

ROBERT FROST'S DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE: THE TWO SIDES OF THE NARRATIVE IN "A SERVANT TO SERVANTS"

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Abstract

The structuralist-inspired development of narrative theories in France from the late 1960s onward has spawned a whole host of opportunities to explore the way narratives function. This is precisely what Gerald Prince undertakes in his *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative*, in which he delineates the mutual relationship between the narrator and the narratee as two of the most important constituents in any narrative. This framework is useful for the study of Robert Frost's narrative poetry, which comprised a large part of his oeuvre at a time when the form had become marginalized due to conforming to the poetic conventions that modernism tended to undermine. This research explores Frost's modernist take on this conventional genre through a narratological study of his poem "A Servant to Servants".

Key words

Dramatic monologue; modernist poetry; narratee; narrator; Robert Frost

1. Introduction: Robert Frost and the narrative form

Robert Frost (1874–1963) occupies a place among the twentieth-century American poets that is as ambivalent as everything that the then-growing trend of modernism stood for. His works are simultaneously widely read, praised, and contested. As a poet who, in his well-known essay "The Figure a Poem Makes" (1939), had declared that poems should be made to "sound as different as possible from each other," his poetry could be categorized in a wide range of different forms and genres. One of the most frequent poetic forms in his diverse oeuvre was the narrative poem. In his essay "Frost and the Meditative Lyric" (2001), Blanford Parker briefly discusses Robert Frost's contribution to the narrative form by ranking him among such masters of the prose narrative as William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, and Mary Flannery O'Connor (180), declaring that his "prosaic pieces" — a term he often associates with his narrative poems — must be compared to the works of those authors because of his "psychological and social insights, his mastery of place, and his recreation

of local and realistic speech" (180). It is important to note, however, that while the narrative form comprises a large part of Frost's myriad of poems, it has not received the critical attention that it deserves, especially considering Frost's innovative contributions to this long-standing form. The aim of this research, thus, is to offer a close study of one of Frost's less-explored narrative poems, "A Servant to Servants" (1939), through a narratological lens in an attempt to explore some of Frost's contributions to the narrative in its poetic form, particularly through his employment of the narrator and the narratee as the two necessary elements constituting a narrative.

In his essay "Frost and the Questions of Pastoral" (2001), which delineates the relationship between Frost's poetry and the idea of the pastoral, Robert Faggen, quoting Frost himself, highlights the exaltation of the rustic over the urban in Frost's poetry (49). Rather than simply evoking the pastoral in the traditional sense of presenting an idyllic landscape filled with dialogues between shepherds, and emphasizing contemplation over work, Frost's poetry is more ambivalent in a modern sense. It features barren landscapes, tough farmers, and "contemplation always [appearing] threatened and mingled with hard labor" (2001: 50). The same ambivalence is reflected in his relationship with the reader, in which, while demanding a certain degree of sophistication and complexity, courtesy of his wide-ranging learning, he also evokes a certain simplicity and clarity (Faggen 2001: 52-54). Frost, in fact, was praised for this tendency at the early stages of his career as it contrasted refreshingly with the works of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (Durham 1969: 57). However, this very simplicity also prompted a substantial number of critics to view his poetry as "limited," lacking "the high seriousness of a great poet," and "far removed from contemporary thought", as it mostly promoted "nineteenth-century, New England traditionalism" (Durham 1969: 58-59).

In an article published in *New England Review and Bread Loaf Quarterly*, Vereen Bell (1985) takes note of this criticism toward Frost's narrative poetry, opening his essay with the observation that the issue many take with these poems is that they are "boring" (70). However, drawing upon Frost's own critical statements, Bell categorizes him as a "minimalist" and identifies the root of such criticism to lie in "simply taking Frost at his word" (70). He deems one of the most significant themes in Frost's poetry to be "the simple, unexotic fact of the passing of time and our involvement in it" (70). In much of Frost's poetry, the passage of time is a leitmotif – a denominator that renders him a distinctly narrative poet, and that stems from his philosophy of stoically accepting time as natural. Another aspect of Frost's poetry that highlights this theme is the fact that his narrators are beings that exist in time: human beings (Bell 1985: 80).

