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Robert Frost's Ulteriority: Saying One Thing in Terms of Another – The Inexpressible

Nicolette S. Stackhouse
University of Southern Mississippi

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Robert Frost's Ulteriority:
Saying One Thing in Terms of Another – The Inexpressible

by

Nikki Stackhouse

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Approved by

Jonathan Barron, Ph.D., Thesis Adviser
Assistant Professor of English

Luis Iglesias, Ph.D., Interim Chair
Department of English

Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

Abstract

Robert Frost's poetry, which is famously rich in double meaning—saying one thing but meaning something else—is also concerned with pragmatism. Pragmatism implies that there is no one fundamental universal truth. I contend that Robert Frost's poetry says that duplicity of meaning, or ulteriority, is something to be embraced. Frost wants the uncertainty of meaning to be understood by the reader as vital to life and the mind's processes. The simple fact that so many readers search for the hidden meanings in his poetry justly proves this point. As a pragmatist, Frost was aware that the process of getting to a truth was far more important than actually finding it, and more than just standard literary concepts of irony and metaphor lay behind Frost's ulteriority. Instead, his poetry carves a special idea of meaning out of pragmatism. He achieves this through various routes of ulteriority that stem from each reader's individual interpretations. Frost's ulteriority demands that the reader draw connections between the literal and the implied. When viewed through the lens of pragmatism, his poetry proves to be as interested in the literal as in the implicit meanings and topics he engages. In this thesis, then, I examine two poems, "Dust of Snow," and "For Once, Then, Something," both of which use ambiguous language that operates on many different levels. Also, both poems engage the reader asking that each reader discover their own meaning, rather than a hidden "true" one that the poem covers up with irony and metaphor.

Key words: Robert Frost, pragmatism, ulteriority, truth, interpretation, irony, metaphor

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Chapter One – Introduction and Key Terms

Pragmatism, Ulteriority, Metaphor, and Irony

In 1935, during his lecture “What Poetry Thinks,” Robert Frost discussed the importance of ulteriority, stating that “in any idea you have there has to be a duplicity. You have got to say one thing and mean another. This is the art of poetry. I am interested in the little thing you can say that will call up something beyond it – an ulterior meaning” (3). Robert Frost’s ulteriority is his own unique method of employing metaphor and irony in his poetry. In the following chapters, the two significant concepts that I will discuss, within the context of two of Frost’s poems, are ulteriority and pragmatism, and their relationship to each other. Frost’s pragmatic poetry is most often disguised by imagery and language that appear skeptical in tone and connotation on the surface. For example, most associations with the hemlock tree and the crow, both found in “Dust of Snow,” are typically negative. Hemlock poison comes from the hemlock tree, and crows are often regarded as bad omens. On the surface, these negative associations initially give the poem an ominous message. However, if the hemlock tree is merely present as part of the poem’s natural setting, especially since they are typical of cold weather trees, then there are no negative associations to be made. The hemlock tree and crow are only part of a whole. More specifically, these parts are *directions* to a larger, pragmatic idea.

The “Beyond,” Ulteriority, and Pragmatism

In general, though, Frost’s poems do not always have directions to those other ideas. Without these directions, both the reader and the speaker cannot reach their destinations. In 1935, Frost gave a hint as to why he often neglected to provide such directions. He considered individual things to be part of larger wholes. He expected his

readers to understand that too. In 1935, for example, in his lecture “Before the Beginning and After the End of a Poem,” he underlined the limited view of meaning attached to random images themselves when they are not recognized as parts of a whole: “There is something beyond, over and above the poem, and after the poem. Absurdly enough, it seems to me that people talk about that beyondness as if it could be achieved without the poem” (3). With this idea in mind, the reader realizes that a particular hidden meaning is not found in separate images within the poem; instead, the meaning is instead to be found in what I call the “beyondness,” of the whole to which these images, such as a hemlock tree, belong. The idea of a “beyondness” would ask us to believe the possibility that a poem exists before it’s written down – its ideas, its emotions, and all of the interpretations that are extracted by individual readers. What I have been calling “the beyond” or the whole is specifically related to what remains unsaid within a poem. This unsaid “beyond” is where one finds Frost’s realm of ulterior meanings.

In this thesis, I will examine “For Once, Then, Something” and “Dust of Snow,” as strong examples of ulteriority. They both use metaphor to point readers subtly to what I am calling the beyond. As a result, his metaphors reveal his ulteriority. I will introduce the reader to Frost’s ulteriority as he used it in his poetry to explore the beyond as part of human psychology. Tim Kendall describes the way Frost viewed ulteriority in a poem as “one or many meanings” that “exist beyond the ‘particular meaning,’” and compares the way ulteriority functions to that of rhythm “existing beyond, and engaging variously with” the meter of a poem (8). Most would accept the idea that something or someone can have a particular form of rhythm, but it might be uncontained or undefined by any structure. If ulteriority is something that exists outside of the poem, then Kendall’s

comparison is brilliantly accurate. However, according to Kendall, to be ulterior is to be deceptive (4). But rather than a cruel exclusion of others, my interpretation seems to point out the fact that those who want to understand, will. Frost's brand of irony is actually more inclusive of others, because it provides a third alternative: the reader is able to discover his or her own meaning through pragmatism, instead of having to settle for a misleading idea or getting pushed away by generalized ideas that are exclusive to some.

Each reader's ability to recognize a "beyondness" a something more, an added context that is not necessarily the context suggested by conventional literary symbolism such as the conventional association of hemlock trees with death. Instead, the beyondness, the something more is unique to each reader, and is achieved by individual interpretations of the poem's collective imagery, an ability to interpret the larger whole to which the image belongs. In other words, we have not reached a final destination just because a hemlock tree appears in the poem; Frost spoke in favor of "writing a poem that shall have nothing in it, but what is beyond it" (Frost 1)¹. The whole or "beyondness" will change the very meaning of the poem, rather than one specific image. One can see an example of such distinctions in a letter someone wrote to Frost. William Brower wrote a letter to Robert Frost, asking the poet to elaborate on an analysis of the poem titled "The Fear" and there raised the problem of the hemlock tree in "Dust of Snow:"

I recall what you said about people making things equivocal that really were uncomplicated. You gave the example of a person who dug around for an abstruse meaning in "Dust of Snow," who found a definite significance in the hemlock tree. I hope I am not falling into a similar trap. If I am, I know you will set me straight. (1954)

¹ His lecture "Before the Beginning and After the End of a Poem."

Frost follows up his statement with a summary of the nature of poetry as art – “It is what is *beyond* that makes poetry – what is unsaid in any work of art. Its unsaid part is its best part” (Frost 1935). The “unsaid part” is ultimately what the reader is left with when they have read the poem; it is the piece of the poem that leaves the reader with its memory, even if the poem isn’t memorized. The images that stand out easily in a poem are stated images; therefore, they cannot be the “unsaid part.” In both “Dust of Snow” and “For Once, Then, Something,” a look “beyond” the conventional association of a hemlock tree with death and a pool of water that reflects one’s face as a reference to Narcissus lands the reader, as well as the speaker, in fantastic places.

First, I define the term “ulteriority.” Although hardly discussed by many Frost scholars, I believe that ulteriority has a much larger and more significant place in his writing, and that he achieves ulteriority through his use of metaphor. Specifically, ulteriority is the act of expressing that which is inexpressible. This method of ulteriority plants seeds or a “crack” (Ryan 471) in the reader’s mind, exposing more intricate truths to him or her, because the reader must actively engage with the text. Frost wrote that “I wouldn’t have a poem that hadn’t doors. I wouldn’t leave them open though” (Oster 156). If the reader automatically gleans meaning from immediate imagery within the poem, he or she has not even begun to search for the “doors” yet. Ulteriority demands that we work hard. Ulteriority can be described as an emotion that a reader is left with after exploring particular images, such as the hemlock tree, in a poem, and the questions that he or she has, that the poem does not answer after such explorations. In my thesis, I will show that often these images concern the more specific issues about the type of emotion at hand.

David Evans explores how literature and philosophy are intertwined; and discusses the hard truths that philosophers pride themselves for reaching, against the subjective light of literary emotions. He delves into the “Jamesian idea of pragmatism” (62); this theory is concerned with the actions that meaning puts into motion, rather than the meaning itself. The resulting actions are meaningful. Evans astutely summarizes that “what literature exposes is something which certain versions of pragmatism have found it difficult to acknowledge—that language is the source not only of the possibility of communication and community, but their perpetual uncertainty as well” (Evans 62). This suggests that while literature is the epitome of emotional communication, it is also the greatest source of double meaning (duplicity) and confusion. However, this “perpetual uncertainty,” duplicity of meaning, or ulteriority, is something to be embraced.

