Poetic Prophecies of a Vintage Boy Scout: Robert Frost and Wilderness Therapy Theory

Andrew Shawn Andermatt

Skidmore College

Follow this and additional works at: http://creativematter.skidmore.edu/mals_stu_schol

Part of the American Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

Poetic Prophecies of a Vintage Boy Scout: Robert Frost and Wilderness Therapy Theory

by

Andrew Shawn Andermatt

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE
December 2004

Advisors: Jay Rogoff, Sandra Welter
Table of Contents

I. Frost and Wilderness
   Therapy.................................................................3

II. Metaphor, Symbol, and Connotation: Exposing Economic and Social Fragmentation..............................................17

III. Making Nature Ours: Imagination and Appreciation of Labor...........................................................................32

IV. Creating Relationships: Imagination and Companionship.................................................................................41

V. Conclusion.................................................................................50

Bibliography..................................................................................53
Abstract

Roderick Nash, in his book *Wilderness and the American Mind*, argues that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “Too much civilization, not too little, seemed at the root of the nation’s difficulties.” With economic stability decreasing, social ties eroding, and young “up and comers” committing suicide, Robert Frost’s approach to nature as a powerful, unforgiving yet playful, therapeutic force seems nothing short of realistic. For Frost, following historical patterns for development of cities and “idle hours” in the fields will only lead to increased divisions in labor and social class. Like the goals of wilderness experience programs such as Outward Bound and Boy Scouts of America, Frost’s themes illustrate a need for clear understanding and appreciation of our work and reliance on our own imagination to bring people and wilderness together.
Frost and Wilderness Therapy

“The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows”—Many argue that this line, from Robert Frost’s “Mowing,” is the most complex line in all of Frost’s poetry. It seems little more than a contradiction to say a fact is a dream, but Frost clearly makes the discrepancy intentional. Is the fact the realization that hard work is what makes a dream or that the manual labor itself is the dream? The answer is not simple. Frost sees in nature the potential to overcome societal anxieties, such as economic difficulties and loneliness. Through Frost’s use of metaphor and reliance on one’s imagination, he suggests in many of his poems that to overcome these problems people must make a conscious effort to understand their work as well as appreciate the labor required to produce a good. Frost’s ideas, in fact, parallel recent studies in wilderness therapy. Specifically, Frost’s ideas reflect the aims and beliefs of wilderness experience programs such as Outward Bound and Boy Scouts of America.

To make these parallels clearer, it is necessary to understand the goals of wilderness experience programs, how they operate, and why they were established. Moreover, we must investigate Frost’s poetry, first by debunking some of the common misconceptions of his work presented by theorists, then by making clear connections between Frost’s themes and the goals and outcomes of wilderness therapy.
Many of Frost’s poems acknowledge the peaceful countryside, as does the work of many of Frost’s contemporaries, but he is also aware of the hardships associated with country living. What makes Frost’s poetry prophetic is that it suggests using the rural environment to overcome social and economic fragmentation before specific programs, such as Outward Bound and Boy Scouts, were ever established. While many writers of his time look to nature for relaxation and isolation from the hectic cities, Frost is turning to the countryside for something very different: hard work and companionship.

Like nature itself, Frost sways between the good and the bad without really giving a solid indication of whether or not nature is a positive or negative force. Critics are not wrong to say that Frost presents a negative view of nature, but does he do it all the time? While we cannot say that Frost is all hostile or all therapeutic, we can say that he is realistic. Like the nature hunters themselves, Frost illustrates his awareness of the hostile while recognizing his acceptance of the good. In particular, Frost provides a realistic portrait of rural living and the hardships that go along with it. While his poems serve as a canvas for these hostile images, his poetry, on the whole, seems to support the opening statement—the fact (of hard work) is indeed the sweetest dream we know.

Many critics, including James Cox, Reginald Cook, John Lynen, Frank Lentricchia, and Lawrance Thompson among others, label Robert Frost a dark romantic, accepting his view of nature as a hostile, lonely place. Sheldon Liebman traces some of the criticism that has developed over the years in his article, “Robert Frost, Romantic” published in Twentieth Century Literature. Critics such as Lawrance Thompson, Liebman argues, credit Frost as being a romantic but claim that he somehow abandoned his romanticism (1996).
Consequently, most of these critics conclude that Frost concentrates on nature’s ability to hinder rather than help human beings.

We do not have to search far to find negative images of nature in Frost’s poetry. Take Frost’s 1936 sonnet “Design” for example. Frost gives us a striking visual when his persona states in the opening two lines, “I found a dimpled spider, fat and white, / On a white heal-all […] (1-2). The playful image of the spider, as dimpled and fat, soon fades when the persona notices the spider, “holding up a moth / Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—” (2-3). Our attention turns from a playful description of a spider to a helpless moth, reduced to something as insignificant as a “rigid satin cloth,” clutched in the spider’s grips.

The rest of the first stanza reads almost like the making of an evil potion.

Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches’ broth—
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite. (5-8)

Although Frost seems to be creating a negative image of nature, the poem, like life itself, relies on contradictions. The healthy spider seeking its prey shares the same scene as the helpless moth, and we must note that the scene takes place on a “heal-all,” a plant known to cure all diseases. But here, the plant cannot aid in healing the moth partly because it, like all other things in nature, must die as well. The persona asks, “What had that flower to do with being white, / The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?” (9-10). Here we learn that the heal-all used to be blue and is now presumably dead because of its faded, white appearance.
Scholar Radcliffe Squires, in his book *The Major Themes of Robert Frost*, asserts that in “Design” nature is “nothing but an ash-white plain without love or faith or hope, where ignorant appetites cross by chance” (87). Many critics may agree with Squires, but Frost’s theme is carefully stated at the end of the poem.

What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?—
If design govern in a thing so small.

Here, Frost uses rhetorical questions to lead the reader to the point of the poem. The persona suggests that everything has a “design,” a purpose, plan, or aim, whether sinister or not, that leads to one’s own fate. Although Frost himself seems to suggest that nature is an “ash-white plain without love, or faith, or hope,” with the pale images and suggestions of fading life, the poem equally suggests that every creature and entity in nature has its fate, a clearly defined plan over which we have little control. Therefore, Frost is realistic in viewing the plight of humankind in nature—some people, fragile like the moth, are doomed while others, strong and crafty like the spider, are fit for survival.

Critics may further their arguments supporting Frost’s view of nature as hostile and alien by explicating “Stars,” where the persona recognizes the stars’ indifference to human beings by saying,

As if with keenness for our fate,
Our faltering few steps on
To white rest, and a place of rest
Invisible at dawn, —

And yet with neither love nor hate,
Those stars like some snow-white
Minerva’s snow-white marble eyes
Without the gift of sight. (5-12)
Frost’s illustration of the stars’ ability to turn a blind eye on our dying day illustrates not only nature’s lack of concern for human life but also its ability to continue beyond the existence of human beings. The stars will be visible long after our death.

Other poems by Frost portray this indifference, and as Sheldon Liebman points out, many of Frost’s poems contained in his “North of Boston” collection, illustrate nature poems depicting violence, miscommunication, loneliness, and destruction (1996).

To say that Frost views only the hostile, vile, violent moments in nature means ignoring his many positive descriptions and metaphors. His poetry suggests that he is a realist, understanding and articulating the hardships of rural living. Frost’s realistic portrait of nature separates him from his contemporaries such as Edgar Lee Masters, whom Frost labeled “too romantic” or “too false-realistic” (1996). He also calls Edwin Arlington Robinson a “Platonist and a romantic.” Frost argues that he himself is not really a nature writer because his poetry always contains a person.

Unlike many poets and writers of his time, Frost spends less time observing nature and more time developing relationships between his personas and the natural world. In particular, Frost suggests that manual labor in a technologically advancing society and human isolation mar relationships in rural locales. We cannot nor should we deny that Frost illustrates a barrier between human beings and nature; however, while considering the hardships of rural living, Frost has a keen intuition that nature has the ability to cure social fragmentation.

