this formula; i.e. the potentiality inherent in humor for creating changes, Henri Bergson can be referred to as he called humor a "social corrective." Humor as a linguistic act can carry with it the intended effect of producing a state of amusement or mirth in the reader for the purpose of bringing about a change in his attitude or belief. When humor is employed, the goal is not only to entertain, but -in the political realm especially- to change belief or move to action. Kenneth Burke, one of the most significant authors exploring humor discussed about the comic in the chapter on "Poetic Categories," in *Attitudes toward History* (1937)¹. He put humor in contrast to the comic, tragic, satirical, and burlesque frames. Humor can be found in any of the preceding four frames though they have no requirement for humor. The distinction for Burke was not really about humorous versus serious discourse. Burke acknowledged this distinction when he claimed that "We might, however, note an important distinction between comedy and humor, that is disclosed when we approach art forms as 'frames of acceptance,' as 'strategies' for living. Humor is the opposite of the heroic." (Raskin, Victor, 2008) He argued that problems in society should be seen as mistakes rather than fundamental flaws, so they can be better overcome. The comic frame, as opposed to the tragic or burlesque, is a frame of acceptance that is a "more or less organized system of meanings by which a thinking man gauges the historical situation and adopts a role with relation to it" (Berkelman, Robert G. Robert Frost and the Middle Way, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1942). This relation to the historical situation can take the form of a comic approach that involves the use of humor to understand the world. Burke wrote comedy is essentially humane and is not confined to the stage but extends to political and economic philosophy, and presumably, political speech, and that it is not synonymous with humor (Quintilianus, Marcus Fabius. *Institutio Oratoria*. Trans. H.E. Butler. Loeb Classical Library).

More than a sense, humor is a tool that can be sharpened into a rationalistic, socio-political weapon, a target for the philosophers to ponder upon; henceforth, philosophers from Plato to Kant to contemporary linguistic philosophers such as Cohen and Attardo have tried to describe what makes something funny and offer a complete explanation of what humor is. Their endeavors resulted in the formation of the three major philosophical theories of superiority, relief, and incongruity with the hope of constructing a universal theory of humor.

The Phenomenology of Humor

The most extensive ancient treatment of humor is given by Cicero in *De oratore* (2.216b-306)². For Cicero there are five questions to consider in an examination of humor: "First, what is its nature? Second, what is its source? Third, should an orator want to stir up laughter? Fourth, to what extent? Fifth, into what categories can the humorous be divided?" (2.235). Cicero decided to leave alone the nature and source of humor to discuss appropriate use of wit, categories of the humorous, and the seven kinds of verbal wit. He thought that it is in the orator's interest to make the audience laugh to secure goodwill, demonstrate cleverness, or attack an opponent. He went on to identify two types of witticisms, those of content and those of words. Witticisms of content are anecdotes or witty stories (2.240), whereas witticisms of words are to be found in puns and "sharp-witted"

¹ Burke, Kenneth. *Attitudes toward History*. New York: The New Republic. 1937.

² Cicero. *On the ideal orator*. Translated by J. M. May and J. Wisse. New York: Oxford University Press. Original edition, *De oratore*, 2001.

comments (2.244). As for the subjects appropriate for humor, Cicero places no limit on them; “There is no category of jokes that is not also a source for earnest and serious thoughts” (2.250). The reverse does not hold as orators should avoid joking about people held in very high or very low esteem. After eliminating clownish behavior, imitation, distortion of the face, and obscenity, Cicero came to the proper categories of humor for the orator. The first category are jokes dependent on words, examples of which include ambiguous remarks, paronomasia, taking irony literally, allegory, metaphor, irony, and antithesis (2.253-263). In the second category, those jokes dependent on content, Cicero included narratives, history, similarity, amplification or diminution, insinuation, mock-seriousness, playing the fool, and ill-tempered jokes.

In order to identify humorous attempts, a standard must be there in the text. Some elements should be displayed with which the readers can identify humor: a fable, a plausible fiction, a caricature, an ironical inversion of the meaning of a word, an ambiguity, innuendo, banter, a naivety, an exaggeration, a recapitulation, a pun, an unexpected turn, a comparison, a novel tale, a historical anecdote, a verse, or a challenge directed at some one. The presence of laughter can be used to identify potential instances of humor; Instances of humor can also be identified without recourse to indications of the readers’ laughter. This can be accomplished through the use of various intention indicators by the writer including exploitation of context, venue, incongruities, and linguistic mechanisms, diction, stereotypes, cultural factors, familiarity, repetition and variation that in a text may serve as humorous enhancers. Then, it is left to the personal judgment of the reader to determine if the humorous attempt is funny or not.

Distinction between Humor and Laughter

Prior to any effort in clarifying what aspect of humor each of the theories shed light on, a significant theoretical issue of the difference between humor and laughter should be focused upon. These terms are sometimes conflated.

Twain’s literary comment on laughter underlies the fact that laughter can be considered as an outcome of humor, but the kind evoked by humor must bear the qualities of the proper laughter. “You don’t believe there is such a being who simply laughs, as the poet sings, because he must?—“The true and proper laughter, ‘the sudden glory of laughter’ as Addison has it, doesn’t come in that causeless way.¹ Look at all the humorists and their creations, their subtle contrasts and their exquisite breaks of laughter—can’t you see behind it all the depth and the purpose of it? Look at the poor fool in ‘Lear;’ look at Lamb, getting the quaintest, most spirit-moving effects with the tears just trembling on the verge of every jest; look at Thackeray and Dickens, and all the bright host who have gained niches in the gallery of the immortals. They have one thing always in their mind, no matter what parts they make their puppets play. Behind the broadest grins, the most exquisitely ludicrous situations, they know there is the grinning skull, and that all roads lead along the dusty road to death. ... Don’t you remember what Garrick said to a friend, ‘You may fool the town in tragedy, but they won’t stand any nonsense in comedy?’ (See Mrs. Clement Parson, Garrick and His Circle (New York: G. O. Putnam’s Sons, 1906), p. 78: “Charles Bannister, tired of playing tragedy, asked to be allowed to play comedy. Garrick answered, ‘No, no, you may humbug the town some time longer as a tragedian, but comedy is a serious thing.’”) It is so true! Any pretender can cast up the whites of his eyes to the heavens and roll out his mock heroics, but the comedian must have the genuine ring in him. Otherwise he couldn’t be a comedian.”

John Morreall (1987) observed that “perhaps the most common mistake ... is to treat all cases of laughter as cases of humor: Kant and Schopenhauer, for example, present their Incongruity Theories as if they were theories of laughter generally, when at most they could hope to serve as theories of humor. Bergson titles his book *Laughter*, when a more accurate title would have been *Humor*, or better, *Comedy*” (Berkelman, Robert G. *Robert Frost and the Middle Way*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1942). Quintilian offered a lengthy discussion of humor in Book 6 of *Institutio Oratoria*. In his treatment, Quintilian outlines strategies for the use of humor in public discourse to relieve tension, to divert attention, to refresh the audience, and to deflect criticism (6.3.1). In reference to the importance of humor, Quintilian cautiously posited that humor may be an art “for it involves a certain power of observation, and rules for its employment have been laid down by writers both of Greece and Rome”. Quintilian acknowledged that the scope of laughter is broad “since we laugh not merely at those words or actions which are smart or witty, but also at those which reveal folly, anger or fear” (6.3.7).

George Campbell’s treatment of laughter reflected his interest in faculty psychology. He thought that laughter was an important phenomenon in that it operated on two of the faculties, “first on the fancy, by presenting to it such a group as constitutes a laughable object; secondly, on the passion mentioned, by exhibiting absurdity in human

¹ Perhaps Clemens meant to refer to the passage in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, part I, chap. 6: "Sudden glory is the passion which maketh those grimaces called laughter."

character”. Campbell saw multiple purposes for laughter, “either merely to divert by that grateful titillation which it excites, or to influence the opinions and purposes of the hearers”. So not only does laughter serve a relief function but an argumentative one as well.