William James discusses pragmatism in general as “a method [...] to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle” (James 5). In contrast, the presence of a skepticism that undermines all other interpretations implies that the reader and speaker not bother to search for meaning at all. Pragmatism gives the reader the outlook that whether or not meaning has truth is irrelevant; what is important is if the so-called meaning or truths have served useful to the individual. That is, has it served a purpose in the context of his or her life?

Metaphor, Irony, and Skepticism

To better appreciate Frost's ulteriority, it can best be understood as coming out of two different literary terms that each achieve ulteriority as their end: metaphor and irony. Irony is defined by M. H. Abrams as "the root sense of dissembling or hiding what is actually the case; not, however, in order to deceive, but to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects" (91). Metaphor is defined as "a figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable" (OED 2016). Generally, ulteriority is included in the general category of metaphor. I, however, contend that ulteriority should be considered the umbrella term for the pragmatic way that Frost uses both metaphor and irony. There has been much analysis on Frost's use and type of metaphor by many different critics² who point out the clever subtleties and contrasts in the various types of metaphor he uses. Dan Johnson even states that, "Perhaps researchers in artificial intelligence who are teaching computers to reason by analogy should include in their curriculum a course in poetry" (1). To make this point, Johnson cites Frost's essay "Education by Poetry," including a few of the poet's own words: "unless you are at home in the metaphor [...] you are not safe anywhere" (1). To be "at home in the metaphor," the reader must become comfortable with the duplicity of meaning and dig deeper below the surface imagery and metaphor. Cunningham focuses on a theme of human value as opposed to an absence of such value "in a natural world" (264). Frost is famous for saying that "Poetry is simply made of metaphor" (Hass 125). A discussion of ulteriority requires that his use of metaphor be viewed as a set of building blocks in the poem where

² Critics such as Dan Johnson, John Cunningham, Robert Hass, and Amelia Klein.

ulteriority is the main goal. In short, the metaphors are not the message, rather they are designed to point the reader in the specific directions towards which Frost's larger goal of ulteriority or the beyond wants readers to go, should they choose to.

Because most readers find meaning in Frost's use of metaphor alone, they do not take the next step in searching for the larger truth of the inexpressible that ulteriority concerns. Helen Bacon mentions that few critics have discussed or explored the ulteriority in Frost's poetry: "In general, critics have treated it [ulteriority] as a relatively minor aspect of his writing" (75). Bacon also discusses the possibilities of double meanings attributed to the same ideas, but does not discuss this idea as ulteriority. Metaphor and irony work together to achieve ulteriority, but many times, these two elements are regarded separately from ulteriority, and from each other.

As readers find meaning alone in the use of metaphor, this mindset also applies to Frost's use of irony. But it too is just a step along the way to the larger goal of ulteriority or a point to what I call the beyond. For example, the reference to Narcissus in "For Once, Then, Something" ironically points the reader in a completely different direction than that of the actual moral of the Narcissus story. In Frost's poem, Narcissus redeems himself by actually performing a service: he triggers the speaker's and readers' creative cognition deeper within themselves. However, the reader stops analyzing when he or she arrives at the Narcissus reference because he or she expects Narcissus to serve as a metaphor for the speaker's actions and because the discovery of an allusion itself is often regarded as the "secret" of the poem. This is problematic because the conventional associations suggested by Narcissus therefore make ulteriority unreachable. Without

irony, there is no ulteriority, no “beyond.” If metaphor constitutes the separate steps in the journey to ulteriority, then irony is the string that connects them.

Amelia Klein touches on irony in Frost’s poems, including a quote from Robert Hass: “creativity [for Frost] exists as a separate, autonomous activity in which matter serves as evidence and resource” (364). This particular quote sheds some light on Frost’s views of how individuals interact with nature, and helps put the natural setting of “For Once, Then, Something” into context as inspirational material – the conjuration of Narcissus in the water and sky is the speaker’s “matter,” and the natural elements of water and sky serve as metaphor. The speaker’s natural setting in this poem are his creative “evidence and resource” (364), because he is ultimately in control of how he interprets his surroundings. The reader too, then, must use the natural settings of the poems as “evidence and resource” in his or her analytical journey. Rather than isolated pieces in the poem, Frost expands their function into the realm of a pragmatic ulteriority.

“For Once, Then, Something” is one of the best examples of the interplay of metaphor and irony as pieces in a larger picture of ulteriority. Tim Kendall offers a brief analysis of “For Once, Then, Something,” but claims that because the speaker can’t say for sure what the “whiteness” at the bottom of the well was, it must be truth, because he can’t know it for sure (325-27). But Kendall is viewing this uncertainty in the same conventional way that hemlock and crows are viewed; the uncertain nature of the “whiteness” does not automatically constitute truth. This view does not account for the creativity aspect that Frost associates with “matter that serves as evidence and resource” (364), nor does it account for the “beyond” outside of simple metaphor and irony. Kendall’s interpretation is a much too simple conclusion for what I am describing as the

ulteriority complex, which includes both metaphor and irony. Kendall misses irony as a step in Frost's ulteriority because he still only applies metaphor to the "whiteness," and then leaves it as such – as if the "whiteness" is the ultimate message: "it must be truth" (327). Kendall stops at metaphor and irony as a final destination, rather than individual steps in a journey. Another issue is the definition of the "truth" the speaker finds. If the speaker "must" believe that the "whiteness" is truth, then the poem is only contradicting the "something" that our speaker receives "for once." The pure irony lies in the elusive nature of the "whiteness;" the speaker's search for truth and ultimate reconciliation relies on this elusiveness because it is his subjective reality that matters, in opposition to the conceptualization of one universal truth. To settle on an interpretation that establishes the unknown as "truth" the speaker is forced to undermine the very nature of truth itself. The speaker is unable to take advantage of the "evidence and resource" function of the "whiteness." In a society obsessed with the search for truth and topics such as the meaning of life, it is also ironic to have the first two opening lines state that "Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs / Always wrong to the light" (Frost 1-2). Frost crafts and places this irony at the beginning of the poem to introduce a pragmatic and realistic idea that in subjective realities, the "others" have no right to taunt the speaker because it is literally impossible for him to be "wrong" about his own truths which are applicable only to his individual existence. Many times, individualistic truths are found in unexpected places or events because they are *specific* to the individual, and dubbing the "whiteness" as a solid "truth" only because it is part of the unknown takes substance away from the value of uncertainty itself.

In the bigger view of ulteriority, the reader should expect that unanticipated circumstances and binary oppositions can often reveal surprising truths that hold answers to questions, stated and unstated. For instance, it is the speaker's literal physical surroundings and circumstances that begin to shape his inner mental reality, and they contrast with "something more of the depths" (Frost 10). His attention to the real, tangible facets of his life begin pushing him to explore the irony and push past the metaphor, to "discern....beyond the picture / Through the picture" (Frost 8-9). However, Kendall claims that the poem's "literal meaning is flimsy enough" when it comes to the opening lines: "Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs / Always wrong to the light," therefore, Frost signals ulteriority. But simply setting up a statistically unlikely situation does not merely signal ulteriority, and I argue that the "literal meaning" is fundamental to the speaker's processes, and to a pragmatic interpretation of this poem. From these two lines, the reader does not simply begin to assume that "more is at stake" (Kendall 325); instead, both the reader and the speaker are starting from a blank slate, the chance to recreate himself.

Once readers begins to assemble the pieces of metaphor and irony in their exploration of ulteriority, or the "beyond," they can then decide whether or not to interpret the ulterior meanings in skeptic or pragmatic ways. Interestingly enough, it seems that most interpretations that begin to tap the edge of ulteriority default to skeptical, negative readings. Because of the bleak natural imagery found in "Dust of Snow," and the uncertain metamorphosis of the surface of the water in "For Once, Then, Something," readers often decide that implications in both poems are foreboding and

ominous. For example, Judith Oster³ writes that “Dust of Snow” contains “guilt and fear:”

Frost would ‘read’ the crow for its blackness [...], or for its wildness although he may have been less ready to bless God for what was so mixed a blessing to Frost, that wildness at once so inviting and inspiring, yet so threatening. (128-129)

It is easy to see how a reader or critic would apply cynicism to this particular poem; the immediate and sparse imagery include a black crow and a wintery day. But since Frost does not “leave doors open” (Oster 156) we must read beyond these images. Frost’s use of *ulteriority* can be construed as a negative skepticism at some points, but both of these poems are fundamentally pragmatic in nature. By a study of these two poems, I hope to show that pragmatic readings undermine any negative interpretations.