Writing poetry in the early to mid-twentieth century, growing up in San Francisco, and living in London, Frost is aware of the rapid development of urban areas around him.
Moreover, Frost is conscious of the society and living conditions that would result from this growth. He also asserts an awareness that many Americans would continue to turn toward the developing cities for purchase of commercial goods.

During the time of his early poetry, Americans were dealing with astounding economical changes. According to David Macleod, author of *Building Character in the American Boy*, the agricultural industry decreased from 72% of the market share in 1820 to 27% in 1920. On the other hand, the share for manufacturing increased from 25% in 1870 to 34% in 1920 (9). Over time, business dominated America, and people living in urban areas grew tired of overpopulated cities. Big business and the desire for success eventually became overwhelming. “Too much civilization, not too little, seemed at the root of the nation’s difficulties,” Roderick Nash concludes in his book *Wilderness and the American Mind* (143).

In light of these statistics, many theorists, including Nash, analyzed people’s attitude toward nature. From early explorations of wild places to modern camping excursions, nature writers often trace the escape from industry that nature provides. It seems that any relationship formed with the land is based on how much time and effort we spend fighting or cultivating it. For some the land is a barrier; thickets, shrubs, and dense forest obstructing agricultural opportunities. For others, the land is a source of survival supplying essential materials for a healthy life.

It is important to consider the historical context for not only Frost’s ideas but also society in general who were a product of the changing views of the turn of the century. Roderick Nash asserts that our change in conception of wilderness from the days of the
Indians until the early 1900s rests on an over expanding population and a change in the way we think about nature. While these ideas are true, we must first and foremost examine the land as a source of survival and how that idea alone influences our views. Wilderness is less urgent in the 1900s because people didn’t rely on it quite as much as agriculture and domestic animals supplied most food.

By the early twentieth century, wilderness was no longer viewed as a necessity for survival or an overpowering obstacle. In fact, wilderness seemed to have very little power over people. People no longer needed to move from one place to another because homes had heat to stay warm in the winter. Most property had places to grow crops or room to keep livestock for family survival. It seemed that any wilderness left was either undiscovered or served as a place of relaxation. Roderick Nash cites differences in thought, influenced by writings of such authors as Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville, as one of the reasons people changed their perception of wilderness. The other reason was simply that America had grown tired of rapid industrialization in cities. Both theories are important and necessary to explain these changes, but we cannot overlook the most obvious; our relationship to the land changed because our power to manipulate the land increased.

America was hungry for civilization and with that civilization, profit. We found ways with our high tech equipment to grow crops and domesticate animals for farming assistance, meat, and clothing. Many Americans turned toward the developing cities for purchase of commercial goods. Over time, America had become riddled with business, eventually growing tired of overpopulated cities.
Americans viewed, at this point, the wilderness of the past to have many unique and desirable national characteristics. The strong, rugged, savage landscape was the backbone of America, making its inhabitants proud of its identity while centuries ago making wilderness "evil." Wilderness was a place of beauty, inspiration, and relaxation. People could appreciate wilderness as a visitor or spectator because we no longer had to be conqueror like the Indian. In the early years, the quality of solitude and hardship intimidated pioneers, but now, people who are immersed in the city life find the quiet and peace welcoming.

There is, however, one critical side to this change in attitude that many writers, with the exception of Frost, have neglected. Indeed, cities thriving on industrial expansion were becoming hostile environments because of the rigors of keeping up with production, and well-to-do urban dwellers were turning to nature to relax. But what about the people living in rural areas who were losing income because people turned to cities for goods? Economically, those people living away from major industrial areas found it difficult to adjust. Jobs became scarce, and a clear division of class began to develop. Claire Walker’s article “Too Many Lives of Quiet Desperation” quotes Edinburgh University professor Stephen Platt as saying, “the risk of suicide among the unemployed compared to the employed is between twofold and threefold” (1999).

Bishop Richard Holloway provides one of the best explanations for Platt’s statement. Holloway argues that “in the days when most people were poor, there was a camaraderie and social cohesion in belonging to the working class that gave them strength and pride […] but in a society where most people are prosperous, and the poor are a minority whose culture has disintegrated, the pain and anger they feel is heightened” (qtd. in Walker 1999). Holloway’s
statement is the foundation for the growing interest in wilderness therapy and parallels Frost’s own notion of a wilderness experience program.

To compare Robert Frost’s poetic themes with modern wilderness therapy, we must first address the basis for this philosophy. This therapy is a mode of counseling established in the years following Frost’s 1963 death that focuses on wilderness activities to deter at-risk youths from committing crimes or harming themselves. The idea stems from the notion that troubled youths and young adults can be steered away from their aggressive behavior by interacting with nature, but the problem with this example is that wilderness therapy, as far as its fundamental purpose and techniques, has not been adequately defined.

Keith Russell, in his article “What is Wilderness Therapy,” addresses the need for a clear definition of such a vague philosophy. Russell’s thesis is that wilderness therapy is a larger term incorporating many subdivisions and definitions. For example, wilderness therapy approaches adolescents as individuals who have not had the opportunity to develop pro-social values. Many universities are starting to adopt such a specialization into their counseling programs, and their purpose is to leave the counseling student with a sense of empowerment, perseverance, and confidence that can later be transferred to the at-risk adolescent. People referred to wilderness therapy often go through a close screening process to make sure that type of counseling is suitable to the individual. Once the client is approved for such a program, the counselors will tailor their therapy sessions around exposing individuals to various team-building exercises in nature.

Like traditional counseling programs, students may specialize in drug and alcohol awareness, family counseling, or even adolescent/behavioral counseling. The problem is that
the diagnoses and therapeutic measures are all classified under one heading: wilderness therapy. This paper will focus on how several of Frost’s poems anticipate and support the philosophical underpinnings of the human/nature relationship as developed in wilderness experience programs (WEPs).

Wilderness experience programs are often defined as "organizations that conduct outdoor programs in wilderness or comparable lands for purposes of personal growth, therapy, rehabilitation, education or leadership/organizational development" (Russell 2001). Some groups such as Outward Bound programs and Boy Scouts of America target children or young adults who are either at risk for behavioral problems or low self-esteem to show them how to interact with and appreciate nature. These programs, in some ways, funnel aggressive behavior through manual labor to teach participants about the environment, community, the self, and each other.

Like the message in many of Frost’s poems, wilderness programs and counseling strive to rectify the feeling of social and economic fragmentation. Ernest Thompson Seton, chief scout of the Boy Scouts of America, argues that, “many Americans had grown degenerate. We know money grubbing, machine politics, degrading sports, cigarettes... false ideals, moral laxity, and lessening church power, in a word ‘city rot’ has worked evil in the nation” (qtd in Macleod 32).

Seton’s use of the phrase “city rot” refers to adolescent minds being corrupted by television, computers, and other forms of entertainment. This form of activity allows adolescent minds to become idle because these forms of media dictate their thoughts and
expressions. In the country, there are fewer avenues of entertainment. Children’s minds become bored, and they need to learn how to adapt to a lifestyle in a rural setting.

The popularity of these programs derives, in part, from the profound number of recorded rural suicides in the past forty years. At a time when people are turning to nature to relax and get away from the hardships of city life, it seems a contradiction that people living in rural areas are desperate enough to take their own lives. Despite people's growing relationship to nature, the increase in suicide among young adults in rural areas is on the rise because of social fragmentation and increased pressure to have material possessions. People living in rural areas simply have a hard time competing with cities for profit.