Even those critics who have acclaimed Frost as a poet, have often tended to neglect his narrative poems, which comprise a significant part of his oeuvre. In *Robert Frost in Context* (2014), Dana Gioia notes that while Frost's popularity is not contested, since he is one of the few poets in the American context who is still widely read by people from different walks of life, with the arrival of modernism, the very idea of popularity was starting to be regarded with some suspicion. According to Robert Kern, "the conventional wisdom about the relation of Robert Frost to modernism, when it was considered at all, was that for the most

part there was none” (1988: 1). It should be noted that due to this modernist skepticism toward popular works, those who attempted to defend Frost’s work did so by situating his poetry in the context of modernism (Gioia 2014: 73). Frost’s proponents either underlined the complexity of his lyric poetry or saw the strength of his narrative poems in the “‘ultimate radicalism’ and ‘terrifying’ view of cosmic emptiness,” which were the themes with which modernism engaged. One instance of the employment of such themes is the way Frost manages to explore the long-standing traditions of the pastoral through a modern lens by encompassing more modern concerns such as the interplay of gender, class, play, and work (Faggen 2001: 50). John Xiros Cooper undertakes a thorough study of Frost’s relationship with the modernist movement of his time and refers to an essay written by Frost, in which his conceptualization of poetry reveal similarities to what T. S. Eliot conceived of as “dissociation of sensibility”: Cooper argues that “Frost’s sense that ‘a poem is the emotion of having a thought’ reaffirms the Modernist notion of the well-wrought poem as the embodiment of a unified sensibility, whereby feeling and thought are as one rather than at odds” (2014: 85). Robert Kern, in his essay “Frost and Modernism,” points out that although Frost’s differences with the likes of Eliot and Pound is undeniable, it does not disqualify him “as an authentically modern writer” (1988: 2). He further elaborates that

he is a different kind of modernist, or that he represents a different degree of modernism—that he is a writer, for example, for whom the pressure or ‘chaos’ of history is less a determinant of poetic form than a provocation to reproduce it in its more or less established modes. ‘When in doubt,’ Frost says, ‘there is always form for us to go on with,’ as though form for him is always something stable and unproblematic in its relation to what lies outside it, a stay against doubt—whereas doubt for other writers may well include doubts about form itself. (1988: 2)

As pointed out above, the form of Frost’s poetry is an important aspect of his work that cannot be disregarded. However, the form of his narrative poetry remained underexplored since the narrative was marginalized as a form with the advent of modernism (Gioia 2014: 73–74).

In exploring Frost’s adoption of the narrative form, Dana Gioia (2014) classifies his narrative poetry into four categories: ballads, linear narratives, dramatic monologues, and dramatic narratives (75). A considerable portion of his study of Frost’s narrative poems covers this fourth category, which he views as the largest and most innovative (78), and the previous three categories are only briefly analyzed. The third category, in particular, “the dramatic monologue” is only discussed in two paragraphs. Gioia justifies the scant attention given to the third category by explaining that although many of Frost’s works are referred to as dramatic monologues, this is merely a misnomer. In reality, he goes on to argue, this is a form that Frost often avoided since it did not suit his interests. The dramatic monologue – a form best embodied in the works of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning – constitutes the “uninterrupted speech of a character in the

presence of a listener,” especially a listener whose presence accounts for a dramatic moment that affects the speaker’s speech and actions. Frost, however, preferred to include what the listener had to say (Gioia 2014: 77). Frost’s avoidance of the form is also evident as there are only three poems in his first five books that can be categorized as dramatic monologues: “A Servant to Servants” in *North of Boston* (1914), and “The Pauper Witch of Grafton” and “Wild Grapes” in *New Hampshire* (1923). Although Gioia’s assertion about Frost’s limited number of dramatic monologues sounds justified, the lack of critical engagement with these poems as an important part of Frost’s literary oeuvre is unwarranted, since the role of the listener in them is as tangible and significant as in the poems in which the listener has a more active presence. Furthermore, although such dramatic monologues focus on the feelings and thoughts of the narrator, they involve the unraveling of a narrative as well, which renders a narratological study warranted.