Skepticism supplies an apathetic perspective that we can’t find any truths at all, much less individual truths that serve different practical purposes in different subjective realities, while pragmatism implies that there is no *one* fundamental universal truth. Frost wants the uncertainty of meaning to be understood by the reader as vital to life and the mind’s processes. Kay Ryan uses the term “crack” (471), to describe the beginning of an introspective journey that Frost’s poetry often jumpstarts. Leaving the readers with a “crack” (Ryan 471) that they must begin to follow on their own is much more beneficial than a stated, fundamental, single truth that lies behind that “crack.” As a pragmatist, Frost was aware that the process of getting to a truth was far more important than actually finding it.

So more than just standard literary concepts of irony and metaphor lay behind Frost’s “*ulteriority*.” It is the relationship between metaphor and pragmatism that create

³ In her book: *Towards Robert Frost: The Reader and the Poet*.

the ulteriority, and it is the relationship between metaphor and ulteriority that create the pragmatic readings. For instance, in “For Once, Then, Something,” Frost uses ambiguous language that operates on many different levels to engage the reader in finding their own meaning, rather than simply finding a meaning that he has covered up with irony and metaphor. This poem contains a tension between skepticism and pragmatism, but the skeptics are the “others” (1). A further look tells us what the speaker is being taunted for: “Always wrong to the light, so never seeing / Deeper down in the well.” The speaker is dealing with others taunting him for never coming to a truth although he searches constantly for it at “well-curbs.” The skepticism here lies with “others,” because they taunt the speaker for never finding meaning; they assume that he won’t. This throws skepticism away from our speaker, making a skeptic interpretation of one of Frost’s most ambiguous poems impossible. These lines portray a speaker who is being constantly taunted for searching for meaning, even though he is “Always wrong” (2). While scholars such as Kendall argue that ulteriority lies in the unlikeliness of the situation the poem is set in and that the “literal meaning is flimsy enough” (325), I argue that the ulteriority lies much deeper than the unlikely social situation the reader sees in the first few lines of the poem. Kendall’s recent scholarship is an example of the typical means by which scholars acknowledge Frost’s ulteriority. For the most part, they do not seem to draw connections between the literal and the implied. When viewed through the lens of pragmatism Frost’s poetry proves to be as interested in the literal as in the implicit meanings and topics he engages.

Skepticism implies that there is no meaning, no higher truth, and a person shouldn’t trouble themselves to go about searching for meaning. Skepticism handles

nature as “black and utter chaos” (Klein 364). Instead of that view, however, my reading of ulteriority as the paradoxical expression of the inexpressible, makes Frost a pragmatist, rather than a skeptic. Even in the scenario that a reader chooses to interpret the poem in a skeptical way, the skepticism *still* serves a pragmatic function – it defines a piece of his or her life. In positivity, which is the heart of pragmatism, the skeptical reading makes that person unique. Pragmatism implies that whether or not there is truth, if the “truth” a person believes he has found has the ability to instill meaning in his life, then that is sufficient enough: “James’s argument is that ‘truth is made’” (Evans 62). I find in Frost’s poetry a pragmatic search for meaning, and believe that his use of ulteriority was inspired by a pragmatic world view. Often the search for answers becomes more necessary in his poems than any actual found verity; more often than not, raw truth has little meaning in life – it is what the individual chooses to do with raw truth that has the most impact.

In “Dust of Snow” and “For Once, Then, Something,” Frost’s pragmatic message to readers is achieved through ulteriority, not supplanted by it. I have chosen these two poems because they both demonstrate a mastery of metaphor and irony and they both ultimately rely on ulteriority. In the following two chapters, I will provide an analysis of the two poems, both of which are included in the *New Hampshire* collection.

Chapter Two – “Dust of Snow”

Ulteriority within Metaphor

“Dust of Snow,” one of Frost’s shorter poems, consisting of only eight lines that create one sentence, was first published in *New Hampshire* in 1923. This particular poem is one of the most intriguing examples of word play, pragmatism, and nature poetry in Robert Frost’s poetry. In this chapter I will discuss the many changes in this poem. For example, even the title of the poem went through multiple changes. Frost had originally titled this poem “Favor” in 1920. He then changed it to “Snow Dust” in 1921, and finally switched to “Dust of Snow” in 1923. Before discussing the poem, though, here is the tiny poem itself:

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued. (Frost 1923)

There are references in the poem that sound ominous such as “crow,” “hemlock,” “change of mood,” and “rued” (to regret). Even the presence of snow can give the reader a feeling of a cold, damp barrenness, or despair. Many readers and several scholars have attributed a negative skepticism to the poem’s tone. Scholars, such as Shenandoah, typically “associate hemlock poison with death.” This scholar adds; “it is this recognition of death” that forces the speaker to “seize the day, since he only has so many” (Shenandoah 2013).

Robert Faggen, too, holds that “the words ‘dust,’ ‘hemlock,’ ‘crow,’ and ‘shook down’ all suggest something more ambiguous and possibly ominous” (Faggen 9). But Frost held that “what is really interesting is not the words, but sentences, their behavior, the way they come in, the way they hold themselves. You can’t just take the words and ignore the sentences” (Frost 1940). The lines of the poem are short and dainty. They point to a simplistic atmosphere, reflected as well in the sparse imagery. The lines “come in” as completely natural and they roll off of the tongue, like a little lullaby. The poem is similar in imagery to “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” a poem that has garnered largely suicidal interpretations as well. Montague Cobb mentioned in a letter to Frost: “my interpretation of this poem...has been quite the opposite of a death poem. Rather it seems a call to life” (Cobb 1959). In my discussion, I will show that while there is plenty of death imagery in the poem, the conventional associations of such “death imagery” and other implications that have little to do with death co-exist as two different elements that only sometimes overlap.

As an example of a negative reading, Robert Faggen in his essay titled “Frost and The Questions of Pastoral,” mentions “Dust of Snow” as a “saving revelation” (55) but he also still maintains that “other aspects of the poem remain troubling, especially the associations we have with crow, dust, and hemlock but also the mythic resonance of Satan” (55). I disagree that the poem is either a “saving revelation” or a troublesomely dark nod to imminent death. Faggen, for instance, reads in the poem a saving revelation. But this asks readers to see the speaker admit something new, rather than be reminded of a regretful day (or saved from remembrance, depending on how a reader interprets the word “save”). A “saving revelation” implies that the speaker himself is saved. I see no

such “saving” because, read literally, the poem only states that it is a “part of a day” that is saved. The day, not the speaker is what the poem emphasizes. On the literal level, too, there are also no troubling “aspects” whatsoever because the natural facts of a crow and the hemlock tree have nothing to do with “Satan.” While Faggen does acknowledge that the poem is perhaps a “study in saving the spirit from the excesses of bitterness and regret” (9), he posits that this happens because of “nature’s complexities” (9). However, I disagree because of two important aspects of the poem itself. It is the *simplicity* of a natural reality that catches the speaker’s attention, and is what takes center stage in the particular moment that the speaker shares with the crow. Secondly, “saving the spirit” is much too dramatic in a pragmatic reading, or even a simply positive reading, as this sentiment implies that the speaker was utterly lost in the beginning.

Unlike Faggen, then, instead of reading the poem’s images as metaphors with allusions to evil and salvation, I want to clarify a positivity in “Dust of Snow.” Rather than a poem reflecting a philosophical stance on humanity’s spiritual fate, I read the verb “saved” in this poem as elusive; after all, it can hold several opposing meanings. For instance, Frost may be implying that the dust of snow falling down onto the speaker reminds him or her of a particular point in time. However, “saved” might also mean that the “dust of snow” actually keeps part of the remembrance away from the speaker (literally saves him from his memory). The verb can also mean that the snow brings the speaker hope, in salvaging a memory that the speaker felt was terrible. In that case, he realizes that maybe the “day I had rued” wasn’t really a terrible memory. These are just a few of the possible interpretations of the placement of “saved.” The most popular

interpretation is that the speaker is given a vision, or saved from suicidal thoughts. These two ideas, however, contradict the pragmatic reading of the poem, which I hope to show.