Cases of suicide have increased steadily over time, but the influx of documented cases since 1960 is alarming. The most significant rise in suicide rates occurs in young adults primarily between the ages of 20-24. In just thirty years, the rates among young children and teens have doubled while the statistics for older individuals have remained relatively static. However, since 1990 unskilled men 25 to 34 years of age make up the most recurring cases of suicide. Men whose work is insecure or those who cannot find a job contribute most to these rates (Walker 1999). With the growing number of career opportunities and business expansion, it is hard to fathom that an age group of “up and comers” would lead the country’s suicide rates.

As Frost, along with the rest of America, began to see an increase in technology and urbanization, he also noted the anxiety some were feeling about a dependence on wealth to the point where severe social fragmentation was beginning to occur. Jean-Claude Chesnais’ article “Worldwide Historical Trends in Murder and Suicide” indicates that suicide rates for
sexes combined are below 10 per 100,000 for less developed countries (93). In early twentieth century America, although technology and modernization had influential and life-saving qualities, these advances were placing a considerable amount of pressure on its people. People were competing with one another for the best lifestyle and jobs that required the most specialized skills. America prides itself on being a nation where everyone is equal regardless of race and social status, yet we have an increase in rural suicides because some people cannot seem to meet the pressures of providing for a family in an economically advancing society.

Perhaps knowing how this boredom could lead youngsters to take their own lives, Frost composes his poem “Birches,” which addresses this problem by depicting a young boy who makes nature his entertaining playmate.

When I see birches bend to the left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy’s been swinging them (1-3).

The persona imagines a young boy who has been playing on the trees rather than an ice storm or some destructive force that has bent the branches to the ground. Pointing this out, the persona indicates the playfulness nature can provide. Also, it illustrates that humans are harmless to nature if they use nature for play rather than profit.

The persona reflects back on a childhood of being a “swinger of birches” and states,

I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone (23-27).
The trees serve as a playmate for the persona and any child that may view the birches the same way. Frost continues by saying that if at any time he became tired of the trees he could leave and come back another day. The persona ends the poem by saying that when his time comes to die, he wouldn’t mind “going” by climbing a birch tree.

May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.
I’d like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches (50-59).

Although the persona states that climbing a birch would be a good way to get to heaven, he is sure to point out that he would rather remain on Earth and swing from the birches another day.

Frost is aware that not every youth can have the opportunity as the persona in “Birches.” He is aware that a century ago, youths were necessary to the establishment and welfare of the economic stability of the family. Magdalena Rosol, in her article “Wilderness Therapy for Youth-at-Risk,” reminds us that in urban settings, children are not required to ensure the daily functioning of the family and retreat to passive situations (2000). Likewise, in rural areas teenagers were a major part of the workforce on farms. With the increase of urbanization and the decreased role of agriculture, teens have very little role in family stability.

To call Frost a man ahead of his time is a bold statement, but his poetry clearly presents the hardships of rural life and ways to overcome these hardships—in short, Frost’s
poetry suggests the concept of a wilderness therapy. Boy Scouts of America and Daniel Carter Beard’s Sons of Daniel Boone aim to mold young men into hard-working, self-disciplined, well-rounded citizens (Macleod 130).

Together, these programs contribute stability and self-worth to young males who feel trapped by economic insufficiency and boredom in rural areas. Providing knowledge about how to respect and make a living in the environment using creativity would only benefit future generations. Those with a sufficient understanding of nature and humankind’s relationship with the environment will provide a healthy, happy lifestyle for themselves and their families.
Metaphor, Symbol, and Connotation: Exposing Economic and Social Fragmentation

“Will, resourcefulness, and ingenuity, rather than foreboding, resignation, and endurance, are the key words in his [Frost’s] vision. He is not by any stretch of the imagination a poet of consolation” (Reginald Cook, *The Dimensions of Robert Frost*)

Scholar Reginald Cook’s assessment of Robert Frost could not be any truer. Will, resourcefulness, and ingenuity are qualities that Frost exhibits in his poetry, all of which take effort and hard work on the behalf of the individual. Interestingly, these three qualities also seem to be the key words in the vision of programs such as Boy Scouts of America and Outward Bound Programs. Cook’s book, *The Dimensions of Robert Frost*, examines Frost as a poet, artist, and wordsmith first and foremost, but Frost’s craft as a poet transcends the generic themes of nature, identity, and self-assurance. Frost’s poetry, both on the artistic and thematic levels, emphasizes the goals of modern day wilderness therapy.

Cook provides an in-depth study of Frost’s poetic themes and uses general subheadings such as “relationship to fellow man,” “world of nature,” and “fatefulness,” but there is no category, as is true with many other theorists, labeling Frost a pioneer for his vision of nature serving as a therapeutic element to ease economic and social hardships.

Comparing Robert Frost’s poetry with the late twentieth century notion of wilderness therapy seems like an unusual pairing at best. Frost’s poetry often suggests a dark image of nature while wilderness therapy programs advocate an optimistic view. With Frost’s
seemingly dark image of man’s relationship with nature suggested by poems like “Out, Out—“ and “After Apple Picking,” his use of symbolism and choice of personas clearly tell a different story. Moreover, Frost’s poetry illustrates his awareness of people’s corroding economic stability in the country and its affect on the younger generation.

The struggle of “up and comers” is the first suggestion that Frost's vision of the future is accurate. It is no coincidence that Frost shapes his poetry to reflect the young, working class. The people in Frost’s poetry are, for the most part, young or middle-aged working class men and women in conflict with nature.

Robert Frost’s emphasis on appreciating manual labor for its own sake and not its economic rewards parallels the purpose of many recent wilderness experience programs. In order to make an accurate link between Frost’s work and the ideas of theorists within the last couple of years, we need to consider the conflicts of an earlier time period. Some problems children and young adults faced in early twentieth century America surrounded economic fragmentation. Being away from major economic development areas such as cities, not being able to support the family, or being relegated to work for economic profit for the span of one’s life, promotes severe depression, loneliness, and hopelessness.

Groups such as Boy Scouts of America and Outward Bound Programs have recently met with great success at curbing the feelings of social and economic fragmentation in young adults. Though it is impossible for Frost to have predicted the statistics of how many success stories would come from established, formal programs such as these, he is aware in his poetry that learning to appreciate manual labor and hard work results in a sense of pride and belonging.
Where Frost is particularly on track with recent wilderness theorists is when he addresses the problems of rural living. Not only is Frost aware that engaging and interacting with the environment by appreciating the work that is to be done is beneficial to overcoming economic anxieties, he is concerned with the rural residents’ lack of knowledge.

Frost’s first main concern is people’s emotional detachment from their work. This emotional detachment has two causes: lack of appreciation for hard work and economic competition. “Out, Out—” in particular shows how nothing good can come from being emotionally detached from our work. Frost purposefully chooses a young boy to serve as the focal point of the poem. Set in the early twentieth century, the poem is faithful to the role young boys played in the family. They were heavily relied on to contribute to the economic success of the family, but Frost’s poem suggests that this is a problem. Children were working, contributing economically to the family, but they only seemed to be working for that purpose.

The young boy in the poem has no motive for work except to cut sticks and has no reason to view work as pleasurable. The day, in fact, is boring and mundane, and the young boy merely waits for his work to be over.

And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work (9-12).

The persona in the poem recognizes the boy’s anxiety to quit work early. Frost’s choice of phrasing “saved from work” is particularly suggestive in this piece. The boy is obviously in some kind of uncomfortable situation, gaining no satisfaction from what he is doing. To be
“saved,” as the persona states, implies that the boy must somehow be rescued from something harmful.

Being faithful to the time period, Frost illustrates a young boy working for his family, being robbed of his childhood. The harmful entity here is making a boy do an adult’s work and having little appreciation or understanding of the work he does. Frost’s poem suggests that this is the starting point of the social and economic fragmentation that people experience.