In light of the aforementioned critical lacuna, this study attempts to contribute to this underexplored category of Frost’s poetry by approaching Frost’s “A Servant to Servants” through a narratological lens. As Monika Fludernik points out in “Histories of Narrative Theory (II): From Structuralism to the Present” (2005), narratological approaches to literature often “highlight how the text manages to have certain effects and explain why these occur (39). Since the aim of this research is to explore the manner in which the narrator and the narratee contribute to the conveyance of the narrative to the reader, a narratological approach is an apt framework for this study. Fludernik considers Gerald Prince as one of the most influential scholars in the classical phase of narratology, since he compiled the first dictionary of narratological terms. Furthermore, he was the scholar who introduced the narratee as a significant constituent of a narrative, which brought about “a spate of communication-oriented models” (Fludernik 2005: 41). The significance of Prince’s contribution to narrative studies is further revealed when one considers how his ideas influenced later narratological discourse and gained relevance years after their conception. Following the conception of narrative as communication, narrative theory expanded its realm into encompassing several other “narrative instances besides the author and the narrator,” overlapping with the work of reader-oriented scholars such as Wayne C. Booth and Wolfgang Iser (Fludernik 2005: 42–43). H. Porter Abbott, who explores the current form and influence of narrative in his essay “The Future of All Narrative Futures” (2005) even adopts Prince’s definition of narrative as “recounting” to point out how the domain of narrative has nowadays expanded to include several forms that were not traditionally considered narratives: “the strong point here is that the term ‘narrative’ as it is generally used, even by those of quite opposed views about the limits of narrative, includes the idea that the story is already there to be rendered” (536).

In his book *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (1982), Prince undertakes a detailed categorization of different elements of a narrative regardless of its genre and sheds light on the peculiarities of the narrator and the narratee as two of the most important constituents of any narrative. Prince places these two elements under the category of what he terms “signs of the narrating,” which he claims “represent the narrating activity, its origin and its destination”

(7). He justifies the study of the signs of narrating by declaring that:

once we have determined that a particular narrative exhibits a certain kind of narrator, adopts a certain point of view or favors a certain order of presentation, we can begin to wonder why it does. In other words, we can ask not only which narrating possibilities a given text has exploited but also why it has exploited them ... such features as degree of reliability, variations in distance, modes of discourse, or narrative speed affect our interpretation of and response to a narrative and illuminate its functioning. (60)

In specifying the significance of a narrator as an element of narrating, Prince posits that there is “at least one narrator in any narrative and this narrator may or may not be explicitly designated by an ‘I’” (8), who may – in which case he will count it as a narrator-character – or may not be a participant in the events of the story that is being recounted (15). He further elaborates that, aside from the explicit “I” that designates a first-person narrator, there are several signs within a given narrative that specify the narrator’s “spatio-temporal situation,” such as words like “yesterday” and “here,” when they are not clearly designated to a certain character (9). In addition, any sign in a text that adds to the narrator’s “persona, his attitude, his knowledge of worlds other than that of the narrated, or his interpretation of the events recounted and evaluation of their importance” all point to the existence of a narrator and contribute to his characterization (10).

In scrutinizing a narrator’s characterization, there are several elements that can be taken into consideration, such as their reliability, self-consciousness, distance, and intrusiveness. These elements are of paramount importance because they not only characterize the narrator, but also directly influence the reader’s interpretation of the events that are being recounted, since objectivity is compromised (Prince 1982: 11–13). The narrator is an element that has been the topic of much discussion in the narratological framework of literary theory. However, Prince’s model of the narrative also highlights the significance of the narratee, which, in his *A Dictionary of Narratology* (1989), he defines as “the one who is narrated to as inscribed in the text,” and distinguishes it from the real reader on the grounds of its status as a “purely textual construct” (57).

Similar to the narrator, the narratee may be a character in the story or not, and may be explicitly designated by a “you” or simply be implied (Prince 1982: 20). In this model, the narrative functions mutually and revolves around the relationship constructed between the narrator and the narratee. The narrator’s understanding of his narratee affects his own narration, and any change in narration, in turn, compromises the narratee’s understanding of the events that are being recounted. This model of narrative sheds more light on the activities that the real reader of a text engages in during the process of understanding a narrative as it reflects a higher degree of ambiguity and offers more alternatives to the straightforward “meaning” of a given narrative.

2. A narrator to narratees: The reciprocal aspect of Frost's dramatic monologue

Frost's "A Servant to Servants" is characterized as a monologue, but it is a monologue that is acutely aware of the presence of its receiver. The poem's main theme is difficult to specify since the narrator tends to veer from one subject to another, but, as will be addressed later, a close inspection of the poem's form is more illuminating than its content. The poem begins by addressing the narratees, and the narrator is grateful for their decision to stay on the narrator's land: "I didn't make you know how glad I was / To have you come and camp here on our land" (Frost 1939: 82). Frost is quite particular in his diction and the manner in which it reflects the characterization of the narrator from the very outset. In her first few sentences, the narrator exhibits an ambivalence in her speech, in that she expresses her gratitude while at the same time making excuses for not showing it, so her actions diverge from her thoughts and emotions. She blames her lack of cordiality on being occupied with a "houseful of hungry men to feed" as a servant (82), and reiterates that in spite of her apparent unfriendliness, she does want to become familiar with the narratees, but leaves her rambling unfinished: "I promised myself to get down some day / And see the way you lived, but I don't know!" (82)

The disparity between the woman's actions and her thoughts are, therefore, showcased expertly right from the beginning, and the ambivalence with which she talks continues to be a major element throughout the poem. The poem is comprised of 177 lines of the garrulous servant's ramblings about her life while interjections indicating her uncertainty and disorientation are interspersed throughout, undermining the overall unity and certainty of the poem.