To be more precise let me examine the word “save” even more carefully. For Frost’s love of ulteriority and word play, he could not have picked a more versatile verb than “saved” to place at the end of the poem. There are multiple possible readings for “saved:” - “to keep safe or rescue,” “prevent death,” “to save from damnation” (religion), “to keep someone’s good health” (God Save the Queen), and lastly, “to keep and store up [something] for future use” (OED 2016). These definitions comprise just a small handful of contexts associated with this particular verb. If we insert each of these meanings into the poem, we come up with multiple perspectives that each work within a pragmatic message. The crow “saves” a part of a day the speaker regrets, and it is up to the reader to decide in what manner the “part of a day” is saved. Frost leaves a specific set of options, all of which work within the larger philosophy of pragmatism. There is even flexibility in to whom or what the favor in the poem is bestowed upon. The most common interpretation of “saved” is to keep something safe, or to rescue it. If the crow is saving a memory that the speaker previously regarded very negatively then the crow is doing the *memory* a favor, not the speaker. In the prevention of death, we find a similar situation: the crow has prevented the death of this “part of a day,” by revitalizing the memory in a non-regrettable way for the speaker.

Thirdly, “to save someone from damnation” can function in the poem as a religious “saving revelation” for the speaker (Faggen 55), but if this is the case, then the poem most certainly cannot be interpreted as troubling; rather it becomes comforting. In this instance, the crow, hemlock tree, snow, and regret function as reminders of what the

speaker is saved from: “Satan,” and “troublesome” elements (Faggen 55). So even if these terms contribute to an ominous atmosphere, the word “saved” takes the reader beyond surface-level interpretations that might suggest negativity and death. On the other hand, the reader has to be careful to avoid getting caught in the false web of positivity. Just because the poem may not be about death does not mean it would have us believe that the speaker’s soul or eternal existence is saved. It is only “part of a day” that is saved from damnation, not the speaker himself, which contradicts any appearance of Faggen’s “saving revelation” (55), or any other spiritually transcendent interpretation. “Saved” also functions on a literal level with the speaker’s memory, in which the crow has possibly “stored up” his memory of that particular day “for future use” (OED 2016). According to this definition, “Use” implies a reason for the existence of that memory, however regrettable, which still gives the memory that the speaker rues a pragmatic function. No matter how negative an event, if the crow has saved it for the speaker’s later use, then not all is lost.

Because “saved” can also mean to avoid “the need to use up or to spend” (OED 2016), the reader can also interpret the crow’s function as a preventative force against the expense of precious time spent brooding on what is only a memory. The crow serves a pragmatic function by forcing the speaker to acknowledge the futility of regret over the past. In a reverse sense, “saved” can also mean to *preserve* the memory from the speaker’s regret, avoiding any more harm that might affect “part of a day” (8). “Saved” is also defined as avoiding “involving someone in useless or pointless effort” - “save yourself the trouble of” (OED 2016). To save also means “to avoid, lessen, or guard against” (OED 2016). In both of these cases, the speaker is saved from the bleakness of

his memory by the crow, snow, and hemlock. They remind him that there are other entities or items in the world (such as themselves) that carry negative resonances besides his own issues and thoughts. In this case, his regretful day is also no longer one to be “rued” (Frost 8). In the face of the plain fact that regret usually involves a stressed and sometimes selfish, single-minded approach, the speaker is reminded by the crow’s presence that he is not the only one that exists, which contributes to yet another comforting feeling that speaker is not alone in his sorrow. The ulteriority that Frost ties into the word “saved,” with its many interpretations, provides a pragmatic solution for both the speaker and the reader. As a mirror of the speaker, the reader has the ability to interpret the crow, hemlock, and snow however he or she wants. Frost’s choice of the ambiguous “saved,” rather than more affirmative terms such as keep, rescue, store, or prevent, provides more choices for a pragmatic reading for any reader in his or her separate realities.

Because of the myriad of ways the reader can interpret “save,” Frost, I believe, is writing a pragmatic poem. By pragmatic, I mean that the speaker makes a practical decision on the spur of the moment. This reading implies that the speaker had a certain mind-set at the beginning of the poem, at the beginning of his day, but that is just what Sheldon Liebman discusses as a “precondition;” he asserts that moments of peace are not “just an escape from confusion and disappointment but a consequence of them. And it is not merely given, but suffered for” (432). The “confusion and disappointment” in life makes these moments worth the trouble. The crow and hemlock with their negative connotations provide a peaceful moment of escape for the speaker – his practical decision is to notice the trivial things around him instead of remaining so focused on the past.

Faggen's position regarding "nature's complexities" (9) as the catalyst for the speaker's abandonment of regret is difficult to maintain because of the stress on the word "way" in the first two lines: "The way a crow / Shook down on me" (Frost 1-2). This particular stress on the manner a crow shook snow down onto the speaker emphasizes a great amount of attention bestowed onto such a tiny little animal in the midst of an utterly trivial, otherwise completely inconsequential act. The speaker has suddenly noticed the tiny things around him in contrast to the emotional complexity of regret –something that the turmoil, unpredictability, and grand scale of the natural world would only serve to exacerbate.

In other words, from a pragmatic perspective, one can read the words "Had rued" (8) that come after "saved," to imply that, if the poem's speaker is indeed feeling suicidal, and unappreciative of life, then this moment when snow falls on him becomes an unanticipated occasion for him to use. The spontaneity in the lines "The way a crow / Shook down on me" (Frost 1-2) directly contrasts with the appearance of "rued" as well as supports its past tense state: "had rued" (8). This is a direct example of Frost's ulteriority. And such ulteriority is also an example of Frost's pragmatism. Pragmatism describes what one does with the options available. This is what occurs in this poem with regard to how the speaker makes use of a memory. For instance, on the subject of remembrance Frost said:

[Poetry is] being reminded...by the sight of this that's happening,
that's in front of you, of something you'd almost thought you'd
forgotten (1960).

The tiny, trivial parts of each day, that are vastly unique and unpredictable, are exactly what the speaker forgot in his previous state of regret. Frost also stated that, "A poem is

getting away with something” (1960). Based on Frost’s own statements, then, we should not be tricked into a negative interpretation by such unsettling words as hemlock. Nor should we be tricked by the crow. That animal has an effect but it need not be considered negative. However, the speaker has still been tasked with interpreting his feeling, and by the end of the poem, he does so in a positive way. In this same way, the entire poem “gets away” from the reader. The brevity of the poem and the simplicity of the lines leave readers with an uncertainty. Because the most notable words in the poem can be interpreted darkly (“crow,” “hemlock”), and aren’t given much explanation, the reader’s first instinct is to draw a negative conclusion, based on uncertainty and the unknown.

As I mentioned previously, the pragmatic reading I am offering here also depends on irony. Frost uses the image of crow, a typically negative image, to convey the opposite: a pragmatic positivity. That term irony is defined in depth as:

A statement in which the speaker’s implicit meaning differs sharply from the meaning that is ostensibly expressed. Such an ironic statement usually involves the explicit expression of one attitude or evaluation, but with indications in the speech-situation that the speaker intends a very different, and often opposite, attitude or evaluation. (Abrams 91)

Abrams also mentions another concept of irony: “unstable irony... [which] offers no fixed standpoint which is not undercut by further ironies” (92). Because of Frost’s play with the word “saved” and the past tense in “had rued,” this concept of irony is appropriate, and it also suits Frost’s larger pragmatic purpose. Not only must we look beyond superficial, negative associations to positive undertones, but we must also acknowledge a certain power that rests in objects as small as a bird, snow, and a tree to change a speaker’s perspective so entirely. In a literal sense, in the course of just a few quiet moments, a small animal gives a member of reason-filled humanity “a change of

mood” (6). This fact should also fill the reader with a sort of cautious awe – our thoughts are not entirely our own. When we reach the positive undertone, Frost doesn’t keep us there for very long. This is what I would call an unstable irony – “Dust of Snow” has no “fixed standpoint” (Abrams 92). The “favor” that the crow bestows upon the speaker is a gift that the speaker has no ability to return, so he or she is forever indebted to the small bird and dust of snow.