One may not see the theme of economic fragmentation until carefully observing the role of the buzz saw in the poem. Although Frost may use seemingly flat characters to illustrate a legitimate concern, the buzz saw acts as a main character itself. Uncharacteristically using personification, Frost brings the buzz saw to life as a sinister antagonist. The buzz saw “snarles and rattles” as if it is some kind of terrifying monster. The persona states, “At the word, the saw, / As if the saw meant to prove what supper meant, / Leaped out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap--” (14-16). Giving the saw human qualities, “leaped” and understanding of the word “supper,” which when yelled by the boy’s sister ends up distracting him, Frost intends to make the saw much more powerful than the boy, thus having it control him.

Having the buzz saw control the boy does more than add rare personification to Frost’s poem. It serves as a symbol. The saw, a tool used for working and providing economic gain for the household, is representative of the harm that can come from too much work. Work, in a sense, controls human beings. The buzz saw jumps at the boy, severing his hand and killing him.
Two interpretations can come from this symbolic act. First, the saw carries not only the power to kill the boy but also the power to take away economic stability from the family. Without his hand, the boy is incapacitated and no longer able to engage in the work he was doing. Secondly, the saw holds the power to enlighten the boy of the dangers of doing a man’s work, but only when it is too late.

Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man’s work, though a child at heart--
He saw all spoiled [...] (22-25).

John F. Lynen offers an explanation of this passage in his book *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*. What is spoiled is the boy’s view of the rural society around him. Frost’s persona makes a point to illustrate the tranquil Vermont background with the tall mountain peaks lining the landscape. The boy’s “perfect” world, his physical ability to support himself, is gone. He is now incomplete, which simply doesn’t fit with the rural reputation (35-36).

Perhaps the most disturbing part of the entire poem is Frost’s nonchalant attitude toward the death of the young boy.

No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little--less--nothing! --and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they were not the one dead, turned to their affairs (31-34).

It seems heartless that Frost would have his characters brush off the death of a young boy, especially since he is a family and community member. This act, however, is also entirely symbolic. Some critics argue that this scene illustrates Frost’s dreary and drab representation
of the rural environment and the people who inhabit it. This, however, is not entirely true. In fact, it suggests Frost’s empathy for those living in rural areas. With the family and townspeople turning to their affairs, Frost is implying that life goes on, and in this case, he suggests that economic life must go on. The family still needs economic support with or without the young boy. The manner in which the boy dies indicates that the boy is both literally and figuratively killed by work, partly because he does not understand the work he is doing.

Another one of Frost’s poems that depicts the same theme is “After Apple Picking.” This poem illustrates how when someone relies on an activity simply for the financial rewards, one becomes emotionally and spiritually dead.

Some critics argue that “After Apple Picking” is about literal death. A reader believing that Frost’s poem is about death could viably support his or her opinion with concrete examples from the poem. On several occasions Frost references winter, a season we often associate with death. “Essence of winter sleep is on the night...,” the speaker says as he finishes working (7). Pairing winter with sleep may signal the death of a person. At the conclusion of the poem the speaker says,

Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it’s like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep” (39-42).

The “long sleep” here refers to some phenomenon, perhaps death or hibernation, as it is compared to “human sleep” which may signify an ordinary nighttime rest.
The theme, however, may not be that transparent. Frost himself denies that this poem is about death. Frost seems to be emphasizing the point that when our labor becomes motivated strictly by the amount of wealth and rewards it gives us, we wear ourselves out and become tired of labor.

Reginald Cook, however, points out that the poem signifies accomplishment. Simply, an individual has been appointed to undertake a task and has done just that (104). We cannot deny that the speaker seems to have been successful as there “may be two or three/ Apples I didn’t pick upon some bough” (4-5). With only a few left on the tree we assume the speaker has picked most of them.

At the same time, however, we are told that the barrel beside his ladder is not full. This indicates that something is incomplete or left undone. It seems that the speaker wants to be satisfied with his work and has been successful, but he dwells on the barrel that is not yet full and the few apples that remain. If we work too hard to collect all the rewards labor can give us we become tired and lose interest in the work.

If we become too engaged in looking at the products of our labor rather than the labor itself, we become tired and end up having a distorted view of labor. Many times throughout the poem we are led to believe that the speaker is already asleep. This, however, may not be a literal sleep as his fatigue occurs in the morning. There is no doubt that he may be tired from apple-picking, but when he says, “I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight/ I got from looking through a pane of glass...” his dream is not one that occurs during sleep but of
the goals he is yet to reach (9-10). “For I have had too much/ Of apple-picking: I am overtired/ Of the great harvest I myself desired” (27-29). His own dreams and endless effort of achieving more has exhausted him to the point that a dream may never be fulfilled.

While Frost pays particular attention to economic hardships in his poetry, his concern for social fragmentation is equally as strong. Wilderness areas have been noted as being desolate with little opportunity or people with which to connect. As a result, people become detached from one another, feeling lonely and isolated. Wilderness therapy programs target the factors that create isolation among people and consider the idea that young adults become bored and destructive when isolated from social areas. Frost’s “The Mountain” is one such poem that illustrates how nature can create a lonely environment, creating social fragmentation on behalf of a community’s members.

In “The Mountain,” Frost uses the mountain itself as a metaphor for people’s detachment from nature. The persona states,

```
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.
Near me it seemed: I felt it like a wall
Behind which I was sheltered from a wind [...] (1-6)
```

The mountain here serves as a monstrous entity with the power to hold the town in a shadow, dwarfing the village and keeping it in the dark. It is unlikely that a mountain, which most often is only viewed in full form from a distance, would keep a shadow over the village. The image, however, is meant to figuratively suggest that nature is so ominous and grandiose to
these people, that it seems to be a mysterious, hovering entity. In short, the mountain represents nature and its power to overshadow a town or village.

The speaker, however, who already implies that he has truly seen nature with his reference to the stars that he misses in the West, says that he saw so much before arriving and sleeping in this town. The speaker’s first observation of the mountain leads him to feel the villagers’ discomfort. The mountain is a barrier, keeping him from seeing all that is familiar. There are two points to consider: villagers who make their homes in the country and those who come to visit.

The same use of barriers is seen in “Mending Wall,” a poem about a stone wall that separates two neighbors and their respective property. The speaker points out the uselessness of the wall when he says,

He [the neighbor] is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple tree will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, ‘Good fences make good neighbours.’
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
‘Why do they make good neighbours? 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 whom I was like to give offence (24-34).

The speaker sees no real reason for a wall since there is nothing to restrain, such as cows or other animals. The only things the wall seems to be dividing is each other’s trees, and Frost’s wit clearly comes into play when he says that his apple trees will not cross the fence and eat the neighbor’s pine cones. This wit shows the speaker believes the wall is absurd.
When the speaker asks the neighbor why he insists on having this wall, the neighbor responds by saying “good fences make good neighbors.” His reply is a cliché, and given for the sake of coming up with a response.

Commonly, a wall is used to block or keep something contained in a given area. If we think of how a wall works metaphorically, we can see the implications Frost is presenting in his poem. Thoughts and ideas that differ from someone else’s may be thought of as a wall or barrier to communication. The neighbor thinks the wall should be mended each year and should stay constructed because it is the way it has always been. The neighbor is a traditionalist who adheres to an idea for the sake of it always being that way. The speaker says “I see him there, / Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top/ In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed” (38-40). The reference gives us an idea that the neighbor follows an archaic thinking pattern and adds to this image by quoting the cliché “good fences make good neighbors.” The old adage fits the neighbor’s outdated way of thinking.

John Lynen argues, however, that the speaker’s views of nature are also somewhat primitive. The speaker “seems to be in sympathy with some elemental spirit in nature which denies all boundaries” (28). Nature works to destroy the wall every year. This is also symbolic.

Lynen asserts that the meanings of Frost’s symbols are often complex. Frost’s symbols are generally cast as images, giving multiple meanings (27). Lynen concludes, “the vista does not have any definite terminus and in the farthest distance fades into vague areas of suggestion” (27). Lynen particularly points to “Mending Wall” because of its seemingly
anecdotal quality. The truth, however, remains that the reader comes away from the poem with some confusion, a vague point buried in the symbols.