Salvatore Attardo (Attardo, Salvatore.35:1287-94, 2003) argued that “humor and laughter, while obviously related, are by no means coextensive” (1288), and Morreall (Morreall, John, 1987) argued that “it is essential to distinguish between amusement as a mental state and laughter as a bodily phenomenon and to notice that not all laughter is caused by amusement”. Although there is a connection between the two concepts, they describe quite different phenomena. Humor can cause laughter, but laughter as a consequence of humor is neither necessary nor guaranteed. Laughter, also, is not bound to humor. There are many examples in which laughter may not be the result of a reaction to humor or wit. Laughing for social acceptance, to ease embarrassment, in response to tickling, or nonsensical laughter serve as a few examples.

Humor Accommodation and the Comic Disposition of American Character

Humor, wit, comedy, joke and rhetoric with their subtle differences from each other in definition and application, are the terms that constitute a jargon referring to what is found funny. Laughter, as a sign of perceiving the funniness is a common experience of all human beings and is in fact a social phenomenon. David Viktoroff (Viktoroff, Victor, 1953) said, “One never laughs alone—laughter is always the laughter of a particular social group” (1953, 14). Laughter has an exclusive power; i.e. no one likes to be laughed at. Laughter is not limited to a situation in which all participants feel comfortable. As Kuipers (Kuipers, Giseline., 2008) accounts “Those who do not join in the laughter, because they do not get the joke, or even worse, because the joke targets them, will feel left out, shamed, or ridiculed.”(366) Garrett (Garrett, Mary M. 79 (3), 1993) found that these groups used humor “not just for pleasure but to construct a community, to create an alternative source of ego-reinforcement, and to sharpen a weapon to be wielded against the outside world” (312). Meyer (Meyer, John C., 41, 1990) found that people use humor in organizational settings to establish values and create unity.

Jokes are not only used for group solidarity by creating a consciousness of group identity, but also they are used for discrimination; i.e. not only they break the ice’ between strangers, unite people in different hierarchical positions, and creates a sense of shared conspiracy in the context of illicit activities like gossiping or joking about superiors, but also the reverse side of the function of jokes is exclusion. Humor, as well as jokes, helps in building community and promotes congeniality in community, both are culturally bounded and linked with individuals’ reception of information and perception of it in the same way, but humor is linked with critical expressions and arguments. The extent to which an individual will personally find something humorous obviously depends on a host of absolute and relative variables, limited to geographical location, culture, maturity, level of education, and context. Humor promotes critical thinking and encourages intellectual play and invention. Research into the language of humor suggests that many comic forms are effective means of recognizing and reversing power structures, challenging social orders, allaying fear, and promoting dialogic resistance. As James puts it: “Humor performs a number of ‘serious’ functions. Humorous literature can be: a form of play, a cognitive challenge, and pure delight, a release from inhibitions, an antidote to anxiety, and a means of vicariously acquiring power. ... Since humor is a learned response, to appreciate its incongruity and tendency to disrupt ‘usual’ expectations, to understand its satirical references and differing forms, and to respond to its plays on language and roles, requires at least a rudimentary knowledge of the ways in which a society operates too.”

A study of the social functions of humor provides us with parameters which enable us to observe the commonalities shared by cultures rather than the particulars pertinent to everyone that accommodates humor in any individual, regardless of his background or personal-cultural bounds. According to Kuipers, four social functions of humor are: meaning making, hierarchy building, cohesion building, and tension relief (367). These four functions are seen in each community and hence in every society, therefore, accommodate the perception of humor in all human beings. Humor is felt by every individual somewhere between the sigh of relief and the tear of joy.

Constance Rourke in her most famous work *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931) directly relates humor to emotion:

Humor bears the closest relation to emotion...An emotional man may possess no humor, but a humorous man usually has deep pockets of emotion, sometimes tucked away or forgotten. That emotion was pervasive in New England. The exactions of pioneer life had deepened, yet suppressed, emotion. Again, emotion was stirred by the terror of the prevailing faith, yet caught within the meshwork of its tenets. Such compression with such power was bound to result in escapes and explosions. The result was a rebound; ... A constant opposition existed between the

dark emotions and an earthy humor. The Revolution, with its cutting of ties, its movement, its impulses toward freedom, seemed to set one portion of the scant population free from its narrow matrix. The obscure dweller in the villages or on the farms-the Yankee -bounded up with his irreverent tune, ready to move over the continent or to the ends of the earth, springing clean away from the traditional faith, at least so far as any outward sign appeared in his growing portrait. He could even take the Revolution as a joke; most of his songs about it streamed nonsense. He had left the deeper emotions behind or had buried them (Rourke, Constance, 1931. pp. 10-11).

Americans have had enough of the background necessary to accommodate humor in their characters and thoughts, so they replaced terror with humor. Stepping out of the darkness, the American emerges upon the stage of history as a new character, as puzzling to himself as to others. A vagabond nation in perpetual self-pursuit made a particular type or subject of humor particularly American; different from British or any other nation's character. The American national character grew out of the archetypal figure of the Yankee peddler whose conventions and common traits have tied together humor in the United States. Rourke in the foreword section notes "There is scarcely an aspect of the American character to which humor is not related, few which in some sense it has not governed. It has moved into literature, not merely as an occasional touch, but as a force determining large patterns and intentions. It is a lawless element, full of surprises. It sustains its own appeal, yet its vigorous power invites absorption in that character of which it is a part." As well in the round up section of her book she asserts that "If the American character is split and many-sided at least a large and shadowy outline has been drawn by the many ventures in comedy."

Mark Twain in "How to Tell a Story" started with a thesis: "The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, and the witty story is French." Twain, thus, comfortably welcomed the Briton's "immense liking" for American humor:

"It [humor] wakens the people to a new life, and is supplanting the dry wit which formerly passed for humor. American humor wins its own way, and does not need to be cultivated. The English come to like it naturally."

And James C. Austin, as well, clarifies the French interest in American humorous literature:

"French reactions to America have been mostly critical –our society, our food, our manners have rubbed French visitors the wrong way and we have irritated a good many Frenchmen too who have never set foot on these shores and never will. But there is one area where their curiosity about us overcame the national resentment of our presence on the scene and that is the domain of humor."(Austin, James C., 1978, 177). "Humor is always popular, and especially so with Americans. It is born in every American, and he can't help liking it."(Twain, Mark, 1884, 4).

It is this humor that has given a comic disposition to American national character. Louis J. Budd in justifying the national patterns of the genre of humorous literature and its being American claims that:

"Even today most such comparisons imply that pulling the long bow is exclusively American, push their own favorite writers as typical if not quintessential, display thin knowledge of world literature, and mistake ad hoc taboos and anxieties for the basic traits of a culture."

No great effort is needed to prove the American accommodation and new ownership of the genre of humor since more than enough evidences are to show that humor exists in every American individual as an intrinsic part of his character. In fact, a universal agreement has been achieved on the claim that Americans share the sense of humor as homogeneously as it has become a part of their national characteristics. Uncle Sam, the Yankee, who wore the colors of the American flag is reborn in every of the U.S. citizens with his humor transfused. Even those Americans of serious faces, moods and manners are sometimes bearers of laughter to the world; to name, almost unbelievably, Abraham Lincoln of whom a funny quotation is read as: "People who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like."