Ironically, the crow, which ought to be a reminder or metaphor of evil, actually reminds the speaker of something he or she had “almost thought” was “forgotten,” and that thing, I believe, is happiness. By “putting this and that together [in poetry]” (Frost 1960), the crow, the snow, and the hemlock tree become a very important part of a memory by association, but in this case they cause the poet to laugh. In a way, the fusion of the bad memory and the slightly gloomy atmosphere of the speaker’s surroundings give him a hope – the elements cancel each other out. The elements that serve as a simple reminder of a “day rued” fuse with the day itself – growth and a pragmatic change for the speaker are a result of this fusion. Irony and metaphor are linked inextricably within the presence of the crow, and work together to remind the speaker that not only has he forgotten happiness, but he has also forgotten even the simplest aspect of happiness; he has the ability to shape and mold his happiness in whatever manner he desires.

Darker implications such as a crow and hemlock, when used ironically, actually become positive images by the very nature of reverse psychology. Readers who look too deeply into the associations of the word hemlock, for instance, miss the irony that the term is used intentionally to throw the readers off track. Frost was well aware of many different meanings that can be connoted from such a seemingly small event, such as a

crow ruffling snow. He uses hemlock on purpose: “Purpose, design, intention...applies to everything that’s written, and thought. Is there purpose to it?” (1960). Hemlock is in the first half of the poem, mirroring the positioning of the poisonous regret that *previously* filled the speaker’s life: “had rued.” Hemlock, crow, and snow all function as a set-up for the second half of the poem, in which the speaker begins to reflect on his dramatic choice to regret.

As further proof of the deliberate ulteriority of this poem, and of the way in which Frost uses conventionally negative images to trick readers, take notice of where the negative words occur. Frost places “hemlock tree,” “crow,” “snow,” and “rued” at the ends of their sentences to resonate and linger in the reader’s mind. This structure is utilized to showcase these words and grab the reader’s attention. If Frost is using these terms in the typically negative connotations we associate with them, why go to the trouble of grabbing a reader’s attention for the obvious? These words linger in the reader’s mind so that he or she will continue analyzing them. In the same way that the speaker is brooding over his “day I had rued” (8), the reader must address the same type of uncertainty in reading the poem. Ironically, though, it is the uncertainty of uncontrollable events and double meanings that create the poem’s buried pragmatism.

Not only do the placements of the key words at the end of lines emphasize the ulteriority but so too does the actual structure of the poem. The poem’s small form gives the appearance of a lack of information, which can induce negative interpretations based on a fear of the unknown. But through a pragmatic reading, this tiny form is actually a directive to simplicity. The way the lines fall together in a sort of sing song tone are noted instantly: “The way a crow / Shook down on me / The dust of snow / From a hemlock

tree” (Frost 1-4). Frost uses little, short words and little, short lines to achieve a lilting affect. Because of the word “saved” that is used in the closing lines “And saved some part / Of a day I had rued” (7-8), critics such as Faggen like to argue that the poem at first seemingly has a tricky redemptive quality that really only leaves the reader with “suggestions of uncertainty” (55). While I concur that the piece is full of uncertainty, this should not necessarily immediately lead to conclusions of a loss of “innocence” (Faggen 55), or a comparison of the black crow to the serpent from the Garden of Eden “on a tree in Paradise Lost” (55). The classic A/B/A/B/C/D/C/D rhyme scheme mirrors the comfort of predictability that the speaker receives from the crow. It also takes away from the discomfort of too much uncertainty. This structure also mirrors the brief language and simplistic imagery. A foot in poetry consists of certain combinations of unstressed and stressed syllables, in either order. “Dust of snow” is made up of roughly “loose dimeters” (Steele 141); more specifically, the poem is written loosely in *iambic* dimeter. A dimeter consists of two metrical feet. Every single key word in the poem receives the stressed syllable, as opposed to an “of” or a “the” receiving one. The meter and classic rhyme scheme of the poem is pictured:

Illustration 1: Meter and Structure of “Dust of Snow” (Image credit: Gillespie 2009)



In the discussion of the poem's structure, Timothy Steele notes one of Frost's many contrasts: "he wrote in a manner that was both utterly conventional and brilliantly idiosyncratic" (123). The simple structure, the loose meter (signaling the presence of pragmatic options), and the placement of key words all function as classic design and as a clever mirror of the poem's tone and subject. Frost really uses the entirety of the poem as directions, pointing the reader to his or her "beyond." In reading this poem, the immediately obvious symbols of death via black crow and poison would signal an ulteriority that is quite blunt, therefore undermining and contradicting any actual ulteriority. I believe that the ulteriority in this poem is exceedingly optimistic; it captures a small moment in time in eight lines. The poem is a metaphor for the speaker's "beyond," and the crow and hemlock fill their multiple roles in an ulterior way by acting as both distractions from the unsaid, and directions for the speaker and reader to follow.

In addition to the structure and the placement of the key words as evidence of the poem's positivity, Frost's accounts of his own experiences also help to place the poem into the right context. Reginald Cook also writes that Frost first titled the poem "The Favor" because the poem itself "was one of those things that had come to him as a favor" (357). Favor is defined as "propitious or friendly regard, goodwill, especially on the part of a superior or a multitude (as in finding favor in the eyes of a superior)," or "approving disposition towards a thing; inclination to commend, sanction, or adopt" (OED 2016). The original title of "The Favor" implies that the entire poem is a commemoration of the favor that the crow, the speaker's "superior," hands him. A favor is not as dramatic of a gesture as salvation, nor is it an act that is ominous and foreboding. The favor is a momentary acknowledgement of the speaker's presence that he regards appreciatively; it

is a breath of fresh air compared to the brooding regret that brought him to stand under the hemlock tree in the first place. Cook writes:

He [Frost] recalled how once he had come upon some cliff brake at a cliff's edge, and how once, in a kitchen in his Franconia farm house, while he was looking westward into a sunset, the window was suddenly darkened by an owl that banked as it turned in its flight, and he felt as if he had been 'spoken to - favored' (357).

It is a tiny, fleeting moment of a "suddenly darkened" window "by an owl" that communicates in its own way with Frost. It does not matter if the owl is aware of the communication his action has sparked with another, or if the crow realizes the "change of mood" he instigates in the speaker. In both of these instances, the notion of pragmatism takes center stage. The individual meaning that Frost or the speaker gleans from their experiences is what is most relevant. Like Frost, the speaker feels "spoken to" or "favored" in "Dust of Snow."

Liebman also finds a personal dimension to this poem and says that the poem makes the distinction that "even the most trivial event can alter the poet's mood by suggesting to him the possibilities of communication and even communion between ... people and things, as he suggests in 'Dust of Snow'" (418). "Communication," in opposition to a "saving revelation" (Faggen 55) is wholly pragmatic in nature. Liebman also asserts that it is Frost's own experience mirrored in the poem. Just like the owl that "turned in its flight," the "dust of snow" the crow "shook down" is a trivial event but one that ironically holds, in its triviality, a profound embrace of the present.

Finally, let me discuss the poem's title in terms of a pragmatic and happy reading. The notion of a "dust of snow" makes for a less dramatic title than "The Favor," as well as functioning as a reminder of two interlocking but opposing ideas. A small powdery

dusting of snow is fragile, temporary, and tiny. But a dusting of snow is also real and tangible, a concrete item rather than an abstract idea such as the imagined favor the speaker receives from the crow. A tiny piece of fragile reality in a dusting of snow is what makes the speaker have a “change of mood;” it is what produces the favor itself. Life is worth living for those small, quiet moments; ulteriority is found in the title that Frost ultimately chose – “The Favor” would have given the poem away too soon. The title “Dust of Snow” also reflects an appreciation for simplicity and the small. The brevity and simplicity of a single-sentence poem is reflective of this desire for the simple things as well. If the bird does indeed “save” the speaker from a “day I had rued,” he has still introduced the speaker to simplicity - he has shown the speaker how to move on, to focus on the present in his quiet moment under the tree, instead of regretfully brooding over a convoluted day void of peace.

There are two opposite tones that Frost uses to throw readers off track – to make them work for their own quiet moment. “Hemlock” and “crow” point the reader in a dark direction, while “saved” and “rued” point to a positive, emotion-fueled spiritual journey. Both of these directions are extreme, and both are incorrect. To reach a profound moment of existence, the reader has to work through the poem much like the speaker has to work through his thoughts and memories under the tree. The intensity of a quiet moment is buried in Frost’s ulteriority by choosing cover-up words like hemlock and crow. The irony of their placement also points to the idea that happiness can be found in even the bleakest of moments, as well as in the fact that a simple bird and dust of snow is all it takes to give the speaker, even if fleeting, a moment of pure, quiet happiness.