The confusion on the part of the reader lies in the opposing attitudes of these two characters. Lynen points out that the reader must somehow try to figure out who is right about the wall: the speaker who wants the wall to cease to exist or the neighbor who continually wants to “mend” it each spring. Are barriers necessary, or should everything be open? Lynen argues that it is not Frost’s purpose to provide his readers with an answer to this question nor is it his goal to teach us something about the relations of human beings (29).

Consequently, Lynen’s theory seems to be disproved by Frost himself. Michael Cornett presents literary scholars with a rare Robert Frost radio lecture in his article, “Robert Frost on ‘Listen America’: The Poet’s Message to America in 1956.” Cornett argues that this rare interview, conducted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters’, has received too little attention considering Frost portrays America as a “confused nation where national and individual priorities are in conflict” (1993). Frost states,

In the poem [“Mending Wall”] I show, or try to show, that we have to have boundaries, though which there's no immediate reason for them, though you can't see any immediate reason for them, that's the point of the poem. You got to have boundaries, separateness, though you can't see any immediate reason for them. (qtd. in Cornett 1993).

Although the persona in “Mending Wall” wants the barrier between him and his neighbor to cease to exist, the persona offers help to rebuild the wall each spring. This action supports Frost’s statement that even though we may not understand a particular barrier, we know they must exist to some extent.
Lynen continues that Frost’s main purpose in this poem is to view an image, or event from rural life, from several angles. Lynen points to the opposing viewpoints of the characters as symbolic in themselves. The disagreement serves as a vehicle to relay the idea that the wall represents something far more complex. What exactly are the two men arguing over? Social injustices? Is their argument grounded in political, philosophical, or religious issues? Lynen’s statement that Frost is addressing all of these is quite appropriate.

Despite Frost’s creation of personas and concern for community members who suffer from economic loss and social fragmentation in rural areas, he does seem hopeful, much like wilderness experience programs, in providing a solution to these problems. “Men are not plagued by such bitter circumstances that they are no match for the opposition. They do not endure supinely or indifferently or inadequately the circumstances that beset them. They are well-equipped fighters in a tough struggle,” Cook states in regards to Frost’s poetic aim (143). On the surface, this statement seems to contradict the events in both “Out, Out—“ and “After Apple Picking.” After all, the boy is no match for the buzz saw and the persona who picks the apples is no match for fatigue and distant dreams of economic gain. It does seem that these two characters are plagued by “bitter circumstances,” and they seem to be less than “well-equipped fighters.” The statement, however, stands alone. The point is Frost believes that it does not have to be that way. Indeed, men can survive any struggle if they realize they can fight.

Frost recognizes the problems plaguing the notion of work: lack of understanding at a young age and working continuously for economic profit. “Conflict and struggle and tension are in the order of things,” Cook states. (144). The question is how do we conquer the
conflict, struggle, and tension? How do we fix such an eroding crevice in society? Frost’s answer seems out of touch with his own time period but seems fresh and current for the twenty-first century. His solution to the problem demonstrates how young children and adults can overcome the tedious feeling of economic fragmentation by learning how to use work for self-fulfillment. If the younger generation were given the adequate tools to appreciate work for the sake of work and not economic reliance, then people would be less inclined to feel isolated.

Julian Simon, in his article “What Does the Future Hold? The Forecast in a Nutshell,” asserts that peoples’ perceptions of material conditions will only get better if people create new challenges that “will capture peoples’ imaginations and hearts and replace the intergroup political struggle that now increasingly supplant the struggle against nature for a better material life” (642). Simon recognizes the need to do away with the political “I have more than you” attitude when it comes to materialistic goods and the need for creative activities that people seek for personal enjoyment, but it seems that everything being devised for fun relates back to this idea of materialism.

Simon is optimistic about the future perceptions of rural areas, but his optimism comes with some blind assertions. Many believe that we can look to history to predict the future because human nature is constant and thus reliable for accurate forecasts. This assumes that people will change their habits as soon as changes in conditions occur, but most behavior will continue to be the same as they have been (Simon 643). Although Frost predicts that the younger citizens will suffer economically and socially if their concentration centers on financial rewards rather than personal fulfillment from labor, Simon predicts that
people will live longer lives than now; fewer will die young, families will have higher incomes and better standards, costs of natural resources will decrease, agricultural land will be less of an economic asset, and the environment will be healthier than now, the air and water people consume will be cleaner because as nations continue to get richer, they will increasingly buy more cleanliness (644-645).

Simon’s predictions, however, fail to pay attention to historical trends. The rates for the young dying younger caused by severe depression from economic and social detachment have been increasing over the past forty years, and if historical trends tell the future, we are in trouble. It is his proposals that will leave those in rural areas continuing to struggle, especially as agricultural importance decreases and the expectations of higher incomes increase.

To Frost “[...] mankind is not entangled in a deterministic snare from which they find no possible extrication. His vision irradiates man’s advantages [...]” (Cook 143). Frost’s poetry illustrates that there is hope to overcome the economic fragmentation we feel by creating the new challenges that Simon refers to, but Frost also acknowledges the dangers of following historical trends by showing his readers what will continue to happen if we rely on material possessions. As economic conditions become more competitive and lucrative, we are likely to be blinded by labor and end up much like the young boy in “Out, Out—.”

Unfortunately, many youngsters outgrow wilderness experience programs by their mid-teens. The average age of children in a program like this is twelve, but the lessons learned and the 65% that said they learned about the environment should provide a basis for promoting the program further to older age groups. Schools have developed Outward Bound
programs that have adopted the idea that people learn best while being engaged in activities (Rosol 2000). Furthermore, the more schools that adopt programs of study and/or recreation will reach a larger group of teens that may think they are past the Boy Scout age. It is imperative that children who have participated in programs like Boy Scouts keep developing these skills through their late teens and that those who do not have the opportunity to join a group as a child get the opportunity.

Like the concern of the wilderness programs, Frost seems to have had this vision himself. “Mowing,” suggests that our imagination will create a prolonged appreciation of the environment and the work to be done. Cook points out Frost’s desire for people to be “versed in country things” (170). One must understand and know how to deal with the changing of the seasons as well as how a man’s skill is measured by vocation. Frost’s idea reflects the cliché, “give a man a fish, feed him for a day; show a man how to fish, feed him for life.” By giving the younger generation the tools and understanding of their labor, they become resourceful and can survive economically without the stress of competition.

Cook writes, “Nature is the medium by which the human spirit extends its growth, the soil in which it develops. This is the significance of his [Frost’s] poetic effort: a cultivation (rather than as in Thoreau a naturalization) of the human spirit in the world of nature” (175). This cultivation, as mirrored in wilderness experience programs, is to establish will, resourcefulness, and ingenuity.
III

Making Nature Ours: Imagination and Appreciation of Labor

“He [Frost] knows the only credit we deserve is for what we do with our God-given intelligence in the face of the inevitable,” Reginald Cook asserts, “the resourceful man on his own—‘how the limited can make snug in the limitless’ (144). Frost does view human beings as somewhat limited in their endeavors with nature, but Cook’s statement illustrates Frost’s belief that the resourceful man, despite being limited, can be comfortable in a world with unlimited possibilities. In order to do this, both Frost and wilderness experience programs realize each person needs to make his or her experience with nature unique and must use the imagination to appreciate manual labor.

The parallels between wilderness experience programs and Frost’s poetry extends beyond the recognition of people suffering in nature because of misunderstanding and material wants; both Frost and WEPs advocate becoming resourceful by using the imagination to appreciate our work and create new challenges. Rather than follow the historical trends that Julian Simon promises will “get better,” Frost and WEPs abandon prior patterns to make new attempts to understand nature.