Mark Twain in an interview asserts that: "American humor is different entirely to French, German, Scotch, or English humor.³¹ And the difference lies in the mode of expression. Though it comes from the English, American humor is distinct. As a rule when an Englishman writes or tells a story, the 'knob' of it, as we would call it, has to be emphasized or italicized, and exclamation points put in. Now, an American story-teller does not do that. He is apparently unconscious of the effect of the joke. The similes used in America may be a little more extravagant

than in England, but the method of treatment is modified. The method is quieter, more modified, and more subtle. Josh Billings said 'never take a bull by the horns; take him by the tail, and then you can let go when you want.' In any other country but America the part at which you should laugh would be put in italics and with exclamation marks." Twain's notion that American humor is 'more subtle', will be discussed more in detail in chapter IV of this study. Apart from the lack of punctuation in many laughter-evoking cases in American texts, another marker of American humor is 'Extravagant Phrasing.' When the interviewer asked Twain "that American writers may be extravagant in the construction of their phrases, while an English writer would use exclamation marks or italics to bring out the 'knob' of his story. Would not the one counterbalance the other?" Twain answered: "I was not saying that extravagant similes should not be used. Simple extravagance would be utterly reprehensible. But where a thing is happily phrased you do not care whether the figure is extravagant or not. For instance, what fault could you find in this: A captain of a ship is describing the perils his vessel went through; 'Why,' says a listener, 'You must have shipped a great deal of water;' 'Sir,' says the captain, 'we pumped the Atlantic Ocean through my ship sixteen times.' How are you to find fault with that? It is extravagant; but it is good fun, and does no harm."

The Yankee in Robert Frost

Robert Frost's personal life was plagued with grief and loss and his ability to portray the terrifying quality of life and his willingness to acknowledge man's suffering from uneven odds in nature's favor point to his awareness of and experience with tragedy. Many critics discovered that Frost wrote some of the darkest poems ever written by any American. They found Frost in the poems that yield most fully to a "design of darkness." Indeed, most of the readers find his poetry gloomy and bleak and he is often appreciated for the terrifically tragic portraiture of life. Frost's use of the rhythms, vocabulary of ordinary speech, and even the looser free verse of dialogue were to serve him to draw experiences from his own tragic life, recurrent losses, everyday tasks, and his loneliness.

In a celebrated speech Lionel Trilling made the following pronouncement: "I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. ... The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe." Surely, the multiplicity of Frost's poetry should not be confined within a single adjective: terrifying. Many of Frost's poetry are, indeed, brilliantly comic, and, "as is classically the case, his comedy is an inverted expression of the insight which makes him likewise a tragic (or terrifying) poet." This correspondence Frost himself neatly formulates in "The Lesson for Today."

I can just hear the way you make it go:
There's always something to be sorry for,
A sordid peace or an outrageous war.
Yes, yes, of course. We have the same convention.
The ground work of all faith is human woe.
It was well worth preliminary mention.
There's nothing but injustice to be had,
No choice is left a poet, you might add,
But how to take the curse, tragic or comic.

Critical attention to Frost's dealings in comedy is regrettably rare. Reginald Cook, W.R. Irwin, Ames M. Cox, and Rourke touched the comic in Frost and their contributions will be duly reviewed.

In the section entitled "Yankee Comedy" in Reginald Cook's *The Dimension of Robert Frost* (1958) it is mentioned that Frost is a rascally nonconformist amused at human vagaries, a lover of verbal wit, a disrespected of conventional inflations, and an addict of wisecracks. Cooks sees, moreover, that though Frost's manner is often light, and his purpose is just as often serious.

W. R. Irwin (1963) in his article "Robert Frost and the Comic Spirit" discussed about Frost's complex and engaging public personality mentioned that he had many masks. Frost was a cheerful, crotchety Yankee farmer, though many perceive that he was the "rustic" who became learned, cosmopolitan, and thoughtful, thus he could advance his personal opinion or better to say his scorn for "sarcastic Science," planners, revolutions, reformers and the reformed; He had a distrust of joining "too many gangs." It was one of Frost's virtues that he could express opinions freely. He often took a gadfly role and knew his duty to speak out didactically, though with such modesty as shown him able to be amused not only at the world he contemplates but at himself. Irwin praises Frost for his rational power. Irwin claims that the constituents of the rational power are wit and judgment in interaction.

"...All this is not to suggest that Frost's poetry is witty only when he staged a verbal coup or expressed himself epigrammatically. Wit was simply of his nature, as a man and as an artist. And this fact leads to a consideration of

greater importance in determining the sources and qualities of the comic in his poetry. Wit is often understood as a faculty which enables the mind to see resemblances. As such it has intrinsic creative energy. Wit is at its most effective, however, when regulated by judgment, the discriminative faculty. When wit and judgment are interactive, there results a rational power in poetry. Such rational power Robert Frost possesses to a high degree. This rational power directed his insight controlled his technique and altogether gave force to his utterance. Without it he might be one more poetizing lover of nature, a local colorist, a sentimentalist, an editorial versifier, but he would not be Robert Frost as we know him. ... The rational directing of insight is of prime importance for Frost's comic writing. Comedy and intellectual control have long been associated, and for good reason; if any one operation can be thought basically characteristic of comic representation, it is the intellectual penetration of appearances to apprehend and expose reality. ... To achieve it the writer must keep carefully poised between involvement and detachment. Too involved, and he becomes pedagogue, analyst, or commentator."

According to Irwin, Frost's commitment to rational discipline is persistently evident, even in poetry which does not pretend to be comic. Irwin knows Frost as a conspicuous fulfillment of Emerson's demand that the scholar uses his intellect pattern to create.

"Frost's rationality, however, is not of the kind which must be discovered under layers of eccentricity and special persuasion. Chiefly it consist in common sense, in an intellectual individualism which stops short of any alienating idiosyncrasy, and in a view of human nature which is at once disenchanting and charitable. Moreover, Frost meets the most difficult test which can face the rationalist: as may be clearly seen in *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy*, he knows where reason ceases to be valuable and must yield to something more penetrating, such as vision or faith."

According to Ames M. Cox, Frost has established himself securely in the position which Mark Twain created in the closing years of the last century—the position of American literary man as public entertainer. Cox claims that Frost brings to his role the grave face, the regional turn of phrase, the pithy generalization, and the salty experience which Twain brought to his listeners. He is the homespun farmer who assures his audiences that he was made in America before the advent of the assembly line, and he presides over his following with what is at once casual ease and lonely austerity.

Constance Rourke as the most accredited scholar on American humor wrote that Frost has kept the native humor and often deepened it to a bitter irony; she continues that most of his humor, like that of the early Yankee tradition, is so deeply interwoven with his further speech as to be almost inseparable from it. Rourke puts Frost's name abreast with Lindsay, Masters, Sandburg and asserts that all have revealed characters, fantasies, and patterns of mind or feeling that appear in an early comic folk-lore. Her precious excerpt on Frost is quoted:

Untroubled by the effort to establish a tradition, Robert Frost has used familiar elements as his own, by the slightest, surest indications rather than by transcription. Old patterns of speech appear, in the familiar Yankee rhythms, unobtrusive and slow; old voices are heard, as in *The Generations of Men*, and bits of regional remembrance. Character is drawn in the habitual Yankee fashion, almost always with an indirect beginning, scant emphasis, a slow unraveling. "Never show surprise!" says one of the characters in *North of Boston*, "this book of people." ... There is no touch of frontier coloring here, only furtherance of a tendency which had been implicit in the Yankee monologues, that toward soliloquy. Frost's lyrics are soliloquies, as are his drawings of people. This is a poetry which is acutely and sensitively self-conscious, turning to deep account the old self-consciousness that had been constant in the American mind and character, finally moving beyond the local, beyond New England people, New England pastures, or snowy roads, or houses black with rain, into sensitive human revelation. (285)

Humor in Frost's Poems

On Frost's verbal wit, a few generalizations can be made. His epigrams, word-plays, and wisecracks reveal themselves in most of his poems. At their best they give a sudden, startling illumination, richer than pages of exposition or argument; at their worst they give his admirers a twinge of pain. Such pain was directed at his critics when he versified the poem "For Once, then, something". Frost showed interest and skill in writing couplets. He did not, of course, feel committed to a neoclassical regularity, but he certainly knew how to take advantage of what couplets, long or short, offer to a poet. Poetry according to Frost must have a definite form and be based upon what he called 'Sound of sentence' to create music from sense. He practiced free verse for the reason that free verse "made far too little commitment to conventions". His use of language was uncommon among other poets. He used simple words, but sometimes he would play with language and spelling. He frequently signed papers 'Robbered Frossed.' (Gerber) Humor is a permanent part of his disposition and not simply a trait. He found humor in simple things, and that was prominent in many of his poems. Sound and voice tones were used as metaphors in

his work. He thought they were “ways of conveying subtle shades of thinking or feeling that capture meanings” (Gerber p.145). He found rich material for comedy in aberrant ideas and attitudes. There are, then, poems in which Frost derives comedy from human idiosyncrasies or from discord. In these he is less concerned with passing judgment and suggesting correction than with curiosities offered by the human show. Indeed, these poems tend to reflect a wholesome subversiveness.

