Dark Energy in Robert Frost's Poems[*]

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Abstract—**Robert Frost is regarded as one of the most distinguished American poets in the twentieth century. His work usually realistically describes the rural life in New England in the early twentieth century and conveys complex social and philosophical themes. But his personal life was plagued with grief and loss, which is also reflected in his poems, and the dark energy distinguishes Robert Frost's poems, frequently conveyed in the use of lexical words like *dark* and its derivatives or synonyms, *woods, snow, night*, and so on. The present study starts with the survey of the lexical representations of dark energy used in Robert Frost's poems, which are collected in The Oxford Book of American Poetry, and the other poems listed on the website which are not collected in the book but written by Robert Frost[1], aiming to gain more understanding of the great poet's contemplation involving human and nature.**

Index Terms—**dark energy, Robert Frost, lexical words, poem**

I. Introduction

It's well established among the editors of the Contemporary Literary Criticism that Frost tried to obtain an insight of "fundamental questions of existence, depicting with chilling starkness the loneliness of the individual in an indifferent universe"[2] in his best works. And the critic T. K. Whipple stated that "in much of his work, particularly in North of Boston, his harshest book, he emphasized the dark background of life in rural New England, with its degeneration often sinking into total madness."[3] In Brodsky's eyes, in real life Frost was a dark, "terrifying" poet as Lionel Trilling had called him, by a sense "of his own negative potential."[4]

Robert Frost chose to use languages that stayed close and true to the experience in his verses and he was successful in bringing the realm of poetry closer to the hard realities of everyday life. Most of Frost's poems put settings in winter. The world of Robert Frost's poetry contains *snow, woods, birches* as well as *lakes*. What is more striking in Robert Frost's poems is that lots of lexically and semantically associated words like *dark, darkness, darken* as well its synonym like *black,* or its extensions as nouns like *night, evening woods, moon, etc.,* and as verb phrases like *to sleep*, revealing the theme of darkness. For example, in the last sentence of Frost's poem Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening "*But I have a promise to keep. And miles to go before I sleep*" (Frost, 2006, p.229), here 'sleep' is usually interpreted as 'I's contemplation of suicide. (Michael Richard Gargiulo, 2010)

The contemplation of humans and nature are thought to be a lasting theme in Frost's poems. And the nature is usually of dark features while humans are in the darkness of nature, struggling and living. In terms of the dark features mentioned above, there is a necessity to obtain an objective view of the relations between human and nature in Frost's poems.

II. A Survey into Frost's Poems

Robert Frost's poems have been widely known and received a fairly large body of criticism. And Robert Frost, hence, has many labels like nature poet, New England Yankee, symbolist, humanist and many others. But more importantly, the poems Frost has written are of greater significance on contemplation of humans and nature. The present survey into Frost's poems aims to gain more knowledge and understanding about his contemplation of humans and nature.

A. Background Information of the Survey

Some critics have noted something darker blowing the placid surface of the pastoral in Frost's poems, which the critic M. L. Rosenthal interpreted as a "shocked sense of the helpless cruelty of things in 'Once by the Pacific'"[5]. In this poem the use of words like *dark, night* accentuated the negative sense.

Frost's personal state of mind and tragic incidents happening to his family can partly explain the prevailing key undertones in his poems. Firstly, the darkness in the poems is closely related to the poet's own health problems. Frost himself suffered all his years from the effects of mental illness. He was in constant depression and often felt himself

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unhinged by his darker impulses. Secondly the successive misfortunes of his family members gave him repeated blows. In 1920 his sister Jeanie had to be sent to a Maine state Mental Hospital and died 9 years later. Then his daughter Marjorie died in childbirth in 1934. And his wife Elinor died of heart failure in 1938, followed by his son Carol who committed suicide at the age 38 in 1940. What's more, his daughter Irma was committed to a mental hospital in 1947.