Outward Bound Programs and organizations like Boy Scouts of America traditionally encourage youngsters to view hard work as exercises in self-fulfillment. These programs go further than allowing people to see work as enjoyable by providing insight that work and
interaction with nature can be spiritually rewarding. Perhaps most importantly, these programs build confidence and a sense of unity and community with each other.

In less developed areas, there is no question that a sense of community can be difficult to achieve. Many rural locations are often miles from urban areas and often have very small populations. In some ways, people may feel closer to one another because of the small populations, and in some cases, rural communities rely on its members much more essentially for the necessary production of goods, but on a whole, it is easy for individuals to become detached from one another with so little to do in these areas. Part of the goal of these wilderness programs is to get youngsters working together as teams as well as feeling fulfilled by nature individually.

These programs also promote sharpening the imagination by creating games or obstacle courses to help deal with possible barriers. The Boy Scouts of America Summer Camp Outcomes Study for 2001 illustrates how participation with its program leads to heightened social, physical, intellectual, and emotional awareness. Summer camp shows young people how to use their time wisely by engaging in physical and intellectual challenges while teaching them how to respect nature and the environment (Harris 5).

According to the study, 80% of the scouts believe that they are influential in making decisions, are sought for advice, make new friends, and feel a sense of accomplishment. An impressive 76% said they learned new skills, and 86% said they tried something they have never done before (13). It’s these numbers that indicate programs like Boy Scouts of America have a beneficial place in young children’s lives.
To parallel these programs’ goals and outcomes, Frost’s “Mowing,” illustrates the rewards and joy one can achieve through engaging in manual labor. Frost’s theme is developed by the conspicuous lack of sound in the field. The speaker is cutting the grass with a scythe, which makes no more than a whispering sound. In a field where grass is being cut one might expect to hear the sound of a tractor or some other machine doing the work, but the lack of sound in the field by the woods illustrates the speaker’s labor is being done with his hands and not by the aid of some fancy machine.

The silence in the poem suggests a different sense of wealth; the overwhelming joy we should feel when we labor with our hands. The speaker questions what the scythe could be whispering and concludes that “It was not dream of the gift of idle hours, / Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf” (7-8). This indicates that the scythe is not whispering about when the work will be over or the money a person makes from laboring. “Time is money” is a cliché we hear many laborers use in their practices. One of the reasons we have powered machinery to do our work is so more work can be done in less time, thus maximizing a profit and minimizing the time we need to spend working. The speaker implies that the enjoyment in labor, especially on a small scale, should be reward itself.

Frank Lentricchia, in his book Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self, reminds us of Frost’s wit. Perhaps it is his wit that leads us to recognize the joy of work. “The need to break out of silence is balanced by the ironic awareness that imaginative solutions—such as those which have scythes whispering—often have a delicate status” (39). That delicate status that Lentricchia refers to is the balance we must have between play, imagination, and hard work. Frost is not afraid to show his reader how imagination can make
our labor more enjoyable (by having a whispering scythe that speaks to the persona), but at the same time, Frost makes a point to indicate that labor will not be easy; there will be no imaginary elf at days end handing over money. "His [Frost's] imaginative play is engaged in as something more than sheer play," Lentricchia argues. "Paradoxically", he continues, "the 'play' of imagination is embedded, in this poem, in a context of 'work,' [...]" (40).

"The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows," asserts the poem's speaker (13). "The fact" in this case represents the actual, physical involvement of a person with his or her work. As we dream of labor and the wealth it can supply, we must first recognize that the fact that work must be done is the greatest reward. Frost's "Mowing" seems to, in a most primitive state, reflect the aim of recent wilderness experience programs to show that hard work and imagination can be intertwined to provide a fun, rewarding, and an overall growing experience.

Frost's attention to the imagination extends beyond overcoming economic fragmentation. Although we may use our imagination to view work as more self-fulfilling and enjoyable, people in rural areas can use their imagination to shrink the social gap. Frost does this on two levels: first to use imagination to make wilderness uniquely our own and second to create relationships in otherwise socially defunct areas.

seriousness and play, encounter each other in the realm of Imagination” (2002). Bidney’s article traces scholar Brian Sutton-Smith’s correlation of seriousness and play linked through the imagination. Each poem creates a balance between realities, the actual living environment that he witnesses himself and the fantasy, or ways the imagination helps in overcoming these problems. For Frost, the very basis of human love is an act of the imagination (51).

In several poems, Frost creates a distinct balance between loneliness and misconception of the wilderness and imaginative ways to overcome such social problems. In these poems, Frost is emphasizing our awareness of reality and the ability of our imagination to carry out a therapeutic role.

Social detachment serves as the second piece of the puzzle involving the struggles of rural living. Using some of the same elements that he does to illustrate economic dangers, Frost capitalizes on metaphor, symbol, and word connotations to evoke an explanation for why rural dwellers struggle socially and what can be done to overcome the feelings of detachment.

As suggested by several of Frost’s poems and modern wilderness experience programs, self-discovery is crucial in rectifying social fragmentation. We must make nature exclusively ours and create our own world. One idea that both Frost and the wilderness programs try to dispel is the cold, dark, lonely image of the woods, for what keeps us from having our own experience with nature is the negative image rural locations have received over time.
Consider Frost’s sonnet, “Into My Own,” for example. Frost is fully aware of the negative impact forests have left on people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Frost’s persona wants to escape to the solitary wilderness, but he realizes the negative perception the wilderness portrays. He states,

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
Were not, as ‘twere, the merest mask of gloom,
But stretched away unto the edge of doom. (1-4).

The persona’s wish that the trees did not have such a negative reputation is more involved than the poem initially indicates. The trees serve as a very strong image here. Frank Lentricchia, in his book *Robert Frost: Modern Poetics and the Landscapes of Self*, points out that the trees in this particular poem represent that which is not human (26). They serve as a symbol for the mysteries of nature and in general, the mysteries of the unknown.

Moreover, the trees represent detachment from humanity and community. They seem to be a good distance away, excluded from any familiar area that the persona inhabits. They stretch away “unto the edge of doom,” indicating both that they stretch on for an unreasonable distance and that they reach to a place humans would not want to venture. The edge of doom here signifies both distance and reference to the forest that lies behind it as being a desolate place.

Although the trees are potentially the strongest image in this stanza, Lentricchia is quick to consider Frost’s overall use of metaphor. If the line of trees making up the forest’s edge signifies the beginning of where civilization ends, then the woods as a whole provoke a
much larger metaphor. Not only are the woods an unexplored area to be discovered, they tend to represent the unexplored self. They are, according to Lentricchia, a “metaphor for a journey into interior space, a journey into the dark immensity of the self’s wilderness which will finally stimulate, once again, the need for community” (26). Lentricchia’s idea suggests that when one explores one’s inner self, much like a dark forest, one will eventually come to realize the need for a social atmosphere.

In “Into My Own,” Lentricchia argues, “those dark trees’ represent for the self seeking permanent exit from community a ‘vastness’ which swallows up the self and thereby swallows up as well the pain of our separateness and self-consciousness (89). Lentricchia’s main point here is that the trees that are situated in the poem are not really a patch of woods inviting the speaker into the wilderness but rather they are metaphorical to the lost part of the self. “The dark wood is situated in a psychological no-man’s-land,” he concludes (89).

We must, however, ask ourselves if this is entirely true. Could Frost’s message be about the psychological self? That lost part of ourselves that we try to find, with some trepidation? As much as Lentricchia’s idea of the psychological no-man’s-land makes sense in terms of “Into My Own,” it seems as if the wilderness holds much more positive influence over the psyche than Lentricchia is allowing.