Frost’s perception of man’s desperate stance in the face of threat has proved most advantageous to his comic spirit. Man is always facing powers which are too great for him. The concept of man in this “terrifying universe” is embodied in Frost’s poetry. In several instances Frost simply exploits menacing images or situations to produce amusement. One prominent theory traces the comic response of readers or spectators to a sense of being delivered from imaginative participation in the grave consequences of danger. Many poems of Frost illustrate a variation on this device. The advances of a menacing superhuman power are vivid enough to stir the superstition which lies hidden in even the most liberated person. Frost achieves here much the same tension between fear and assurance. Between these extremes of fear and assurance lies a norm. Without at all insisting, Frost invites the reader to share this norm with him and to profit from the spectacle of what deviations from it produce. These deviations, we are further encouraged to believe, are not isolated instances, but the condition of a noticeable part of mankind. And it is clear, moreover, that a desirable norm is a condition of enlightenment. “The way of understanding is partly mirth” by Frost indicates enlightenment as a gift of grace is achieved by half mirth and half intellectual striving.

By casting a glance at some of his poems, the comic spirit in Frost will be more tangibly revealed. “Mending Wall”, “An Importer,” “Departmental,” “Broken Drought,” “lone striker”, “To a Thinker”, “A Hundred Collars”, “Once by the Pacific,” “Bereft,” “Fire and Ice,” “Desert Places,” “Acquainted with the Night,” “Bursting Rapture” are but a few to name that enjoy entertaining, yet thought-evoking touches of humor that Frost strategically used in them.

As before mentioned Frost’s humorous talent was in finding rich material for comedy in aberrant ideas and attitudes. The neighbor of “Mending Wall,” for example, moves mechanically in the conviction of his father, which is really the exclusivist superstition of Stone Age man. He is impervious to questioning, to good sense, to the physical reality which he faces. Indeed, the whole ritual of mending the wall is a futile repetition against the subversiveness of nature. Equally ridiculous is that wholly modern victim of multiplicity whom Frost teases in “To a Thinker.” It is granted that he is ‘a reasoned and good as such,’ but from this cause itself he has no more stability and peace than the caged bear. The “thinker” is distracted between telescope and microscope, ‘his mood rejecting all his mind suggests.’

Such poems as “An Importer,” “Departmental,” and “Broken Drought” show Frost to be also an accomplished writer of light verse, but of light verse with a serious incisiveness. There are, then, poems in which Frost derives comedy from human idiosyncrasies or from discord. In these he is less concerned with passing judgment and suggesting correction than with curiosities offered by the human show. Indeed, these poems tend to reflect a wholesome subversiveness. The “lone striker” is no hero of individualism, but the reader can scarcely resist approving his carefree defection from the factory, as if to keep an appointment with April. It is somewhat the same with the thievish family Loren in “Blueberries.” Unwilling to work, with only an acquisitive sense of property rights, they are clearly undesirable citizens. Yet the mockery they politely make of the common good is a delight to the anarchist concealed in any law abiding reader who can perceive the stodginess of a social contract.

Even better exhibit of this kind is the poem “A Hundred Collars.” Two less comfortable chance sharers of a hotel room could scarcely be imagined than Dr. Magoon -‘a democrat, if not at heart, at least on principle’-and the gross, drunken, garrulous friendly Lafe, whose collar size has grown from fourteen to eighteen. That is, the doctor is uncomfortable; Lafe, the genuine democrat, would be at ease with the devil himself. And it is Lafe who shows courtesy and generosity to his mean-spirited companion; it is Lafe, moreover, who is through his rackets employment in touch with living reality, as fully as the learned doctor is alienated from it. Frost’s perception of man’s desperate stance in the terrifying universe advantageous to his comic spirit can be traced in “Once by the Pacific,” “Bereft,” “Fire and Ice,” “Desert Places,” “Acquainted with the Night,” and “Bursting Rapture.”

In the case of Frost’s exploiting menacing images or situations to produce amusement; The reader of “A Hundred Collars” can at least understand why the timorous doctor would clutch at his throat when the hulking Lafe, elemental man, asks, “What size do you wear?” The speaker in “Mending Wall” can be viewed again as he finds his neighbor entertainingly obstinate, but he can also see him as “an old stone savage armed.” ready to use his boulders as weapons.

Contemplation on the “Wall”

Wall-building act seems ancient; the building of the first walls, both literal and figurative, marked the very foundation of society. No one is there who does not have a sense of the wall's literal meaning. Figuratively, rules and laws are walls; justice can be considered as the process of wall-mending. The ritual of wall maintenance highlights the dual and complementary nature of human society: The rights of the individual (property boundaries and proper boundaries), are affirmed through the affirmation of other individuals' rights.

One might point at the self-confinement of the walls; well, this notion is true, but, ironically, wall-building is generally interpreted as a great social gesture. What to wall in and what to wall out can be decided upon collectively by the community and by the social conventions. Our territorial instincts, if we had any, hardly served any purpose, since territory had little or nothing to do with our making a living. After we started to hunt, territory was still of no great interest to us. It was only after we settled down to farming and herding that the land became of vital importance to us and, therefore, something worth fighting for. Walls, then, encircled lands, cities and countries.

Frost walled himself in New England and this brought him some problems with the critics who dismissed him as “the country bumpkin whose poems did not see much beyond the ‘shining surface’ of ‘rural life’” (Parini, Jay, 1999, 183) ... else, he was accused of being an outdated, old-fashioned poet whose pastorals did not fit the progressive trends of the twentieth century. The difficulty in Frost's poetics is to be diagnosed in his too much subtlety rather than lack of modernist sophistications.

Pastoralism and modernism are to be found in Frost in balance as he follows the Greek sense of moderation in opposites. Frost confesses in “Two Tramps in Mud Time” that his ‘object in living is to unite’ his ‘avocation’ and his ‘vocation’ as his two eyes make one sight. He deconstructs the ancient conflict between good and evil claiming that there are good forces so dangerously potent that if are uncontrolled will destroy one another.

Frost's task is to recognize the walls between the binary oppositions then deconstruct and establish another wall of distinction between the opposites that would distance them properly. The course of study, then, is driven to Frost's dealing with the three binary oppositions of Man and God, Man and Nature, and man and man. Humorously, he disrupts the traditional wall between them which gave comforting effects to God and nature. He associates fear in the life of a man with them both. Contrarily, Frost suggests that if man enjoys the accompaniment of another man, generally, God and nature might not have acted with such force on him. It is this terrifying aloneness with God that makes him vulnerable. Critics accused him of being agnostic. However, Montgomery thinks otherwise. “Frost's hesitance in speaking dogmatically on the subject of supernatural is due more to his acceptance of a man's limitations and acceptance of mystery in existence than to agnosticism.”(141)

Frost was a pastoral poet, “the icon of Yankee values, the smell of wood smoke,... the reality of farmhouse dung” as Derek Walcott (Walcott, Derek, 1995, 30) in his review of the Library of America edition evoked an image of him (30); and in the words of Amy Lowell, he was in “direct contact with the world -the little world of hill and upland, of farmhouse and country town” (85). His poetry was a transcript of his observed life. Rural setting of New England, its people and their stories drawn from everyday New England nourished his material for poetry. Poems such as “Home Burial,” “A Servant to Servants,” and “The Fear,” from *North of Boston* (1914), with the myth of virtuous self-reliance, and bleak portrayal of New England established him as New England's poet who depicted doubt, betrayal, blankness, suffering, and neuroticism in a rural setting.