The next few lines of the poem interrupt the narrative flow by delving deeper into the narrator's emotions as she attempts to communicate them, and fails. In line 7, she explicitly declares that she cannot express her feelings anymore, nor does she seem to "want" to lift her hand either in anger or for protection any longer. After describing such conflicting emotions, she asks her listeners: "Did ever you feel so?" (82). This question directed at the listeners is in line with the way Prince's model of the narrative as an act of recounting necessitates the presence of a receiver. The listeners remain silent, passively lending an ear to the narrator's chatter throughout the poem, but their silent passivity does not undermine the fact of their presence there, which is clearly signaled from the beginning of the poem.

It is also important to note that, in keeping with Prince's model, here the narratee is a "textual construct" operating within the world of the poem itself, rather than merely being a stand-in for the real reader of the poem. Since the presence of the narratees is explicitly acknowledged, their role is rendered significant, especially considering the fact that the poem is categorized as a "dramatic monologue" by Gioia – a form which primarily attempts to provide psychological insight into the speaker's temperament and character (Abrams and Harpham 2015: 96). The dramatic monologue as a narrative form most often necessitates the reader's efforts to piece together and construct an understanding of the

speaker from his casual remarks or digressions. As a result, any element within the poem that influences the narrating activity of the speaker is of significance.

In this poem, the presence of the narratees works as a sort of enabler – a fact that prompts the speaker to continue with her directionless chatter despite the fact that she both admits and shows she no longer knows how to express her thoughts and emotions. In line 10 of the poem, when the speaker interrupts her speech to ask the narratees whether they have “ever [felt] so” (82), she seems to be looking for a kind of confirmation on the validity of her feelings. The question, which serves as a moment of connection with her listeners, allows her to express herself more intimately later, declaring that she hopes her listeners never feel the confusion that she is experiencing, especially since the confusion she is dealing with has led her to a state of disorientation where she does not “even know for sure / Whether I am glad, sorry, or anything” (82).

James R. Vitelli has commented on Frost’s ability to make several voices heard in his dramatic poems and points out the manner in which he manages to push the voice of the poet himself to the background, reducing it “to a mere stage-manager’s voice, setting a scene, giving minimal directions” (1974: 365). He quotes Frost himself in accounting for the sense of neutrality that the poet manages to achieve in composing his poems: “I make it a rule not to take any ‘character’s’ side in anything I write” (qtd. in Vitelli 1974: 365). This neutrality, Vitelli argues, contributes to the ambiguity that operates in many of Frost’s poems. He then goes on to ask:

How do we know, then, what the poem means, where the poet stands on the dramatic issues in these poems? The answer lies in listening nevertheless for the poet’s voice, for it is there, whoever does the talking. He controls the accents, determines the pace, and in those minimal, directive touches, provides the significant, symbolic details around which the characters’ voice resound. (366)

Vitelli declares that the poet’s voice is to be found in the “tones and the overtones” of a poem, and makes an interesting case for “A Servant to Servants” by focusing on what the poet means in “the nervous silence of the couple the speaker is addressing” (366). The “psychotic speaker” of the poem essentially has not much to say to the narratees in spite of her attempt to do exactly that in 177 lines, “retreating instead into the white silences of her madness” (Vitelli 1974: 366). Vitelli also highlights the seventh line of the poem, “I can’t express my feelings any more,” and posits that despite explicitly declaring her inability to do so, the speaker actually does manage to express herself quite well, but for the reader to be able to access this expression, they have to look for what Vitelli calls “the screen of style,” not the content itself (1974: 366).

