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A Man for Our Times?

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By George W. Dawson

Mr. Dawson is the President and Chief Executive Officer of Centra Health

A Man for the Times?

He was named for a notable southern Civil War general. (And for the benefit of some in this audience, I will say that this is the only reference to the Civil War in this paper.) He was born in San Francisco in 1874 and spent his early formative years in the raucous California city that was, at the time, a thriving boom town driven by silver mining, immigration, and speculation. Truly embracing the "wild west," his father was a gun-toting, hard-drinking, newspaper man and frustrated minor political character who suffered and died from tuberculosis leaving his wife, a mother of two, a widow destitute when our subject was eleven. From his father he took a passion for excellence, and from his failure, a hard lesson about the uncertainty of life.

From his mother he took a different view. A disciple of the Christian religious mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg, the religious views she strongly held over the objections of her husband provoked a life-long internal debate our subject had with himself about his view of God. She was a homeschooler and as such, was essential to his early intellectual development, reading to and with him as he dropped out of elementary school in the third grade.

Nevertheless, his commanding knowledge of the Greek and Latin classics, as well as English literature, served him well throughout his life. He did attend high school, and while there he gained an interest in botany and the emerging evolutionary science of Darwin -- also a lifelong influence.

In fact, he might serve as the poster child for the value of a well-rounded liberal arts education, except for the fact that he dropped out of two colleges and never earning a degree. This did not prevent him from serving on the faculties of some of the most prestigious colleges and universities of this country – or from receiving more than 20 honorary degrees.

He was a financial failure for the first 40 years of his life, unable to hold a steady job during his early years and struggling to make ends meet to support his wife and family. In fact, this widely accepted icon of Americana might never have achieved success had he not uprooted his family to pursue his avocation on Great Britain's soil. Only on his return did he achieve success. He lived through turbulent economic times, including the early period of national growth and development, the lead up to WWI, the Great Depression, and the post-war period. He carried the marks of his early financial uncertainty with him until his death.

Mental illness and depression ran in his family. His sister and several of his children were deeply affected by mental illness throughout their lives, including asylum admissions and suicide. And he was deeply affected by dark periods. He and his wife were often separated by a wall of silence and distance for which he held her responsible even up to and after her death, according to some biographers. (Taylor and Winnick). But in his time, he had the celebrity status of the biggest Hollywood actor, athlete or rock star you can name of today. And he had an ego to match. In fact, throughout his life his

continual quest and need for public admiration and recognition seemed to drive much that he did and how he did it. He continued to look for validation in public places until his death – the four Pulitzers he received not being sufficient to fill this need.

He worked back-to-back on behalf of two U.S. presidents – one Republican and one Democrat. Despite the fact that some of his closest friends were blacklisted by the McCarthy Commission, he was chosen by the U.S. State Department to represent the United States on a cultural mission to the USSR, during which visit he chose himself to discuss the U.S./Soviet relationships with then Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

Many today think of him as the simple New England farmer poet: Robert Frost. This populist view is not all that surprising, for much of his life Mr. Frost cultivated this image. But it is not a true representation of this very complex author, just as his best known poems like *Mending Wall* and *The Road Not Taken* fail to adequately represent his complex body of work.

Robert Frost was profoundly affected by women in his life. In this paper I hope to examine his relationships with three of these, and to look at how they were reflected in his poetry. In doing so, I hope to begin to remind the SPHEX members of the complexity and depth of the man whose poetry I have long admired. My apologies and pleas for mercy are offered to those many SPHEX members whose credentials far outweigh those of this self-confessed literary neophyte. I can only throw myself on the

mercy of the court and ask that you educate me and others during our question and comment period. Along the way perhaps we shall touch on the question posed in my title -- was Mr. Frost "A Man for the Times?"

Belle

Not surprisingly, the first influential woman in Robert Frost's life was his mother, Isabelle Moodie Frost of Edinburgh, Scotland, by way of Lewistown, Pennsylvania. Her father died at sea when she was eight and thus she was sent to the U.S. by her mother when she was 11. This was not an unusual practice for the times. She met William Prescott Frost Jr., after his graduation from Harvard while both were teaching at the Lewistown Academy. They were married a few months later and moved to San Francisco to begin his journalistic career. Robert was the couple's first child, born in a small apartment on Washington Street – one of a number of second-rate rentals they would occupy over the next decade. Family legend has it that Will Frost warned the doctor attending the birth that he would shoot him if anything went wrong.