The poet's antiquated pastoral conventions and his association with New England, which enhanced his Yankee authenticity but tarnished him with the image of its quaint decline, make it easy to think Frost outdated; and his poetry's “masculine” attention to stern facts seemed not so much imaginative art as blunt realism and narrow regionalism. Amy Lowell as she praises Frost adds, “But his canvas is exceedingly small”. However, this glosses over the persistence of the pastoral mode in the twentieth century created a ripe moment for Frost.

Some critics claim that Frost does not fit progressive twentieth-century trends; they assert that old-fashioned Frost's poems cannot be read as modern or postmodern, or considered as worthy and intriguing as T. S. Eliot or Wallace Stevens. Reversely, Lionel Trilling and Randall Jarrell asserted that Frost was more than a popular country bumpkin and revealed the poet as a challenging modern master, a defensiveness remains among those who claim the poet's significance. In fact, doubt, betrayal, blankness, suffering, and neuroticism in a rural setting, the traits which are not innately modern, are compatible with the anxiety and doubt pervading twentieth-century literature. Certain poems, such as “The Subverted Flower,” or “The Most of It,” became accepted in the modern canon

because they featured neuroses, fear, and isolation. Of course pleasant poems ("The Pasture," "Mowing," "After Apple-Picking," "The Silken Tent" to name a scant few) have been much praised and explicated, though generally with attention to Frost's pastoralism or his craft and without concern for how they fit a "modern" paradigm.

It is a fact that there is not a broad awareness of the poet's complexities. In his 1975 study, *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self* Frank Lentricchia attacks "a widespread and casual assumption among the experts of literary theory that Frost cannot bear sustained theoretical contemplation" and urges "that the difficulty in Frost's poetics is not absence of depth and modernist sophistication, but too much subtlety".

Subtlety, Sanity and Balance, a Deconstructive Contemplation on the Wall

Subtlety in Frost's work has the power to reconcile his pastoralism -which accommodates the Yankee Americanness in his poems- and modernism. Subtlety, too, is witnessed in Frost's pastoralism in that pastoralism for him is not only adopting a rural setting and a character with rural tendencies or in the tradition of the Yankee, but it is treated as a mode reflective of a culture's attitudes toward life in nature. Once more, Frost's subtlety can be traced in his deconstructing the wall between culture and nature and establishing it again.

For Frost, culture and nature do not stand as complementary binary oppositions. They are, in fact, each other's extensions. In his playful-serious way, Frost banded the contention that there is not merely the ancient conflict between good and evil but that there are good forces so dangerously potent that, uncontrolled, they will destroy one another: individualism and socialism, justice and mercy, work and play. This idea is conveyed by his self-revelation in the poem from *A Further Range*:

I never dared be radical when young
For fear it would make me conservative when old.

Abreast of subtlety, sanity and balance prevail Frost's poems. Much of Frost's poems' enduring substance lies, indeed, in his Greek sense of moderation. To him, extremes are anathema. Or, better, his is a thoughtful balance; he reconciles extremes without producing a dead center. For extremes, rather, he absorbs the good and purges the bad.

His living and his writing are full of good opposites that are made to reinforce, not to fight with each other. In his humorous poem "A Record Stride" he is pleased that he can taste on his old hiking shoes the salt of both the Pacific and the Atlantic. While young he went "to school to age to learn the past"; after fifty years he "goes to school to youth to learn the future."The subtlety in his view is that he found where the trouble lies; he reminds us of the trouble in "Build Soil-A Political Pastoral," that:

We're Always too much out or too much in.

According to Frost, we need constantly to purge the extremes of their destructiveness and to temper them with each other. With beauty, accordingly, he prefers roughness, to keep it from becoming the aesthete's toy. In "Leaves Compared with Flowers" he says:

I bade men tell me which in brief,
Which is fairer, flower or leaf.
They did not have the wit to say,
Leaves by night and flowers by day.

But he himself comprehends both fire and ice, inner and outer weather, climbing up birches toward heaven and also coming down again to earth. He is Aristotle's Golden mean in American overalls.

Not only are individual poems based on this idea of blended opposites, but also the whole body of his poetry comprises them. Unsupported by the ability to harmonize opposites, we are sentenced to live with fear. The Yankee puts this mode in "To a Thinker":

From form to content and back to form
From norm to crazy and back to norm,
From bound to free and back to bound,
From sound to sense and back to sound.
So back and forth. It almost scares
A man the way things come in pairs.

In his exquisite "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" these two claims upon him are to be discerned in the intimated struggle between work and play, between the practical and the poetic. Near a frozen lake, he says, he has stopped his horse, to watch "the sweep of easy wind and downy flake" filling up someone else's wood. He would like to give in to the spell and linger indefinitely over the accumulating quietness; but the practical little horse, who wants to be getting somewhere, shakes his harness bells and reminds the driver of his duties.

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

The poem, incidentally, is an excellent illustration of Frost's love for synecdoche; that is, he here makes a small part represent the whole of life. But to analyze such a sensitive poem and employ it as evidence seems almost unforgivable. It whispers, and we make it shout. The poet's whole growing idea is best seen in "Two Tramps in Mud Time." In that poem his philosophy of work and play and of healthy balance reaches its ripest maturity. The opening of the poem finds him, on a spring day, splitting beech blocks, as much for the feel of poised ax and rocking muscles as for the firewood. In the midst of his work-play he is solicited by two tramps who really want the job for themselves, for the money in it. He loved his job whereas the two tramps needed it, the poet admits to himself; and then into his concluding stanza the poet compresses the entire idea:

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

Man and God, Man and Nature, Man and Man

A good deal of Frost's irony lends itself to the more affirmative stances of humorous or defensive ploys against the world's chaos. Although Frost is a darker poet than most casual readers admit, his view of man's predicament is not pessimistic. Frost is suspicious of the three traditional human comforts, God, communion with nature, and human companionship. For many people faced with pain and doubt, the consolations of God, nature, or man have traditionally proved effective. As a poet writing in the twentieth century, however, Frost feels cut off from these standard comforts. The time honored solace of turning to God has little positive meaning in his work. In "The Lovely Shall Be Choosers," "The Fear of God," and "Bereft" Frost looks with an ironic eye at the idea that God acts as a helper and comforter to man. In one sense the poems actually serve as warnings against the hope for a benevolent deity because the most terrifying predicament for man is revealed to be an intimate association with God. Frost in "nearer, my God, to thee" suggests that man's fear increases as he approaches a deity. In "The Fear of God" Frost cautions man to beware any 'subordinating look or tone.'

"Bereft" carries a similar warning, but the tone of this poem is much darker than that of "The Fear of God." The emphasis falls upon the idea of an ending, possibly even death, as Frost uses a terrifying storm to represent man's great fear. As he stands on the porch, the observer literally hears the wind change to a "deeper South Atlantic Bulletin roar." He fears the storm not only because of its power but also because it suggests a quality of madness in nature. The line, "Somber clouds in the west were massed," suggests that the storm signals not only the end of a day and of a season, but, possibly, the demise of a life. Confronted with this possibility, the observer suddenly sees the storm as a force directed against him personally. He interprets the swirling leaves as snakes rising up to strike at his knee, and he then compounds his error by deciding that the storm has moved against him because it knows he is alone in life:

Something sinister in the tone
Told me my secret must be known:
Word I was in the house alone
Somehow must have gotten abroad,

Word I was in my life alone,
Word I had no one left but God.