Liebman also touches on brevity and happiness; he writes that Frost once stated: “Moments of joy are transitory...but they remain occasions for celebration regardless of their brevity” (418). The quiet moment that the speaker experiences under the hemlock tree is an occasion to celebrate. Everything about “Dust of Snow” is “transitory” - the snow will melt, the bird will fly away, and the speaker’s mood will change. Frost also uses “dust” of snow, instead of “piece of snow,” or “clump of snow,” or any other number of more tangible, permanent portrayals of the snow such as “part,” “portion,” “bunch,” or “mass.” Besides obvious rhythm and meter choices, the word “dust” implies fragility and temporality, much like the dust that settles onto furniture and can be blown away with one breath. Similar words such as “powder” (which is a more common descriptor of snow), or “sprinkle” would not work within the poem due to the connotation of a heavier substance that they have, as well as the second syllables. “Dust” works in two respects: it is a short, one-syllable word that fits within the theme of simplicity, brevity, and fragility in the poem. It also keeps the poem’s meter and rhythm in check with the tone of the speaker’s quiet moment in nature.

The last aspect of this tiny poem’s pragmatism lies in the speaker’s basic acknowledgement of his experience under the tree. “Visionary experience in Frost’s poetry occurs only after intellectual exhaustion, spiritual despair, or metaphorical breakdown...it seems reasonable to conclude that they [‘interludes of darkness’] are a precondition for it” (Liebman 432). The “interludes of darkness” are the crow, hemlock, regret, etc. The speaker “*had* rued;” the past tense implies that the speaker no longer rues a memory as a direct result of his moment under the tree. In any case, the speaker at least realizes the futility of regret over something from his past. The speaker’s dark moment is

an unavoidable “precondition” for the pragmatic positivity we receive by the end of the poem, as well as a precondition for the poem’s existence itself. This facet emphasizes the claim that “Dust of Snow” is positive, or at least pragmatic, rather than an ominous warning to appreciate life in the face of death. In this way, it is impossible to conclude with a negative reading of “Dust of Snow.” The slight references to any negativity within the poem still function to serve as a contrast to positivity – in a reverse sense, the negative images can still be regarded as good omens. The “interludes of darkness” only exist as a contrast to the quiet peaceful instances found in poems such as “Dust of Snow.” We cannot have evil without good, light without dark, profound without trivial, emotion without stoicism, and so on. In these oppositions, it is the pragmatic worldview and resulting actions that provide the most substantial results.

Chapter Three – “For Once, Then, Something”

The Individual and Subjective Realities

Robert Frost once stated that “Poetry is the only thing nowadays that is not ghost written; it is the last stronghold of sincerity” (Clemens 6). Instead of the grandiose, emotional, universal truths that many associate with poetic efforts in general, Frost’s “stronghold of sincerity” relies on two things; the reader’s experience-based interpretations, and Frost’s own system of ulteriority. The latter forces the reader to be pragmatic and earn passage into the poem’s “stronghold.” As an example of what I mean, I turn to Frost’s poem “For Once, Then, Something,” which is as difficult to decipher and interpret as the title is ambiguous:

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven godlike
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something. (Frost 1921)

This poem is one of Frost’s most famously ambiguous poems. The title alone plunges the reader into a sea of dubiousness. Ulteriority is already signaled by the intriguing word “something” in the title – “something” could literally be anything. As in “Dust of Snow,” however, this uncertainty is what creates the beauty of Frost’s pragmatic poetry.

The poem first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1920, and then was published in *New Hampshire* (1923). I find it interesting that both "Dust of Snow" and "For Once, Then Something" are in the same book of poetry. They are flanked by "In a Disused Graveyard" and "A Blue-Butterfly Day," both of which address the transience of life. It is fitting that the two poems function as symbols of life along a timeline, and that they are nestled between other poems that address birth and death.

James defines pragmatism as "ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience...instead of following interminable succession of particular phenomena" (19). An idea is only useful if it enables individuals to put it into action; if he or she is able to produce results, and advance in progress, then the idea has served its purpose. The existence of an idea or philosophy just for the sake of itself serves no purpose to anyone. From that perspective, then, when the speaker in this poem is constantly kneeling at "well-curbs" but "always wrong to the light" one can say that he is searching for idea after idea, with no real results or meaning to justify his search. When the speaker is able to accept that his search is justified when he can put his ideas to practical use in his life, he then realizes that it doesn't matter what "it" was, whether it was whiteness, truth, or a pebble; all forms serve to induce the speaker to declare that "for once, then, [it was] something" (15). This moment shows that "something" is the perfect term for whatever tangible actions each individual's subjective reality is able to produce. The constant "interminable succession of particular phenomena" (19) is comprised of a multitude of "shining surface picture [s]" (4), that "a ripple" (12) has the ability to change in an instant. Frost uses ulteriority to lead the reader to the speaker's

ultimate pragmatic viewpoint. That ultimate viewpoint --“for once, then, something” (15) -- occurs after he references Narcissus, an immortal being who is caught up in the epitome of a useless idea, superficial beauty. Narcissus functions as both a warning against vain searches, and as a command to look deeper within one’s own spirit in an introspective journey.

In addition to the allusion to Narcissus, ulteriority and pragmatism are also signaled in the “whiteness” that “lay there at the bottom” (Frost 14, 13). The speaker’s series of unanswered questions (“What was that whiteness? Truth? A pebble of quartz?” (14-15)) is exactly what supplies him with his answer: he doesn’t need one – he has the ability to create his own answers to his own questions, just as much as any other entity or circumstance from which he might be inclined to extract meaning. The irony of “whatever it was,” then, is that “it” could be anything, but only if “it” also manages to serve a practical function. Similarly to Kay Ryan’s conceptualization of the “crack” (471) that “Dust of Snow” forms in readers’ minds, Judith Oster discusses Frost’s use of metaphor in vague words: “a word like ‘something,’ for example, used as Frost uses it, opens it [a door, meaning, etc.] at least a crack.” The speaker, and reader, must decide what to do with the “crack.” Oster then brilliantly points out that:

A poem, then, can be an invitation, but not an unlimited one, not always, and not to everyone. We may get invited in and challenged to play the game, but we are not assured of a perfect score. A person who does not realize that this is an open-ended game with no one ‘correct’ answer may be too timid to accept the challenge.
(156)

Oster’s “limited invitation” is the same idea found in the irony of the world’s overlapping collections of subjective realities. The speaker’s aim for “a perfect score” is impossible in the context of any reality other than his own. This is the case in the second half of the

poem when he or she realizes that the search for meaning will only ever be “an open-ended game with no one ‘correct’ answer” (Oster 156). Appropriately, in the mysterious fifteenth line, the speaker loses his “timidity,” and “accepts the challenge.” Not only does the poem’s ambiguity signal poetry’s lack of the same universal meanings for different individuals, but it mirrors the very concept of life itself: no one is “assured of a perfect score.”

Like “Dust of Snow,” some scholars also have applied the “saving revelation” (Faggen 55) interpretation to “For Once, Then, Something.” They argue that the “whiteness” the speaker sees in the well is symbolic of a personal epiphany. I disagree with this view because it is the “drop” that falls “from a fern,” shattering the surface of the water, that gives our speaker a realization of the value of his own truth, rather than a constant search for one. Since a pragmatic reading views the “whiteness” as metaphor for uncertainty, it is a stretch to compare it to a personal revelation. In a fascinating analysis of Frost’s use of uncertainty, Angela Leighton concisely states that “words, like ‘something’ . . . force on the reader a kind of optional uncertainty” (7). She also provides a quote from Frost’s 1930 lecture ‘Education by Poetry:’

‘The person who gets close enough to poetry, he is going to know more about the word belief than anybody else knows, even in religion nowadays. . . . Every time a poem is written, every time a short story is written, it is written not by cunning, but by belief. The beauty, the something, the little charm of the thing to be, is more felt than known.’ (7)

The speaker in “For Once, Then, Something” is searching for a truth he or she can believe – “the something . . . the thing to be” that renders existence meaningful, rather than pointless. “The thing to be” is the speaker’s future, which is impossible for him to know. If the speaker, as well as the rest of humanity, can never predict the future, it is absurd to

search for meanings and truths that are permanent and unwavering, as these can't exist in a collection of subjective realities. The speaker must instead embrace his search, and embrace his own subjective reality and interpretations that are relevant to his own inner mental universe. It is only towards the end of a search in the "well" where he thinks he has finally found something that he realizes the "something" doesn't really matter after all: "'the beauty, the something, the little charm of the thing' are much less nouns for specific ends than verbal efforts to believe in whatever it is a poem might be" (Leighton 7). Combined, a poem that is "written...by belief," and Leighton's "optional uncertainty" work together to produce a pragmatic belief in the endless possibilities that individual meaning can create. The lack of "specific ends" in the speaker's search for truth is what spurs ridicule from "others that taunt me" (Frost 1). Without "specific ends" in mind the speaker will seem, to the rest of humanity, "always wrong to the light" (2). But "specific ends" are contrary to the fact that no one person is the same. The speaker's drive to search for answers gets him or her farther along the road to happiness than the pessimistic viewpoint of "others" (Frost 1). As a result, "something" is far more appropriate in light of unpredictable journeys.