For Will and Belle, it was a difficult relationship from the early days. Will Frost was drawn to the excitement of San Francisco. "There was gold dust in his eyes, you might say," Frost later remarked (Parini, pg. 7). She, with her mystic religious beliefs and more reserved nature, and Will with his wild free spirit and somewhat outlandish style, were an odd couple. Will enjoyed early success as a newspaper man, eventually becoming city editor of the *Daily Evening Post*, until succumbing to the dual vices of whiskey and politics. But his mother's spiritual and mystic beliefs made strong impressions on the

young Frost. Decades later Rabbi Victor Reichert, a good friend and confidant of Frost's during his later life, stated "Frost liked to play down his religious sense of things, but it was there and he always said he learned about those things from his mother who could see right through the material world as if it didn't exist" (Parini, pg. 9). Frost later described his formal religious progression as: "Presbyterian, Unitarian, Swedenborgian, Nothing." (S.L., pg. 226)

In addition to religion, Belle Frost was the primary educational influence in Frost's early life. After her father's death in 1885, she took the family back east to Lawrence, Massachusetts, 25 miles north of Boston. There was the home of William Frost, Sr., Robert's grandfather. With help from them and the benefit of a teaching position in nearby Salem, she managed to barely make ends meet. As a teacher she struggled, but by several reports, she doted on her children reading poetry and classics to them at a young age. During his early teenage years, Frost got his first exposure to farm life on the Amherst, New Hampshire farm of his Aunt Sarah and Uncle Ben Messer. In later years, he described the bucolic countryside, stone walls, horses and cows, and learning to swing on birches for the first time which was to inspire the following:

Birches

WHEN I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay.
Ice-storms do that. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves

As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells,
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
(Now am I free to be poetical?)
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.
One by one he subdued his father's trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.
I'd like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
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.

(Lathem, p. 121)

Or just perhaps this poem resides at another level - oh say, describing the reaction of Bernie Madoff to the current state he finds himself in – or to the state of the economy at large.

In 1888 Frost and his sister were enrolled in the high school in Lawrence where his father had attended. By this time it was clear that he was a gifted student. He had passed the entrance exam with flying colors and was enrolled in the Latin track, including heavy doses of Greek and Roman history in the classical languages. Here he also became associated with a fellow student, Carl Burell, who had a significant early influence both in writing and in the study of botany. (Throughout his life his knowledge of the local plants and birds would be evident as was his habit of taking long "botany" walks at every opportunity). At this point in his youth, Frost also came in contact with the writings of Richard A. Proctor (*Our Place Among Infinities, 1876)* and the question of the evolution of the universe and related issues of cosmology and theology. He was to debate questions of theology and evolution with his mother at the time and to ponder the questions throughout his life. Interestingly by his later years he had adopted a deep faith as noted by his Rabbi, Victor Reichert, his close friend in later life who noting his Mother's example, " He lived, more than anyone I ever knew, in the spirit. The outside was bluff, the inside was deep and true. He was always in search of God – or some

quality that could be identified with that word." (Parini pg 442). His poem, "*Design*", was written originally in 1912 and then revised and published later.

Design

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth --
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.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
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.

(Lathem, pg. 302)

A couple other thoughts occur about Frost's early childhood and adolescence. He grew up in a very poor household with economic uncertainty always before them. His mother was not a successful teacher, his parent's marriage was not a positive role model, and the family grew up beholding to Frost's grandparents. Later in life, his family relationships would always be difficult, and for the most part, his children remained dependent on their father. Keep these influences in mind as we explore his poetry and life.

Elinor

While at Lawrence High School, Frost met the second woman I would like to highlight this evening. In fact, she shared valedictorian honors with him. Her name was Elinor White, and after a protracted and difficult courtship, she was to become his wife for 43

years giving birth to six children. Like most couples of that tenure, there was depth and complexity to their relationship. Clearly Robert Frost was not an easy spouse – nor was Elinor. From the start, their courtship was stressful to Robert. After an idyllic summer in 1892 (that produced a poem titled "*The Subverted Flower*" which was so hot Elinor would not permit him to publish it in her lifetime) they had a halting courtship. Frost passionately pursued her while she completed four years and a degree at St. Lawrence University. Meanwhile he was dropping out of Dartmouth after completing less than a semester. He was pursing, and she, reluctant and reserved. At one point in despair, and perhaps a bit of romantic excess, he traveled to Virginia intent on losing himself in the Dismal Swamp. After his first acceptance by a serious publication – *My Butterfly* – and despite some serious reservations by both her and her father (who refused to attend the ceremony), Robert and Elinor married on December 19, 1895.