Once again Frost turns his irony on a traditional religious concept: the idea that man needs only turn to God in time of trial. But in "Bereft," as in "The Fear of God," God is no comfort. Indeed, the terror increases because of God's presence. The lines just quoted imply that if the observer had the company of someone other than God, the storm might not have acted with such force. The point is that Frost rejects God as a defense against the pain, chaos, or fear of life. He feels the same way about a second traditional defense for man communion with nature. This is not to say that he rejects nature as a source of inspiration or even of qualified comfort. Obviously his poems show his need for periodic retreats to nature in order to clear away the conglomeration of detail that confuses him. But nature in his poetry is neither beneficent nor partial to man, and attempted communion with it does little to ease man's predicament. In "An Encounter" the poet figure literally experiences the frustration of unyielding nature. The lovely woods in his poems are also "dark and deep."

A second reason why Frost is suspicious of nature as an aid to man is that he, along with other twentieth-century poets, rejects the suggestion that man and nature are joined together in the overall scheme of creation. Nature holds its place as that part of life which is non-human, forever separated from man. Man, in fact, is insignificant when compared to the expanse and continuity of nature. In "On Going Unnoticed" Frost describes the observer's reaction to the sudden realization that, compared to the forest, his presence seems less than that of the coral-root flower. His trivial size and short life contrast with the infinite forest which takes no notice of him. He would like to yell out, to call attention to his presence in the woods, but he knows his loudest shout is in vain. And he is forced to admit that while the flower is as unimportant as he seems to be, it is at least part of the forest. Apparently shaken by his discovery, the man grasps the tree and looks up, asking for some notice of his presence. But the forest only drops a leaf with his 'name not written on either side.' All he can do is linger his 'little hour,' symbolic of his life span when measured against the forest, and snatch the coral-root as a meaningless act of revenge.

The third defense that Frost rejects is that of companionship or protection in numbers. Just as the forest denies man comfort by rendering him insignificant, so the masses of humanity also fail to offer solace. The loneliness in "Acquainted with the Night" is terrifying precisely because man finds himself in an urban area. His sense of isolation remains overwhelming despite his walk through the city—he finds communication impossible. A sense of being lost pervades this poem, an isolation so total that nothing nor no one can ease it. "Acquainted with the Night" perfectly renders the concept of individual man being an anonymous face in the crowd. Rather than alleviate his loneliness, the masses increase it by reminding him that he has importance to no one but himself.

In "Not Quite Social" he adopts the stance of humorous irony as he comments upon the narrator's rejection of city values and life styles. He jokingly hopes that he will not be sentenced to cruel and unusual punishment, and he ironically denies the suggestion that he may be a rebel from what we would term "modern life":

To punish me over cruelly wouldn't be right
For merely giving you once more gentle proof
That the city's hold on a man is no more tight
Than when its walls rose higher than any roof.
You may taunt me with not being able to flee the earth.
You have me there, but loosely, as I would be held.
The way of understanding is partly mirth.
I would not be taken as ever having rebelled.

The human figure in the Frost poem is frighteningly alone, unable to call in outside forces to defend him from the chaos of everyday life. All he can do is gather his personal strength in an attempt to understand, and Frost suggests in "Not Quite Social" that mirth, the sly grin, the ironic stance are necessary for holding back the pressures of the twentieth century.

Healing the Fear through Humor

We got to know that extremes were anathema to Robert Frost, and he reconciled extremes in a thoughtful balance without producing merely a neutral, dead center. From extremes, he absorbed the good and purged the bad. Frost defined his object in living to unite the pairs. He deconstructed the walls and established new walls intelligently and with Greek sense of moderation. He did with the walls what an optometrist does with the lens.

The course of our study took us where we realized about Frost's rejection of the three traditional defenses against God, nature, and fellow man; the alienation of the three leaves the observer with his guard down, filled with fear. Frost's solution is to minimize the threat to a size with which man can cope since suggestions of personal annihilation or of universal meaninglessness are too large for one man to handle, yet all he has to rely on is himself. Frost's individualism springs from the belief that man has to survive by his own strength and intelligence. No one else can possibly care about him as much as he does. In order to make the confrontation with life a little more even, the individual in the Frost poem often counters his circumstances with a humorous irony that allows a relative measure of detachment. "Fun lays in intellectual activity" and "The way of understanding is partly mirth", this outlook of him is that which has made all the difference.

In chapter III of this study "Humor Accommodation", it was mentioned that humor is felt by every individual somewhere between the sigh of relief and the tear of joy. The relief is achieved when fear is overcome. In an overall study of Frost's poems the element of fear seems to be ever-present. It lurks in between the lines. Frost's strategy to heal the frightening atmosphere is to blow an air of humor to his poems so that he can keep balance in the feelings he evokes in his readers. Fear and pity as the elements of purgation in Aristotle's theory of catharsis are horror and humor in Frost's poetics. Where fear lurks, humor comes to heal. In short, Frost's perception of man's desperate stance has proved most advantageous to his comic spirit.

An exhibit of the fear Frost evokes in man can be traced in "A Hundred Collars" in which two sharers of a hotel room Dr. Magoon and the friendly Lafe, whose collar size has grown from fourteen to eighteen. The doctor is uncomfortable. Lafe, the genuine democrat, would be at ease with the devil himself. Frost simply exploits menacing images, simultaneously he creates situations to produce amusement.

In "Wild Grapes" – "But that beginning was wiped out in fear/The day I swung suspended with the grapes," - Frost portrays the fear a girl of five years old experiences when swung suspended with the grapes in pursuit of wild grapes, and to juxtapose the fear he puts humor in her brother who led her to that glade where a white birch she knew of stood alone. Frost's humor is put not only in the narrator's statements, but also in the dialogue she has with her brother in the progression of the poem. Similarly, the speaker in "Mending Wall" finds his neighbor entertainingly obstinate, but he can also see him as "an old stone savage armed." ready to use his boulders as weapons.

This interweaving of fear and humor is a pattern that can be easily recognized in many of Frost's poem as if he was under the spell of one fixed idea. The pattern seems recurrent in many of Frost's poems though the themes vary. Among the many themes that Frost dealt with in his poetic career was his concern for living in a peaceful world, out of fear of any kind. He confined himself artistically to New England, but his tastes were cosmopolitan, not strictly regional. In his last ten years of his life he became a poet-diplomat. Shortly before Robert Frost's death on January 29, 1963, *County Government Magazine* published in its December 1962 issue the poet's response to its request for his participation in a symposium on the theme "The Cold War Is Being Won." "I hate a cold war of sustained hate that finds no relief in bloodletting but probably it should be regarded as a way of stalling till we find out whether there is really an issue big enough for a big show-down. We are given pause from the dread of the terribleness we feel capable of. I was sometimes like that as a boy with another boy I lived in antipathy with. It clouded my days. But here I am almost writing the article I was going to tell you I couldn't write. My limit seems to be verse and talk."

Mutual trust, communication, and goodwill were among the themes he developed in some of his poems such as in "Mending Wall". Frost repeatedly warned his readers to look for further implications in his poems and not to stop with the poems' obvious associations. According to him a poem is most valuable for its ulterior meanings. "Mending Wall" is not a simple poem that propagandizes living peacefully beside each other, rather it entails a political concern. When President John F Kennedy inspected the Berlin Wall, he quoted the poem's first line: 'Something there is that doesn't love a wall.' The issue of borders and the optimal distance, respect to each other's ideas, cooperation, importance of communication and many more of Frost's universal concerns are put into this homely poem. The question to ask a poet, Frost said, is "not what he means but what he's up to". Therefore, as his readers we are invited to see how large a world of forms and ideas he was drawing on.