Therefore, the content of the narrative in Frost’s poem is arguably not as significant as the manner in which it is narrated – a tendency that is one of the hallmarks of the modernist movement in literature. As Gioia (2014) points out, the fact that the narrative was a rather marginalized form in the literary atmosphere of the twentieth-century due to the emergence of modernism makes Frost’s con-

tribution to the form all the more significant. Frost's experimentation with form by turning a poem of "what" into a poem of "how" shapes the traditional narrative poem into a more modernist form, infusing it with a sense of subjectivity and ambiguity that Tamar Katz identifies to be the main goal of modernist experimentation in narrative form (1995: 232). This modernist spin on the narrative is evident throughout "A Servant to Servant," as the reader is constantly stopped and pushed back and forth in the poem through several formalistic choices. One such formalistic choice is the sudden use of ellipsis in line 6, "With a houseful of hungry men to feed / I guess you'd find...." as the woman fails to finish her sentence, which provides a tangible example of her meandering train of thought leading nowhere, in a sense prefiguring the whole poem's directionless narrative.

3. Poetic form as the portrait of the narrator: Fragmentation and the instance of the psychotic speaker

The narrative speed is another important element that Frost manipulates in his experimentation with form. It is a term Prince uses in *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (1982) to illustrate the way "the events and situations making up the world of the narrated may be presented more or less quickly" in any given narrative (54). As the narrator of "A Servant to Servants" speaks about her experiences, Frost scatters many interjections throughout her speech to slow down the unraveling of her narrative, diverting the reader's attention away from the content of her speech. One such interjection, for instance, appears as early as line 9 in parenthesis: "Than I can raise my voice or want to lift / My hand (oh, I can lift it when I have to)" (Frost 1939: 82). In fact, the woman speaking throughout the poem appears to try her best to express as much as she can by giving as much information to the narratees about how she feels and what she thinks, perhaps in an attempt to make sense and connect with her listeners more easily. Ironically, however, her desperation for a semblance of sense through divulging more information about herself in the form of interjections and interruptions ends up fragmenting and destabilizing the narrative even more.

In her ramblings to the narratees, who are visiting her land after hearing about it in a book (Frost 1939: 83), the narrator starts talking about the place and her husband, Len. She informs the narratees that they have "a good piece of shore" that they sometimes rent, but cannot yet be considered a business because not enough people visit: "It would be different if more people came, / For then there would be business" (83). She contrasts her husband's attitude with her own, declaring that "He looks on the bright side of everything, / Including me. He thinks I'll be all right / With doctoring" (83). The ambivalence of Len "thinking" she will be all right and the mention of "doctoring" further solidifies the implication that there must be something wrong with her, as the form of the poem subtly signals. As Frost points out in his 1946 essay, "The Constant Symbol," what makes a poem fresh "belongs absolutely to its not having been thought out and then set to verse as the verse in turn might be set to music. A poem is the emotion of having a thought while the reader waits a little anxiously for the success of dawn"

(qtd. in Cooper 2014: 86). It is the form of the poem that perfectly encapsulates the “emotion of having a thought” throughout these 177 lines and conveys the narrator’s state of mind. In lines 47–52, where the narrator is declaring what she really wants – perhaps even needs – to “be all right,” another instance of her fragmentary train of thought is manifested through the form of the poem:

... But it’s not medicine—
Lowe is the only doctor’s dared to say so—
It’s rest I want—there, I have said it out—
From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them—from doing
Things over and over that just won’t stay done.

The first three line-endings in the block quoted above make use of dashes, which serve the double purpose of indicating both pause and bracketing the interjections, supplying information that the narrator deems significant enough to stop her story to include, which can be read as an attempt to bond more with her narratees. The pauses slow the reader down when reading the poem out loud, and the interjections slow down the presentation of the narrative itself, bringing it to a halt. The fragmented product of the narrator’s mind serves as the perfect portrait of the narrator herself, who, at some point throughout her ramblings, explicitly admits that she is not of sound mind:

I have my fancies: it runs in the family.
My father’s brother wasn’t right. They kept him
Locked up for years back there at the old farm.
I’ve been away once—yes, I’ve been away.
The State Asylum.