Although the poem recognizes the detachment that the wilderness seems to promise, the poem serves as reassurance. The persona finds no reason at all to turn back to civilization and finds no reason why people should not join him on his journey. The persona ends his account dramatically saying, “They would not find me changed from him they knew-- / Only more sure of all I thought was true” (13-14). The speaker who everyone knows will not be a
different person upon returning from his journey through the woods. He will, in fact, be more aware of himself and others, as indicated by the last line of the poem. Wilderness does not work to change a person but rather to provide confidence and reassurance of an individual’s vision of him or herself.

Imagination also plays a role in the persona’s experience in “Waiting.” If not enough that the wilderness serves as some kind of psychological interpretation for our own inner fears, than we can be reminded that we are never alone in the wilderness. Frost’s poem, “Waiting” makes a point to remind us of how crowded nature really is:

What things for dream there are when spectre-like,
Moving among tall haycocks lightly piled,
I enter alone upon the stubble field,
From which the laborers voices late have died,
And in the antiphony of afterglow
And rising full moon, sit me down
Upon the full moon’s side of the first haycock
And lose myself amid so many alike. (1-8)

The first stanza of the poem sets up a lonely picture when the narrator, almost as if a ghost or phantom, enters the field long after the laborers have departed for the day. The use of the word “died” here implies loneliness and works well with the ghost image. Other key words that imply loneliness include “spectre-like” or being like a ghost, “stubble field,” implying something not fully grown or incomplete or perhaps already harvested, and “voices have died” which implies no one is there.

Despite the connotations of these words, we are provided many details which allow us to view a scene that, rather than lonely, is quite crowded. In the very opening line, the
persona states “What things for dreams there are when spectre-like, / Moving among tall
haycocks lightly piled, / I enter alone upon the stubble field […]” (1-3). The persona
courages the readers to dream and use the imagination, particularly when no one is around.
The crowded natural environment is suggested by the word “antiphony” and the phrase
“amid so many alike”. Antiphony refers to the alternation of two groups or singers, allowing
us to imagine more than one entity.

The setting of the poem makes it all the more metaphoric. It is set at night, a time
when things may be most lonely. But while dreaming of daylight, “I dream upon the
opposing lights of the hour, / Preventing shadow until the moon prevail […] (9-10), he also
recognizes the many items that will keep him company, namely the “night-hawks peopling
heaven,” “the bat’s mute antics,” who locates the persona’s secret place.

Despite the fact that each scene seems to be lonely and deserted, the speaker in each
poem has done something that many people fail to do: make nature our own creation. When
the personas use their respective imaginations, they envision a world where machinery
whisper the secrets of labor, the answers to the mysteries of the self are revealed, and where
stars, hawks, and bats join us in our daydreams.
Creating Relationships: Imagination and Companionship

Concerns about rural living extend beyond economic hardships and misunderstanding of our work. Using our imagination to appreciate our work and make nature exclusively our own is just one step that Frost and WEPs advocate to cure the difficulties of rural living. The second problem with living in undeveloped areas is lack of social bonding. Many people feel secluded from cities and from civilization in general which has led to depression and, in some cases, suicide.

Like the wilderness experience programs, Frost promotes working together and that, in many ways, our work in nature is shared by one another whether we are present or not. Frost illustrates that our active imagination brings people together, both literally and figuratively, in the wilderness.

Although the first several lines of “The Mountain” support the idea that human beings have little access to nature, there is a glaring difference. Frost develops a relationship between two men, the speaker, who is traveling through the area, and a laborer who works at the base of the mountain. The laborer seems to have the same attitude toward labor and nature that Frost and WEPs are targeting to abolish, but the difference here is that the laborer has an active imagination that allows him to bond with the traveler.

When the speaker asks the laboring man about the village, he replies:

‘There is no village—only scattered farms.
We were but sixty voters last election.
We can’t in nature grow to many more:
That thing takes all the room!’ […] (25-28).

The reply of the laborer illustrates a major concern on the behalf of the rural dwellers: nature is in the way. The laborer states that in nature, towns cannot develop because nature seems to take up all the room. Because of this, towns remain small, “we were but sixty voters last election,” and lead people to be sectioned off from civilization by nature, which like the mountain in this case, acts as a wall.

While the speaker is very interested in exploring nature, the laborer seemingly has no motivation to do so at all. The only person who can have access to nature is the person who takes an interest in finding out more about it. The speaker is interested in climbing the mountain to see what view exists on the top. When the speaker asks the laborer if he had climbed the mountain, the man replies, “It doesn’t seem so much to climb a mountain/ You’ve worked around the foot of all your life” (88-89). The laborer has no interest in finding out more about the mountain and follows with the remark, “Twouldn’t seem real to climb for climbing it” (94). The man seems to be discouraged by climbing a mountain for the sake of fun. There must be a reason to climb it, and according to the man, others who have engaged in logging only got “some way up.”

This fact that most laborers have only been able to get part of the way up the mountain is symbolic because the mountain is a metaphor for the appreciation of nature. Those who want to see it and be a part of it often will be able to take in its awesome view. The speaker speculates about the view from the top of the mountain, “There ought to be a view around the world/ From such a mountain—if it isn’t wooded/ Clear to the top […] (58-
The loggers can’t reach the top of the mountain, and thus are left midst the dense forest unable to appreciate the view of nature. In addition, the laborer seems to be more interested in the spring that is at the top rather than the view, “As to that [the view] I can’t say. But there’s the spring, / Right on the summit, almost like a fountain. / That ought to be worth seeing.” (66-69).

The persona has an inkling of imagination by dreaming about the view from the top of the mountain, but the laborer illustrates a much more active imagination by suggesting the presence of a brook at the top without ever having been up there.

Lentricchia argues that the brook is a controlling symbol in the poem. On the surface, the description of the river illustrates a sense of destruction.

The river at the time was fallen away,
And made a widespread brawl on cobblestones;
But the signs showed what it had done in spring:
Good grassland gullied out, and in the grass
Ridges of sand, and driftwood stripped of bark. (10-14).

The mountain is real and ominous to the farmer because it prevents him from gaining access to the top and from being able to develop the town. The river, though destructive in the farmer’s description, is not directly destructive to the farmer; therefore, he allows it to exist in his imagination (he really has no factual support for the existence of the river since he has never been up the mountain to see for himself) (46). This imaginative issue rubs off on the traveler. “Unlike the dangerous river, the brook does not change nature. The brook is gentle and lends itself to the manipulations of imaginative consciousness (47).
But what would interest you about the brook,
It’s always cold in summer, warm in winter.
One of the great sights going is to see
It steam in winter like an ox’s breath,
Until the bushes all along its banks
Are an inch-deep with the frosty spines and bristles—
You know the kind. Then let the sun shine on it! (51-57).

The farmer, seemingly imbedded in work with little want to see the view from the
mountain, does have a release in nature after all. He sees nature on his own terms, and it
seems to work, as he is fairly excited to tell the visitor about the brook at the top of the
mountain. This action also points to Frost’s initial efforts to get people to accept nature on
their own terms by making it exclusively theirs.

Frank Lentricchia writes,

Though representative of the anti-aesthetic, labor is not representative of disvalue in
this poem [“The Mountain”], because only within certain carefully prescribed limits,
defined by labor, is the self released into the aesthetic state where it may experience
the healing powers of an imaginative freedom that lifts us briefly out of what Wallace
Stevens aptly called the ‘malady of the quotidian,’ the dull, ritualized rhythms of our
everyday lives (48).

Lentricchia points to labor as something other than the disvalue of aesthetics because
the farmer allows himself to imagine the river and connect with nature (whereas the
characters in “Out, Out—“ and “After Apple Picking” have very little imagination at all).
The farmer is aware that there is more to this mountain other than the base that he is
cultivating. Therefore, the “dull, ritualized rhythms of our everyday lives,” and those of the
farmer’s, are quenched by the farmer’s eagerness to share his story of the river with the
traveler.
The interest of the speaker does not seem to help in unraveling the mystery of nature, however. Does anyone really have access to nature? It seems that no one in the poem has access to the mountain, just a vision of it from a distance. Although the speaker wants to know more, he never gets any answers. Anyone who journeys up the mountain only sees part of what is there. The speaker’s “soujourn” with nature that he describes at the beginning seems to be nothing more than a dream.