Mending Wall

This poem centers on an annual ritual of mending a stone wall that divides the adjoining property of two neighbors. The setting evokes a sharp contrast in perceptions: the activity is ordinary but it has larger implications. This is an

annual job, “spring mending-time”, and requires them to repair the damage that nature has spent the rest of the year inflicting upon the man-made structure. The speaker is clearly aware of the essentially pointless nature of the task: not only does it need doing “once again”, emphasizing that all the work they do every year will be undone by the following spring, but the speaker seems unsure whether they really need the wall at all:

There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him. (23 – 26)

The introduction to the wall describes the large gaps in need of repair that appear after hunters accidentally shoot the wall while hunting rabbits. The narrator, who has mixed practical and poetic characteristics in him evenly, lets his neighbor know that the wall is in need of repair and they walk with the wall between them in order to view what needs repair. The narrator then, ironically, questions the utility of the wall and proposes to ignore mending it. He notices that the wall is not necessary because his apple trees will never get across to eat the cones under his pines. However, the other farmer says the one line that his own father instilled in him: ‘Good fences make good neighbors.’ The narrator then begins to sincerely question why there is this wall and what they are trying to wall in or out. The steadfast neighbor unquestioningly clings to the old axiom that ‘good fences make good neighbors’ viewing the activity as an annual duty performed of necessity with dutiful and prideful regard.

“Mending Wall” entails many of Robert Frost’s philosophical and social concerns. As well, Frost’s mentality and ideology about distances and borders symbolized in a wall is best illustrated in this poem which is honored to be his second favorite poem.

Frost’s philosophy in short reads that when he is averted from the traditional comforters of man, turns to the accompaniment of a friend who recognizes and respects Frost’s existence and whom Frost goes to talk to; in other words, in the frightening world, it is the effective communication with a friend that consoles a person, frees him of his sorrows and comforts him of the fears that life inflicts on him. This philosophy has been recurrently recognized in Frost’s works. “Wild Grapes”, for instance, entails the same philosophy where Frost relates a small child’s experience of gathering grapes and suggests the letting go with the ‘hand’, and not letting go with the ‘Heart’. He soothes the readers with the idea that when confronting the wrath of nature or the fears of life that one cannot “weigh anything” there still is “...one more stem to cling by...” that holds the person fast to siblings and friends. With his humorous tone, partly put in the words of the narrator’s brother, Frost in “Wild Grapes” tries to conjure up the truth that even in times of turmoil one can think to find someone to talk to and purge his charged temperaments and anger.

“Mending Wall” was written after Frost encountered with back-country, New England farmers. Within its lines are the simplicity of language and subject, realism and imagery, humor and cynicism that combine to reveal the meditative insight that marks the poetry of Robert Frost. This poem, as well as his many other poems, follows Frost’s motto that the poem begins with delight and ends in wisdom. The delight relies on the humorous tone of the narrator starting from the beginning of the poem by explaining his fear of nature as a destructive element, a recurrent theme in Frost’s poetry, that disrupts man’s comforts and brings tragedy to his life, in ‘Something there is that doesn’t love the wall’. Frost, in fact, has started from a good philosophical point. Equivocal with John Locke he believes that there are two motions in life, toward something and away from something: desire and aversion; We are attracted to whatever that gives us pleasure and avert from whatever that gives us pain. Nature is an enemy to what they build, but there is no way to escape from it. Mending the wall is an ironical attempt of man’s taking revenge from nature; ironical in that the two men meeting on terms of civility and neighborliness to build a barrier between them are engaged in doing a Sisyphean task, i.e. perpetually pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have the boulder roll down again. The very earth conspires against them. These men push boulders back on top of the wall; yet just as inevitably, whether at the hand of hunters or sprites, or the frost and thaw of nature’s invisible hand, the boulders tumble down again. Still, the neighbors persist.

The poem, thus, seems to meditate conventionally on three grand themes: barrier-building, the doomed nature of this enterprise, and their persistence in this activity. The folksy straightforwardness the poem begins with ends in complex ambiguity. The speaker may scorn his neighbor’s obstinate wall-building, may observe the activity with humorous detachment, but, ironical enough, it is he himself who goes to the wall at all times of the year to mend the damage done by hunters; it is the speaker who contacts the neighbor at wall-mending time to set the annual appointment. The speaker says he sees no need for a wall here, but this implies that there may be a need for a wall

elsewhere— “where there are cows,” for example. Yet the speaker must derive something, some use, some satisfaction, out of the exercise of wall-building. There is something in him that does love a wall, or at least the act of making a wall, or mending wall is an excuse for him to meet a friend and an opportunity to talk to him.

Structurally, the poem is written in first person, making it hard not to sympathize with the views of the speaker and his annoyance at his old-fashioned neighbor, but ultimately by acknowledging both views the poem suggests a middle ground is possible: perhaps that occupied by the wall itself. The structure of the 'Mending Wall' is a long one-stanza poem. It is written in blank verse and contains a narrative-like style. It features an inspiring theme, heavy use of metaphors and good use of repetition. Repetition is used as a technique to emphasize the main ideas. The line 'something there is that doesn't love a wall' has been repeated in line thirty-five with a new meaning. It refers to the attitudes of the narrator towards the wall - the narrator does not 'love the wall' and wants it down - whereas the 'something' mentioned in the first line of the poem refers to nature. Another repetition is the statement 'good fences make good neighbors'. Although people can be good friends, there will always be a barrier standing between them, acting as a boundary that separates their social relations from their personal privacy, 'walling in' what they do not wish to share with others.

Frost's description of every detail in this poem is quite interesting, very pleasant to read, and extremely imaginable. He leaves the reader to decide for himself what deductions he is to make from the reading. On one hand, Frost makes literal implications about what the two men are doing. For instance, they are physically putting the stones back, one by one. Their dedication, commitment, and constant drive shines through when reading how persistence these men seem about keeping the wall intact. Quite the contrary, however, is the inferences that something even deeper is going on. There is a sharing experience taking place here. Indeed, by laboring so hard, each man is experiencing physical repercussions, but they are also using this time as a "meet and greet" period.

This pleasant poem contains all the aspects of a lyric: sweet to the ear and able to give the reader or listener a 'feel good' sensation. It has all the right elements that a good poem should have, alliteration, assonance, rhythm, structure, tone and of course, the ubiquitous iambic pentameter. 'Mending Wall' is in fact a very profound and thought-provoking piece of work. It not only provokes deep thought and argument but also makes the reader question his own values.

One of the poetic techniques used in “Mending Wall” is imagery. In the first eleven lines of the poem, it is used to describe the degradation of the wall, creating a visual image for the reader. The sentence structure of the first line of the poem places emphasis on 'something'. This, compound with the use of personification, makes 'something' appear alive and even human-like. Animate qualities have been given to 'something' through the use of the words 'love', 'sends', 'spills' and 'makes gaps' (lines 1-4), illustrating a vivid impression of the degradation of the wall. Nature, in the form of cold weather, frost and the activities of small creatures, gradually destroys the wall. The narrator seems to believe that walls are unnatural and suggests that nature dislikes walls. This is portrayed through the phrase 'sends the frozen ground swell under it' (line 2). The poem describes nature making holes in the wall large enough that 'even two can pass abreast'. Literally, this refers to the size of the holes. However, it can also be interpreted that nature wishes the men to 'walk together', side by side, and living in harmony where there is no barrier in their friendship that separates them.

Figurative expressions are used in 'Mending Wall' to describe the relationship between the neighbors. Many phrases contain both a literal and metaphoric meaning; The phrases 'to walk the line' and 'set the wall between us' (lines 13,14) refer to the building of a tangible wall that marks the boundary of the neighbors' properties. These phrases are figurative and represent the setting of a barrier in the neighbors' friendship. When they meet to repair the wall, it could be metaphorically interpreted as repairing their friendship and resolving disputes. 'To each the boulders have fallen to each' (line 16) shows that faults lie on the behalf of both neighbors. The metaphor in line seventeen compares their disputes to loaves and balls - some are small and some are large. Figurative language has been used to convey the meaning and the significance of building the wall.