This admission clearly justifies the form that the poem has taken as well as the ever-present conflict in the woman’s thoughts and feelings, along with her struggles with self-expression. Again, the narratees become the narrator’s confidants as she divulges how she feels about the asylum, in a few lines that serve to perfectly capture the way the mentally ill are socially ostracized for fear of how they might affect other people’s lives. The narrator admits that the asylum was a place she would not send “anyone of mine there” (84), and believes that those who do not send their people there keep their people at home, which seems to her to be “more human” (84). In a series of powerful lines from 99 to 101, in very simple words and style, Frost lays bare the experience of the mentally disturbed in a world that fails to provide them with a suitable place, fearing that they might “darken [...] other people’s lives.” While the asylum becomes the home for such people, the real problem is never remedied, since they are isolated even further in such condition: “Worse than no good to them, and they no good / To you in your condition” (85). Frost’s deceptively simple diction highlights a complex issue regarding the plight of the mentally ill: in a world where, through the march of modernity and capitalism, individuals are becoming exceedingly isolated and

commodified, those who do not seem to serve any pragmatic purposes for the system have no place in it. Accordingly, they are excluded and put in institutions such as asylums that operate under the guise of benevolence and are advertised as being created in the first place to help such underprivileged individuals. However, according to the narrator, such institutions prove to be “no good” and only serve to perpetuate the isolation that the mentally ill experience. This critical look at the predicament of the mentally ill is merely one of the multiple themes that permeate the narrator’s speech. The narrator’s explicit admission of belonging to the ostracized group she describes, and her capitalization on the power of personal experience and observation further legitimizes her discourse vis-à-vis the mentally ill.

Furthermore, her experience as a mentally ill individual in such a society further justifies the ambiguity and hesitation with which Frost characterizes her speech. Right after her admission, at the beginning of the poem, that she does not even know how she feels (82), one can detect the ambiguity with which she speaks reflected in her choice of words: “There’s nothing but a voice-like left inside / That seems to tell me how I ought to feel, / And would feel if I wasn’t all gone wrong” (82). She describes what shapes her feelings and thoughts to be not a clear, firm voice, but a “voice-like” that only “seems” to dictate to her how she “ought to feel” (emphasis added). There is a sense of brokenness being implied, perhaps a foreshadowing of her admission later that she was put into an asylum. She describes herself to be “all gone wrong” – a reflection of the dehumanizing view of the society toward her because of her condition. The hesitation is further amplified by the existence of a “voice-like” that has to dictate to her how she should feel, as if because of being “wrong,” she cannot know it herself. This view certainly shapes her own idea of herself too, as such expressions of uncertainty as “I don’t know,” “I can’t express my feelings,” and “I don’t even know for sure” are often repeated throughout her speech.

The narrator is further characterized through the narratees who are listening to her drawn-out speech. Toward the end of the poem, after the narrator digresses from one subject to another, attempting to express her Sisyphus-like situation, trapped in a world in which she has to do “Things over and over that just won’t stay done” (83), and rattles on about herself without communicating much to her listeners, she addresses the narratees once again by saying, “I almost think if I could do like you, / Drop everything and live out on the ground” (86). In these lines, through connecting herself with her audience, she draws a kind of comparison between herself and her listeners, considering the freedom of her listeners in being able to “Drop everything and live out on the ground” to be an ideal that she cannot attain. This is in line with her attitude toward the narratees’ decision to visit her land after reading about it in a book: “In a book about ferns? Listen to that! / You let things more like feathers regulate / Your going and coming” (83). The narrator’s conflicted feelings return as she compares her own situation with the narratees’, admitting that she might not like living “on the ground,” that she should be “glad of a good roof overhead,” as opposed to the tents that the narratees might have snatched from them (87). However, the admission that she has lain awake at night thinking about the narratees, “More than you have

yourself,” and her association of the word “courage” with the narratees’ action in the following line where she confesses that she does not have the “courage for a risk like that” (87) suggests a wistfulness in her tone implying that she certainly wants that freedom, but her need for security far surpasses that: “But the thing of it is, I need to *be kept*” (87). The existence of the narratees as the silent but tangibly present listeners, thus, serves two important purposes. It both acts as an enabler prompting the narrator to speak further in her quest to make sense, and holds up a mirror to the narrator’s character by contrasting a sense of freedom with her bound sense of security.

In short, Frost manages to reveal to the reader much more about the narrator than the narrator herself is capable of expressing, and to do so, he uses the form of the poem to fill in the silences where words fail the narrator. Just as James Vitelli has aptly said of Frost in his essay, through a close consideration of the way Frost manages his material, “we may find that his poems no less than those of Eliot’s have pushed modern poetry into new and dramatic explorations of the self – where modern poetry has achieved one of its chief distinctions” (1974: 367). The form of the poem, then, becomes a portrait of the self in Frost’s dramatic monologue, and every formalistic choice made by the poet reflects a different dimension to the self that is being constructed throughout the poem. Such an attempt to explore the self through the form embodies Frost’s modern take on this traditional form – a contribution that has restored the narrative form’s status in the context of modernist poetry in spite of its initial marginalization.

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