Together they gave birth to six children:

- Elliott, born Sept 25, 1896, before the two years the Frosts spent at Harvard and before economic difficulties and his wife's difficult pregnancy with her second child caused him to withdraw. Elliott died at age four from typhoid fever in a very difficult event which was to be reflected in such poems as *Design* and the classic narrative *Home Burial* (although Frost always downplayed any literal historical precedent for his poems).
- Leslie, born April 28, 1899, shortly after Frost left Harvard and just before he began a nine-year stint at farming which was to serve as his introduction to the agrarian life. While never able to claim great success as a farmer, this period was

to be where he first began to accomplish success as a writer. By 1911 he had written drafts of some of his best poems – many of which showed up in his first two published volumes – *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, as well as some material that showed up in publication as late as 1942. Interestingly, the rural New Hampshire interlude might not have happened had it not been for Elinor's quiet appeal to Robert's grandfather for help in purchasing the farm in Derry. It was with an additional inheritance from his grandfather that this farmer poet made ends meet during the years in Derry.

- Carol, born May22, 1902
- Irma, born June 27, 1903
- Marjorie, born Mar 29, 1905
- Elinor Betina, born June 18, 1907, and died shortly after birth.

There has been a good deal written about Frost's shortcomings as a farmer. My reading supports some of this, especially his penchant for sleeping late and staying up late writing poetry. He was not especially diligent or talented in farming, but also clearly fed his family well and related well to his rural neighbors. Most importantly, all would agree that it was during his Derry period that Frost developed his true voice as a poet becoming intimately familiar with the speech and the context of the New England small holder. It is also clear that Frost suffered from the periodic illnesses and dark periods that had plagued him throughout his life thus far. The loss of his mother did nothing to brighten his spirits. His early biographer, Lawrance Thompson, made much of this darker side in his biography, and other biographers, such as Jay Parini, believe that this aspect is

overstated by Thompson. But there is little doubt that Frost had a strong tendency toward depression, a shortness with people when it suited him, and an ego that required constant attention and reinforcement.

Desert Places

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it--it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

(Lathem, pg. 296)

By 1906, Frost apparently realized that farming was not going to allow him to support his family. He took a part-time teaching position at the Pinkerton Academy near Derry. Starting with a part-time appointment that soon became full time, Frost taught English and tutored in Latin, history and geometry. He was a very popular, although unconventional, figure – admired by some and strongly disliked by several other faculty with whom he clashed. But Frost gained some important skills and insights while at Pinkerton, and later after following his principal to Plymouth Normal School for Women. First he was learning to be a writer by diligently applying himself to his craft. He was

reading widely and furthering his knowledge base. He continued to absorb the dialogue and the cadence and styles of his New England farming neighbors, and he gained confidence in speaking before groups. This skill was to serve him throughout his life. He gained confidence also as a poet as works were accepted for publication in journals.

By 1912 when he was fast approaching 40, Frost confronted a pivotal question in his life: would he spend it teaching, farming, or writing poetry? Encouraged by the publication of some of his works, he and Elinor decided to make a serious commitment to his writing. They packed up their four living children and a few of their household goods, accumulated drafts from some 20 years of writing, and made the move that was to change Frost's life. They set sail for Great Britain -- a period that would last from late 1912 to early 1915. Taking a lease on a cottage in Buckinghamshire some 20 miles north of London, Frost settled into a daily routine of working at his writing and exploring the countryside on long walks. His push was to further develop his collected works and to pull the best into a coherent collection that would form his first published book, *A Boy's Will*. In this effort, he was encouraged and actively assisted by Elinor who worked as assistant, advisor, and promoter. When it was completed, they set out to find a publisher calling on the House of David Nutt, a small but respected publisher of poetry. Much to their surprise they were not only accepted, but given a generous contract with an option for the rights to his next four books. Apparently the head of the House, Mrs. M. L. Nutt liked what she saw in his work.

It was during this period that Frost and Elinor were befriended by the likes of Ezra Pound and Edward Thomas, William Butler Yeats, T. E. Hulme and others that would be critical to his later success.

Buoyed by the acceptance of his first book for publication, Frost with support and assistance from Elinor, entered the most productive period of his life when during 1913 he cranked out most of the material for his second book, *North of Boston*, as well as pieces that would be used in many of his subsequent publications. He developed his confidence as a poet and the "sense of sound" that characterizes the best of his work. He developed his loose iambic pentameter style that paid more attention to the vernacular of speech than to the rigid form. In a letter he wrote shortly thereafter, he described it this way, "A sentence is a sound in itself on which the other sounds called words may be strung. You may string together words without a sentence-sound to sting them on just as you may tie clothes together by the sleeves and stretch them without a clothes line between two trees, but – it is bad for the clothes." (S.L, pg. 110).