For Frost building a wall was a civic game. This civic “game,” offers a good excuse for the speaker to interact with his neighbor. Behind the literal representation of building walls, there is a deeper metaphoric meaning cleverly intertwined into the poem. People build social barriers to provide a sense of personal security and comfort believing that barriers provide them with protection so that they will be less vulnerable to their fears. In this poem, Frost examines the way in which we interact with one another and how we function as a whole. Man has difficulty communicating and relating to one another and as a result, we have a tendency to close ourselves off from others.

Frost shows how isolating one leads to hostility toward others. The differing views of beliefs, like many relationships in our modern world, are never resolved because of how the two men view one another's ideas. The narrator sees the neighbor as an "old stone savage armed." The other man refuses to argue in favor of neighborliness.

Central to the experience of the poem is the perpetuation of a paradox. The wall between the neighbors both separates and unites them. As well, the poem opens and closes with contradictory statements. However, there is a great irony in the way the two men are brought together by a task that will keep them apart, and the lexical choices stress that they never actually work together. Instead, they each complete the work on their own side of the wall, never meeting or cooperating:

We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each... (14 – 15)
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. (21 – 22)

An overall light-hearted tone has been achieved throughout the poem. One of the main techniques used to achieve this is the inclusion of conversation. 'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!' (Line 19) and the metaphor 'spring is mischief in me' (line 28) for example, shows the neighbors having fun in mending the wall together, creating a cheerful, light-hearted atmosphere. The comparison of the repairing of the fence to an outdoor game also contributes to this light-heartedness. Although the narrator does not want the wall, ironically, the mending of the wall brings the neighbors together and literally builds their friendship. In repairing the fence, the neighbors are spending time together, building their friendship and improving the communication between them. Because the fence is important to the neighbor, he treats the matter of repairing it seriously. Imagery is used to describe the neighbor's attitude, illustrating a rather grim, yet comical representation of him shifting the stones and repairing the fence. The narrator sees the stubbornness in his neighbor, and uses the simile 'like an old-stone savage' to compare him to a stone-age man who 'moves in darkness' (lines 40, 41), that is, set in his ways, and who is unlikely to change his views. They are at the extreme ends but by participating in mending the wall of their separation, they are united to talk.

Conclusion

Humor concerns with culture, value and meaning no less than other genres. In effect, humor can help in building community and promote congeniality in community; linked with critical expressions and arguments, humor promotes critical thinking and encourages intellectual play and invention and offers telling insights into society. Meaning making, hierarchy building, cohesion building and tension relief are the four social functions of humor and humor is said to be felt in every individual somewhere between the sigh of relief and the tear of joy. The adjacency of humor and fear gives America enough of the background necessary to accommodate humor in American characters and thoughts.

The image of the Yankee – the American national character who was found funny- and his humor were traced in Robert Frost. Many critics discovered that Frost wrote some of the darkest poems ever written by any American. They found Frost in the poems that yield most fully to a design of darkness, found his poetry gloomy and bleak and often appreciated him for the terrifically tragic portraiture of life. Indeed, many of Frost's poetry are brilliantly comic; yet critical attention to Frost's dealings in comedy has been regrettably rare.

In fact, humor in Frost was recognized to be a permanent part of his disposition and not simply a trait. He found humor in simple things, and that was prominent in many of his poems. He found rich material for comedy in aberrant ideas and attitudes. There are, then, poems in which Frost derives comedy from human idiosyncrasies or from discord. In these he is less concerned with passing judgment and suggesting correction than with curiosities offered by the human show. Indeed, these poems tend to reflect a wholesome subversiveness.

Boundaries and their worth in Frost's poetry led us to see him in deconstructing the ancient conflict between good and evil claiming that there are good forces so dangerously potent that if are uncontrolled will destroy one another. Frost's task was to recognize the walls between the binary oppositions then deconstruct them and establish another wall of distinction between the opposites that would distance them properly and keep them in a healthy balance. He believed that unsupported by the ability to harmonize opposites, we are sentenced to live with fear. Frost's perception of man's desperate stance in the face of threat was certainly advantageous to his comic outlook. The concept of man in this terrifying universe facing powers which are too great for him is embodied in Frost's poetry.

In several instances Frost simply exploits menacing images or situations to produce amusement. Subtlety in Frost lied in his purging the extremes of their destructiveness and in tempering them with each other. Frost achieves here much the same tension between fear and assurance. Between these extremes of fear and assurance lies a norm. Without at all insisting, Frost invites the reader to share this norm with him and to profit from the spectacle of what deviations from it produce. A desirable norm is a condition of enlightenment.

The point for us is that Frost used irony to suggest the problems facing twentieth-century man. Isolated from the traditional consolations of God, nature, and fellow man, Frost's poet figure must confront the universe alone. The prospect is frightening and the fear stems from the recognition that some unknown force is at work in the universe, but Frost acknowledging the uneven odds went on to suggest methods of coping with the predicament. The only defense against overwhelming fear is acceptance of the predicament. Knowing that he cannot change the situation, Frost by a conscious creation of form and the ironic stance, accepted the facts for what they were. But his acceptance was ironic and often humorous, a defensive move aimed at staying the confusion of a world that was capable of crushing him.

When our understanding of the world is shown to be deficient in some way, we experience distress, ranging from minor irritations to frustration to fear to outright terror. When our understanding is improved in such a way that we can deal with this previously frightening situation, or when the situation is otherwise changed, removed, or avoided, we feel delight, ranging from modest relief to great joy. This interweaving of fear and humor is a pattern that can be easily recognized in many of Frost's poem as if he was under the spell of one fixed idea. In the successful coupling of serious and comic, Frost with serious artistic intent could give us a literate laugh. Only rarely will Frost throw in a joke for the sake of a laugh. His humor is serious, a means of staying confusion, and it is most evident when the poet figure finds himself swamped by circumstances he cannot control. Almost always, however, the poet figure remains fully aware of his situation, and it is this awareness that accounts for much of the affirmative irony. The adverse facts of life are there; the observer cannot send them away, but he manages a momentary stay with his humor or irony. The ironic stance never offers an escape from the problem. What it does allow is a means of coping with the predicament. Humor is used not to blot out the seriousness of the situation but is used as a device for resolving this fear.

American humor as manifested in the Yankee character, Robert Frost as an inheritor of the Yankee tradition, an icon of Yankee values, who practiced American humor in his works were studied in this thesis and "Mending Wall" was taken as an epitome of Frost's works in poetry and a bearer of his philosophy.

The ritual of mending the wall as a futile repetition against the subversiveness of nature was what frightened Frost. Mending the wall is an ironical attempt of man's taking revenge from nature; ironical in that the two men meeting on terms of civility and neighborliness to build a barrier between them are engaged in doing a Sisyphean task, i.e. perpetually pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have the boulder roll down again. The very earth conspires against them. These men push boulders back on top of the wall; yet just as inevitably, whether at the hand of hunters or sprites, or the frost and thaw of nature's invisible hand, the boulders tumble down again. The neighbor resorts to an old adage: "Good fences make good neighbors." The speaker remains unconvinced and mischievously presses the neighbor to look beyond the old-fashioned folly of such reasoning. His neighbor will not be swayed. The speaker envisions his neighbor as a holdover from a justifiably outmoded era, a living example of a dark-age mentality. But the neighbor simply repeats the adage.

The interplay of fear and assurance, fear from the wall-breaking "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" and assurance that the wall is mended "Good fences make good neighbors," carry deeper metaphoric meanings. This sonorous, homey, serene poem is steeped in levels of meaning and well-wrought metaphoric suggestions. These implications inspire numerous interpretations and make definitive readings suspect. It, for an instance, reflects the social barriers people build, to provide a sense of personal security and comfort in the belief that barriers are a source of protection which will make people less vulnerable to their fears. The issue of borders and the optimal distance, respect to each other's ideas, cooperation, importance of communication and many more of Frost's universal concerns are put into this homely poem.

Man's condition is, almost by definition, desperate; he lives in a "terrifying universe," which he cannot alter. Frost could reach a psychic and emotional poise to overcome the terror and make possible a joy in living by the norms which make human life dignified and wholesome.

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