The dream state is just the point that Frost is trying to make. The laborer’s dream makes his work less monotonous, and the dream has led to curiosity on the part of the speaker, thus creating a bond between the two through the imagination of what lies at the top of the mountain. Whether the view or the brook is existent at the top of the mountain seems to be irrelevant.

Many might agree that man has limited access to nature, but wilderness experience programs would suggest using the mountain to find out the answers to our curiosities instead of reaping profits from labor. What makes these programs worthwhile and useful tools in curbing the detrimental effects of social fragmentation is their longevity. Team building activities emphasize the need to communicate and help other people thus creating social skills.

Longevity plays a role in Frost’s “Mending Wall.” Nature serves as the recurring element that keeps bringing the two neighbors together. Each year both men mend the wall from a year of nature’s wear and tear, and each spring, without fail, nature requires the two to return to fix the wall.
Although Frost’s wall serves to keep two people apart, he uses it metaphorically to illustrate the diversity of people’s ideas and the ability to co-exist with these differences. The only items they are walling out are the trees, and the speaker indicates that trees can co-exist.

Although the speaker is the one who questions the necessity of the wall, he is the one who initiates the wall’s mending each spring. This mending of the wall brings the two neighbors together through their work. Even though they are separated, they share a common bond through the labor of fixing the wall. Lynen points to the wall as representing all kinds of man-made barriers. “The two views,” he notes, “[…] represent general attitudes towards life—the one, a surrender to the natural forces which draw human beings together, the other, the conservatism which persists in keeping up the distinctions separating them” (29).

Lynen points to the concept of fraternity, or brotherhood, in the poem by saying,

Fraternity is another word that keeps us together. That necessity to have our own field for it in a country of our own obtains, too, in the regions of a country, the parts of a country. My part of the country, my northern part of the country, and this southern part of the country, have their own ways, only slightly different. The fraternity is closer, and we're drawn together, we aspire toward each other, but there is the separateness (29).

Here again, both neighbors create their own distinct relationship with nature. Each man has his own view of what the environment should consist of (pine trees vs. apple trees), but each man equally is drawn to one another for the sake of keeping the barrier between them in tact.

Perhaps one of the strongest illustrations of social togetherness via the imagination occurs in Frost’s “The Tuft of Flowers.” Frost points out that this poem and “Mending Wall” have similar themes. In “The Tuft of Flowers” a man is led to a patch of flowers that has not
been cut down by a mower because of some pleasure the individual receives from the flowers. When the speaker, who is seemingly lonely upon entering the field, looks for the mower he can’t find him.

I went to turn the grass once after one
Who mowed it in the dew before the sun.

The dew was gone that made his blade so keen
Before I came to view the levelled scene.

I looked for him behind an isle of trees;
I listened for his whetstone on the breeze.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,
And I must be, as he had been, --alone, […] (1-8).

Frost makes a point early on to have the speaker aware that he is alone in the field. The speaker, however, is not alarmed at that realization. He understands that the mower was also alone while cutting the field. Once the speaker realizes that he is alone he says, “‘As all must be,’ I said within my heart, / Whether they work together or apart’” (9-10).

Frost carefully uses an element of nature to both lead the speaker to the remaining flowers and spark his imagination. The speaker no longer feels lonely. He feels the love the mower had in the flowers that he also loves.

The mower in the dew had loved them thus,
By leaving them to flourish, not for us,

Nor yet to draw one thought of ours to him,
But from sheer morning gladness at the brim. (27-30).
This brings the two men together, and the speaker no longer feels like he is working alone. Robert Frost’s “The Tuft of Flowers” illustrates how loneliness is overcome through labor and man’s relationship to land. The flowers move the speaker and it is as if some kind of transference of love has united the mower and the speaker. The speaker is no longer lonely. In fact, it makes him feel like he is working alongside the mower even though he’s not there.

The butterfly and I had lit upon,  
Nevertheless, 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; 

But glad with him, I worked as with his aid,  
And weary, sought at noon with him the shade; 

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

‘Men work together,’ I told him from the heart,  
‘Whether they work together or apart.’ (31-42).

The butterfly that grabs the speaker’s attention seems to be as much in search of something as the speaker. The butterfly, too, seems lonely while looking for a sweet flower that’s been cut away. The tuft of flowers that still stands unites the butterfly and the speaker as well as the speaker and the mower, thus serving as the centerpiece of the poem.

The aims and goals of WEPs, focusing on team building, trusting others, and appreciating work and the wilderness is displayed metaphorically in Frost’s poetry. Although WEPs encourage the use of the imagination to solve a problem or build a team with
others, Frost’s portrayal of the imagination allows people to challenge their own creative side, building relationships where one may never have known they existed.
Robert Frost’s poetry, though dark and pessimistic at times, clearly represents his view of nature as a healer of economic and social fragmentation, much like the recent wilderness therapy theories.

Part of Frost’s image as a dark romantic stems from the criticism he has received over the years. Many of his poems illustrate nature’s dark side and its negative impact on human beings; however, this view is part of Frost’s intended purpose. To view his work critically and analytically, both casual readers and critics need to consider that what Frost is doing is incorporating realism into his work.

By considering Frost’s realistic images of nature, readers may delve deeper into his poetry’s meaning. Frost is doing more than denouncing nature as an evil entity. His goal is to demonstrate how people set themselves up for hardships experienced in the wilderness by allowing nature to overtake them. Two such hardships, which are the most widely addressed in this study, are economic and social fragmentation. Frost’s poetry suggests that people experiencing financial setbacks and social frustration are often victims of their own misdoings.

While human beings hold the power to develop a negative relationship with nature, they also have the power to create an amicable partnership with the natural world. This is where Frost’s poetry and wilderness therapy theory come together. The goal of wilderness
therapy theory, as illustrated through wilderness experience programs such as Boy Scouts of America and Outward Bound Programs, is to influence young adults or at-risk adolescents to view nature positively. Such programs emphasize teaching individuals to use nature in a constructive way. For example, the aim of these programs is to show people how to use nature for relaxation, team-building, creating social ties, establishing trust among peers, and, most importantly, learning basic wilderness survival skills to heighten an individual’s confidence.

Both Frost’s poetry and wilderness programs promote using nature for more than economic profit. Frost suggests understanding and appreciating the work that is required of an individual. “It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,” states the persona in “Mowing” who, alone in a field, contemplates the work ahead of him (13). The “it” here is the accomplishment of the work itself, which, in this case, is completed by hard work rather than dreaming of the rewards.

In addition to understanding that work in itself is a gift, Frost urges readers to go beyond creating a relationship with nature by encouraging them to create bonds with others. Creating this bond is just what the persona in “The Tuft of Flowers” does when he says, “‘Men work together,’ I told him from the heart, / ‘Whether they work together or apart.’” (41-42). Although the men working in the same field do not know each other, the persona feels a kinship with the other man by realizing they both share the same work.

Frost’s link to wilderness therapy programs is even more relevant in “Mending Wall” when the persona says, “Oh, just another kind of out-door game, / One on a side. It comes to little more” (21-22). The theme of loneliness and isolation in the poem due to two men being
separated from each other by a wall suddenly turns into a playful game where the two count on each other to meet once a year to mend the broken barrier.

Despite the rewards that can come from hard work, it is important to realize that being in nature amounts to much more. The self-fulfillment that comes with doing honest work is enough to rectify the feelings of economic and social fragmentation. Knowing how to use nature and respond to it using one’s own will, resourcefulness, and ingenuity will lead us to realize that “The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows” (13).
Bibliography