When *North of Boston* was accepted for a limited run by a U.S. publisher, the Frosts knew it was time to go home. At last, at age 39 his public period as an author was beginning.

Over the many years until her death, he and Elinor made an effective team. Among the events that shaped their lives together were the following: 1) The Great War and the

death of Edward Thomas, 2) multiple college and university appointments "in residence" beginning with Amherst, 3) numerous homes and relocations of family, 4) publication of four more books of poetry, 5) three Pulitzers, 6) the death of a daughter, 5) the beginning of his long association with the Bread Loaf School of English and Writers' Conference in association with Middlebury College.

For her part she managed his extensive travel schedule and speaking engagements and ran a somewhat haphazard household. Their family relations with children and each other were strained at times. The death of a daughter (Marjorie) and health problems added to the strain. Frost's period of depression and the lifelong grudge he carried about the circumstances of his courtship and marriage with Elinor complicated things. She suffered from a nervous condition for much of her life as well, and also from periods of poor health. Clearly she and the rest of the family played second fiddle to Frost's career, temperament and ego. Elinor's defense was to punish Frost with silence.

Elinor suffered a heart attack and died after a number of additional attacks two days later on March 20, 1938, in their second floor apartment in Gainesville, Florida. Circumstances at her death were not ideal. According to Parini, Frost was kept from her by her doctor who feared he would upset her in his obviously agitated state. Thompson writes that he carried resentment with him, "that, in the final hours of her life, Elinor had not once asked to see him, that she had deprived him of the chance to ask her forgiveness for all the pain and suffering" he had caused her (T&W, pg. 3). His guilt was compounded when his daughter, Leslie, blamed Frost for her mother's death by not being

more considerate of her health and facility. They had been married for 43 years and Frost found himself alone and in deep depression.

Early biographers were quick to label Frost as a poor father and husband. He was not an easy man, but he clearly had a long, faithful and productive marriage with Elinor. They were together almost constantly and she played important roles as critic, manager, confidant and partner. Together they raised the children, and both were with their youngsters on a daily basis – much more in their lives than many parents of the times. Each book he published in her life was dedicated to her.

When I hear his classic narrative poem, *The Death of the Hired Man*, I cannot help but wonder if it relates to his life. Frost would strongly object to my literal point of view, but I think about his search for a home, his possible search for the relationship described between Warren and Mary, his questions about the real value of education, and his sense of pride.

The Death of the Hired Man

MARY sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. "Silas is back."
She pushed him outward with her through the door
And shut it after her. "Be kind," she said.
She took the market things from Warren's arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

"When was I ever anything but kind to him?
But I'll not have the fellow back," he said.
"I told him so last haying, didn't I?

'If he left then,' I said, 'that ended it.'
What good is he? Who else will harbour him
At his age for the little he can do?
What help he is there's no depending on.
Off he goes always when I need him most.
'He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
So he won't have to beg and be beholden.'
'All right,' I say, 'I can't afford to pay
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.'
'Someone else can.' 'Then someone else will have to.'
I shouldn't mind his bettering himself
If that was what it was. You can be certain,
When he begins like that, there's someone at him
Trying to coax him off with pocket-money,—
In haying time, when any help is scarce.
In winter he comes back to us. I'm done."

"Sh! not so loud: he'll hear you," Mary said.

"I want him to: he'll have to soon or late."

"He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove.
When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
A miserable sight, and frightening, too—
You needn't smile—I didn't recognise him—
I wasn't looking for him—and he's changed.
Wait till you see."

"Where did you say he'd been?"

"He didn't say. I dragged him to the house,
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke.
I tried to make him talk about his travels.
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off."

"What did he say? Did he say anything?"

"But little."

"Anything? Mary, confess
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me."

"Warren!"

"But did he? I just want to know."

"Of course he did. What would you have him say?
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man
Some humble way to save his self-respect.
He added, if you really care to know,
He meant to clear the upper pasture, too.
That sounds like something you have heard before?
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look
Two or three times—he made me feel so queer—
To see if he was talking in his sleep.
He ran on Harold Wilson—you remember—
The boy you had in haying four years since.
He's finished school, and teaching in his college.
Silas declares you'll have to get him back.
He says they two will make a team for work:
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!
The way he mixed that in with other things.
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft
On education—you know how they fought
All through July under the blazing sun,
Silas up on the cart to build the load,
Harold along beside to pitch it on."

"Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot."

"Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream.
You wouldn't think they would. How some things linger!
Harold's young college boy's assurance piqued him.
After so many years he still keeps finding
Good arguments he sees he might have used.
I sympathise. I know just how it feels
To think of the right thing to say too late.
Harold's associated in his mind with Latin.
He asked me what I thought of Harold's saying
He studied Latin like the violin
Because he liked it—that an argument!
He said he couldn't make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong—
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay——"

"I know, that's Silas' one accomplishment.

He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds' nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He's trying to lift, straining to lift himself."

"He thinks if he could teach him that, he'd be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books.
Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk,
And nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different."

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw
And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
As if she played unheard the tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.
"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time."

"Home," he mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he's nothing to us, any more
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

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

"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
"Silas has better claim on us you think
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles

As the road winds would bring him to his door.
Silas has walked that far no doubt to-day.
Why didn't he go there? His brother's rich,
A somebody—director in the bank."

"He never told us that."

"We know it though."

"I think his brother ought to help, of course.
I'll see to that if there is need. He ought of right
To take him in, and might be willing to—
He may be better than appearances.
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think
If he'd had any pride in claiming kin
Or anything he looked for from his brother,
He'd keep so still about him all this time?"

"I wonder what's between them."

"I can tell you.
Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anyone. He won't be made ashamed
To please his brother, worthless though he is."

"I can't think Si ever hurt anyone."

"No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there to-night.
You'll be surprised at him—how much he's broken.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it."

"I'd not be in a hurry to say that."

"I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself.
But, Warren, please remember how it is:
He's come to help you ditch the meadow.
He has a plan. You mustn't laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud

Will hit or miss the moon."

It hit the moon.
Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.

Warren returned—too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

"Warren," she questioned.

"Dead," was all he answered.

(Lathem, pg. 34)

Kay

Robert Frost was pulled from a season of deep despair by Kay and Ted Morrison. Kay was a former student who befriended him in his grief. Her husband, Ted, was involved with Bread Loaf. Multiple biographers mention Frost's passion for Kay and his proposal that she leave her husband and marry him. It is not clear whether his relationship with the much younger woman reached the physical stage. During that 1938 summer while the Morrisons and Frost were together with many others at Bread Loaf, he clearly gave offense in his childish actions. The more generous biographers excuse this as a state of grieving and instability.

Regardless, Ted and Kate Morrison clearly moved past the initial attempt at romance. For the next 25 years Robert Frost would rely on Kate as his secretary, manager, muse, closest reader, and best friend and adviser. He relied on her to help him in health and illness, in housing and travel, in correspondence and advice. Moreover for some years,

he shared his property, The Homer Noble Farm, near Ripon with them -- she and her husband living in one house and he in the cabin up the lane.

Time does not permit me to do this 25-year period and their relationship justice. I will conclude by first noting that Kate was part of Frost's life through good and bad – the suicide of his son, the admission of his daughter to an asylum for the mentally ill, his fourth Pulitzer, and his involvement in the Eisenhower administration, the Kennedy inauguration, and the trip to Russia. She was with him at his death in Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston on January 28, 1963.

The best way I know to mark their complex relationship is by presenting the *Silken Tent.* This sonnet was written in one sentence. There is good evidence it was originally written to Elinor and then, as was often Frost's custom, put away and later revised and presented to Kate by Frost. Perhaps this says it better than I can.

The Silken Tent

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when the sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease,
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

(Lathem, pg. 331)

Closing, in the words of his excellent and objective biographer, Jay Parini:

"The contradictions of his life and work remain stunning. He was a loner who liked company; a poet of isolation who sought a mass audience; a rebel who sought to fit in. Although a family man to the core, he frequently felt alienated from his wife and children and withdrew into reveries. While preferring to stay at home, he traveled more than any poet of his generation to give lectures and readings, even though he remained terrified of public speaking to the end. He was a Democrat who hated Franklin Roosevelt, a poet of labor who could not support the New Deal. He believed passionately in war as a rational and justifiable response to certain international crises, yet he could not stir in himself much interest in the Second World War. He was an ardent Eisenhower supporter who campaigned for John Kennedy with enthusiasm in 1960 – and who publicly identified himself with Kennedy by reading at his inauguration. He was a fierce anticommunist who embraced Nikita Khrushchev personally, calling him "a great man." As Katherine Kearns has said, Frost's "near-phobic distaste for systems… exceeds even the most potent American individualism." In a sense, Frost made himself a representative American by amplifying his individuality, by finding a voice for Everyman in the persona of the Lone Striker. By making himself eccentric, he found the center." (Parini, pgs. 446-447)

So you tell me… Was he a Man For The Times?

By George Dawson
SPHEX Club
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Sources

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