The word "something" appears "everywhere in Frost, from the earliest to the latest poems" (Leighton 26). As examples Leighton cites the following lines: 'Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun, / Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound' (p. 26); 'Something inspires the only cow of late / To make no more of a wall than an open gate' (p. 120); 'Steer straight off after something into space'; 'Was something brushed across my mind / That no one on earth will ever find?' (p. 227)" (9), as well as multiple others; the most famous is "Something there is that doesn't love a wall" (Frost

1914), from “Mending Wall.” While the vague word “something” is usually discouraged from use in formal papers, in Frost’s poetry, it bears much more meaning– it is representative of the speaker’s struggle to find “specific ends.” Specifically, the speaker finds that whatever “ends” surface, he needs to gain access to the poem’s “stronghold” or what I have called the “beyond” – these are specific to him or her. As a result, he or she is perfectly capable of creating the doors into their own newly discovered universe beyond the poem; this is why “something” is a perfect descriptor – it could be anything.

Leighton brings attention to the repetition of “something,” and describes how the word’s uncertainty becomes a foundation: “the word ‘something,’ repeated three times, graduates from being an expression of difficulty, uncertainty, near-invisibility, to being the thing itself, achieved” (11). “Something,” in its own essence of being that is the unknown, because a sought-after product. The presence of life’s uncertainty, summed up in “something” is what makes life beautiful. The subject of beauty brings me to the myth of Narcissus reference: “Gives me back in a shining surface picture / Me myself in the summer heaven godlike” (4-5). Without the reading of pragmatic ulteriority, these two lines would seem to start the reader down the path of self-analysis, leading to a moral that warns us against obsessing over ourselves and beauty in general. However, Leighton points out that the poem is not quite a sonnet because it has an “extra line,” a total of fifteen lines. The additional line, as well as the mysterious “‘something,’” does not fit into the “moral, the Narcissus story of being able to see only ‘Me myself’” (Leighton 10). The extra line and the excess suggested by the word “something” mirror each other in that they both reflect a “beyond” that goes further than whatever absolute truth the speaker thinks he will find. The myth of Narcissus ends in his death: he wastes away at

the side of a pool in love with his own reflection. By contrast, our speaker is distracted from the surface reflection in the well by a lone “drop” from a “fern:”

Water came to rebuke the too clear water
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something. (Frost 11-15)

The water’s ability to “rebuke the too clear water” (11) is repeated here and reminds me of “Dust of Snow,” where the small crow’s ability to communicate with the speaker brings the speaker back to reality. The power of the trivial and small outside forces (a crow, a drop of water) connects the speaker to the practicalities of his current reality, and prompts him to look deeper within himself. By contrast, Narcissus focuses on the triviality of his personal appearance and so distorts his own reality. The reference to Narcissus serves to lead the reader past surface-level fascinations to what lies deeper within ourselves – our great potential for creating meaning, as well as learning to shun the “others” (1). In an ironic reversal of the Narcissus moral, Frost commands the reader to dig deeper into his or her own interpretation of existence and meaning. In pragmatic fashion, the speaker discovers his ability to form his own meaning and personal reality out of the world around him. He realizes that whether the “whiteness” was “truth” or just a “pebble of quartz,” it doesn’t matter – he feels that it was still “for once, then, something” (15).

The reader and the speaker mirror each other in their separate searches for beauty and meaning. As the speaker searches for meaning within his life and undergoes changes of perspective, the reader follows the speaker’s journey in the poem as a metaphor that points to his or her “beyond.” In relation to this, Leighton also describes the poet

Elizabeth Bishop's approach to beauty: "too important to name, too precious to debate, 'beauty' is a word she saves for the unspoken" (12). "Like Frost, she too seems to have nothing to say about 'beauty' as an ingredient of the poem" (Leighton 12); Frost's "something" is a stand-in for the mention of beauty as well, but more specifically the beauty of the unknown. The reader must be cautious with the introduction, in the ironic reference to Narcissus, of a superficial beauty: "Gives me back in a shining surface picture / Me myself in the summer heaven godlike / Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs" (4-6). Frost references Narcissus's self-obsession and "godlike" self-attribution, while slyly giving the speaker a head adornment made only of "fern and cloud puffs" – natural materials of a temporary nature, rather than gold, silver, or other typical "godlike" adornments. A wreath of "cloud puffs" emphasizes the speaker's mortal and earthly state, while highlighting his futile search for truths of lofty heights – his back and head are turned on the home of the immortals, the heavens. This mockery of surface beauty compels the reader to search for what *is* the beauty in this poem, and he or she is left with only natural imagery (water, fern, cloud puffs, and well-curbs), or imagery that is hard to discern (something white, uncertain, something more of the depths). The elements of nature and uncertainty are two items that are entirely and permanently dependable; it is the use of these elements as a creative "evidence and resource" (Klein 364) that forces the reader to acknowledge the presence of ulteriority in his or her interpretative abilities. Uncertainty, then, is to be utilized as a type of creativity in constructing one's inner world.

Uncertainty and creative action all depend on the presence of realism as a counteractive, balancing force, and in this poem, nature functions as the realistic

presence. As the reader discovers different pathways to new perspectives, the speaker struggles temporarily in a limbo between misguided searches for meaning and reality. In a pragmatic reading, it is useful to note Frost's approach to realism: "Frost is a poet of the minutely observed literal, but also of the literal become hyperrealistically legible, and therefore opening up stranger perspectives" (Leighton 13). Frost focuses on the small and trivial such as the transitory nature of the speaker's natural surroundings of ferns, clouds, and a well full of water to symbolize life's uncertainty and temporary attributes, rather than long-lasting truths spouted by the speaker from his searches for meaning. Our speaker "thought" he saw something beyond the reflection of himself "godlike," which implies that he has harnessed the ability to see deeper into himself and his surroundings, in fact, he states "I discerned:"

Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths—and then I lost it. (Frost 7-10)

"*Once*" is italicized in the original form of the poem, which begs the reader's attention; why this emphasis? When the speaker "lost it," as the water droplet shattered the surface of the water, his futile search for universal meaning became a thing of the past, hence, "once." It is here, as the speaker gets closest to what he believes might change his life that the entire course of events changes unexpectedly. The speaker has discovered his own meaning, the very fulfillment "others" believed he couldn't find; he has possessed it within himself all along. In the first half of the poem, our speaker is "always wrong to the light" (2), and continually strives to kneel "at well-curbs," searching for meaning, if in the wrong manner. When he encounters "something more of the depths," he admits that "then I lost it." This is followed in the next lines by "For once, then, something" (1, 10,

15). Counterintuitively the speaker feels that he has gained “something” even though he tells us that he lost it! I read this as his final acceptance of the temporary nature of meaning. He realizes that he has the ability to decide for himself whether or not he wants the “whiteness” (14) to be “truth,” a “pebble of quartz,” or just simply “something” (15). He has realized the beauty of his search over meaning itself. His focus has become “hyperrealistically legible,” in that he provides the reader with an actual description of what he thinks he saw using both natural terms, as well as possibilities. This natural language contrasts with the generalized rhetoric of “others,” “always,” and “never” found in the beginning of the poem. The language of possibility, uncertainty, and “stranger perspectives” (Leighton 13) has replaced that of an unrealistic and idealistic communication from “others” that the speaker must be “always” right “to the light” (Frost 2). At this point in the poem, the speaker is a changed person; he is content with just “something.” Ironically, then, Frost’s use of nature and realism in “For Once, Then, Something” enlightens the speaker and leads to a deeper probing within his own spirit, which helps him to truly begin understanding the world around him, and his abilities to contribute to his own world.

Frost elegantly combines metaphor with ulteriority (irony) in the nature imagery within the poem. As a result, the metaphors then begin to symbolize oppositions. The speaker describes the “something” he sees in the well with natural terms such as “whiteness,” and “pebble of quartz” (14-15). However, although the “whiteness” is a symbol of certainty, it is an element of nature (a drop of water from a fern) that shatters the speaker’s view of “something” in the depths of the well. Nature is unpredictable; it “rebukes” itself because the water misleads the speaker, if only for a moment. As in

“Dust of Snow,” a collection of natural elements captures the speaker’s attention, and then leads him in the opposite direction of introspection. The water’s “rebuke” criticizes nature itself for misleading the speaker. The fern drop rubs out the speaker’s certainty about what he believes he saw for a moment, playfully contradicting itself. The ironically inverted allusion to Narcissus also functions as a playful jab at the fanatically religious who believe they have found absolute truth and meaning within their chosen doctrine. In the poem, the speaker’s doubt paradoxically leads to concepts such as repentance, a constant atonement of actions, and unceasing worship of an unknown, unseen, and unheard entity or entities.

The speaker’s transition from “trying with chin against a well-curb” (7), to “for once, then, something” (15) signals his new comfort with the unknown. Susan Sontag discusses humanity’s obsession with meaning “As the activity of the mystic must end in a via negative, a theology of God’s absence, a craving for the cloud of unknowingness beyond knowledge and for the silence beyond speech, so art must tend toward anti-art, the elimination of the “subject” (the “object,” the “image”), the substitution of chance for intention, and the pursuit of silence” (1). The speaker experiences an “elimination of the ‘subject’ (“himself heaven godlike”), as well as learning to substitute “chance (“something”) for intention:” he chooses to no longer kneel at well-curbs, as “having knelt” is in past tense. Christopher Knight also discusses humanity’s myriad of endless and perhaps futile types of searches for truth, stating that “It is a pursuit that does not always guarantee success, though even its failures can be difficult to distinguish from its successes, as in Robert Frost’s poem “For Once, Then, Something” (285). In a world where “failures can be difficult to distinguish from its successes,” the speaker absolutely

depends on a pragmatic worldview if he is to live fully, forming interpretations at his leisure rather than painfully kneeling with knees and chin on the hard concrete of life's bottomless pit of subjective realities.

Cunningham also mentions the journey and search motifs that appears in one of Frost's other poems, "Acquainted with the Night." He states that "the journey is seemingly endless" (270). In his analysis of the poem, he interprets one of the lines: "'clock.../ Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right' as a suggestion that "one may not look above...to find human and moral values" (270). In "For Once, Then, Something," the speaker's error is that he continually looks beyond himself, whether "above" or into the depths of the earth. Both Narcissus and the view of the sky behind the speaker's head encircled in "fern and cloud puffs" (Frost 6), as well as the bottomless well, signify the extremes in which the speaker continually conducts his search for truth. The speaker is looking too far past his immediate surroundings; his immediate surroundings are all he needs.

As the surface of the water in the well is ever-changing, so too is meaning. When the surface of the water is changed by the "ripple" the speaker's perspective on truth is simultaneously changed. The water also functions as a reflective source; the "whiteness" or "something" reflects the potential that the speaker possesses within himself. In "Dust of Snow," the speaker sees a reflection of his own negativity within the ominous black crow, only to realize that he interprets the crow in an ominous way as a result of his negative lens. In the reflection of the water, the speaker sees in the lens of the water a reflection of his futile search for truths in the vague unknown "something." He also

realizes that his perspective of himself as “always wrong to the light” has obstructed his ability to create meaning.

There is another classical literary allusion in this poem other than Narcissus. The second allusion refers to an old saying by the ancient philosopher Democritus (Hass 35). The poem makes a joke out of his proverb “of truth we know nothing, for truth lies at the bottom of a well” – (“so never seeing / Deeper down in the well” (Frost 1-2)). At first glance, this allusion would seem to suggest that the speaker’s search for meaning for the “truth [that] lies at the bottom of a well,” is useless, and that any attempt to obtain concrete truths can only be in vain. Robert Hass details the reference to Democritus and asserts Frost’s confirmation of this “adage” (35) in the poem, which is a skeptical viewpoint at its finest. I disagree, however, because I read Frost arguing against this very viewpoint. Because Frost follows the line “a something white, uncertain” (9) with “something more of the depths” (10) he emphasizes that uncertainty is “something more.” While the speaker learns that his search must be redirected, the journey is certainly not without value. The speaker’s constant “having knelt at well-curbs” (1) is what attracts the ridicule from “others” that “taunt” him. Adherence to the pessimism in Democritus’s assertion (which ironically still functions as his own truth because he believes in it), is what makes the speaker’s journey for meaning seem like wasted effort. But it only *seems* to be a waste. In fact, it is the journey that Frost wants us to appreciate. Even though the water’s reflective, mirror-like qualities imply that the speaker’s reflection is connected to the “truth,” or the “pebble of quartz” at the bottom of the well this is another of Frost’s tricks, another misdirection. In fact, the water shows the speaker’s face as if to say that truth lies within himself. The pragmatic “drop” of water

keeps the speaker in check so that, in contrast to Narcissus who falls in love with himself, the speaker will know that there is also meaning beyond his own face. In this complex image, the speaker is warned to search within himself for meaning to advance his personal growth, rather than stagnate. By contrast, stagnation is found when Democritus refers to “others,” and is found in Narcissus, who ultimately wastes away. Frost, in contrast, offers a pragmatic view of the search for meaning as the embodiment of truth itself: what real purpose will truth(s) serve in the speaker’s current existence? This purpose becomes the new focus of the speaker’s journey.

The implication in the reflective well-water that suggests that truth lies within the individual further expounds on the idea that the speaker’s hunt everywhere else but in himself for meaning is futile. In other areas, the perpetual cycle of searching yields no results, because it is only important that the speaker, and reader, take meaning and put it to practical use within his or her own reality. Frost made it clear in 1931 that “the highest part of any poem is that which is between you and yourself; between you and your maker, if you want” (43). In the right context, however, this persistent search should be embraced. When the speaker takes the first step to stare beyond the water’s surface reflection into the depths, he has begun the new journey. He must accept duplicity in meaning, and begin to sift out which layers of the duplicities have relevance in his own life. Like the changing surface of the water, the reflection of the speaker’s face changes as well, which is a nod to the fact that humanity is ever-shifting, changing, and developing. This facet of the reflective water emphasizes how steadfast, universal truths are non-existent.

It is useful to revisit the fact that values, morals, and meaning are all human-constructed conceptualizations. Although this fact might sound a little depressing, or even pessimistic, according to Frost, it is actually a wonderful idea, one reached through ulteriority. The ability to rationalize, create, conceptualize, and direct our lives according to our own subjective realities and personal truths sets humanity apart in a unique, distinctive way from the rest of the universe. Once we accomplish the most difficult task in our searches for truth – identification of where and how we want to apply those truths in our daily lives – then the journey for meaning becomes meaning itself.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Frost explores the fundamental questions of existence in his poetry. Yet, he still creates an accessible world where the tiny is just as important as the large, and where the lack of answers can be as beneficial to an individual as the answers themselves. At the end of each day, all that each of us has is the here and now – Frost knew this. For some while, he was criticized for his “everyday subject matter” (Barron 2014), but that’s exactly what composes our everyday realities. What do we truly have other than our everyday experiences? The idea that Frost aimed to convey through the two poems I have mentioned is that these everyday events and circumstances are the meat of what makes human life profound. It is up to us to decide exactly what we want to do with our daily experiences, and how we want those experiences to affect the rest of our lives.

Expressing the inexpressible – we are unable to accurately portray or understand any other individual reality other than our own. But Frost gives each of us channels through his ulteriority by which to discover more about our own realities, which in turn directs our actions towards others around us and the rest of the world, and alters our understanding of another’s experience.

Both “Dust of Snow” and “For Once, Then, Something” are entirely different poems with the exact same message – to treasure the trivial in life and continue the search for meaning within oneself. “Dust of Snow” relies on concrete imagery and natural settings, while the latter is eloquently composed with ambiguous language and elusive, classical references. As a perfect pair, their oppositions to each other mirror the oppositions found within the specific lines and images, and work together to create a well-rounded little world within *New Hampshire*.

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