Though his fears, angers, and jealousies could be alarmingly intense, he took to poetry and distilled the vast terrifying wild into controlled verse. Frost's poems are critiqued in Anthology of Modern American Poetry (2015) as presenting "pessimistic and menacing undertones which often are not recognized nor analyzed".[6]

B.   Scope of the Survey

As for how many poems Frost had written, the best answer given by Yahoo is 180 and a half, which is incomplete and unpublished. But the total number given by Google is much lower, 121 poems. Then on the website of poemhunter[7], there are altogether 158 Frost's poems collected

After some efforts of proofreading and comparing with the search results from Yahoo, Google, together with Frost's famous and typical poems collected in Anthology of Modern American Poetry, finally it's settled that there are altogether 160 poems for the present survey.

C.   Tools Applied in the Survey

Looking into certain lexical words manually is surely more time-consuming and less efficient than making use of a computation system. The tool used for the present survey is AntConc 3.2.4 w (widows) 2011, which is developed by Professor Laurence Anthony and colleagues in the Center for English Language Education in Science and Engineering of Waseda University in Japan. AntConc is a freeware, a multiplatform tool for carrying out corpus linguistics research and data-driven learning. The Concordance Tool in AntConc shows the search results in a "KWIC" (KeyWord in Context) format, which allows the users to see how words and phrases are commonly used in a corpus of text.

With the search engine ready, the collection of Frost's 160 poems is arranged in a certain form and order, which facilitates the search of certain lexical elements.

D.   Results of the Survey

Before the computation, four groups of words related to dark energy are divided and investigated separately, which is listed as follows:

1) *dark* and its derivatives like *darkness*, *darken*

2) *black*[8]

3) related nouns like *night, evening, woods, winter, snow, moon, stars*

4) related verbs like *to sleep*[9]

By using the search tool AntConc, lexical words related with dark energy in Frost's poems are calculated and investigated, and then generate the following results, as shown in Table 1 (See Appendix1).

According to Table 1, compared with other words, it's obvious that the frequency of *night* and its plural form *nights* ranks the highest, followed by *snow* and *star*, while words like *dark*, *stars* and *woods* are used almost at the same frequency in the poems.

Based on the results in Table 1, a further survey of how many poems contain the dark energy related words is preceded, obtaining 97 poems in general. As it has been mentioned above, the pessimistic and menacing undertones in Frost's poems can be detected in terms of dark energy related words, which indicates that about 60.6% of Frost's 160 poems have the connotation of such pessimistic and menacing undertones.

It seems true to think that if a poem contains more dark energy related words, it is considered to be more likely to connote the darkness and depressive undertones. From Table 2 (See Appendix2), the two poems like The Onset and The Death of the Hired Man have the highest occurrences of dark related words, 8 of which are involved in the two poems which are followed by the poem The Bonfire having 7 while the other two like The Star Splitter and An Old Man's Winter Night have 6. As for the poems containing less than 6 occurrences of dark energy related words, the total number is quite remarkable, almost 57.5 % of the collection for the survey. In other words, almost the majority of Frost's poems more or less connote negative undertones.

III.   INTERPRETATION OF DARK ENERGY IN FROST'S POEMS

Depressive or negative undertones, conveyed in terms of dark energy related words are often regarded to relate to the themes of death, anxiety and fear, isolation and depression in Frost's poems. These themes are discussed in details vial typical poems in the following sections.

A.   Death

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[6]   Biography of Robert Frost. http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-frost/biography/ (accessed 22/11/2015).

[7]   Referring to the website: http://www.poemhunter.com/robert-frost/poems/ (accessed 20/11/2015).

[8]   As for the derivatives of *dark*'s synonym *blac*k, there is no occurrences of *blackness* and *blacken* in the collection.

[9]   The verb phrase "*sleep*" is restricted for the research rather than words like *die, died, dead, death* or *grave*, because the verb *sleep* is more likely to be used metaphorically than the other words mentioned here.

In western literature, *snow* or *winter* is thought to have an intrinsic relation to death, not to mention words like *dead, ghost, grave* or *graveyard*. Words like *snow* and *snows* occur in Frost's 31 poems and *winter* in 12 poems, which may imply that Frost did deal a lot with the themes of death or life and death. There many of Frost's poems are titled with the words mentioned above, like Dust of Snow, A Patch of Old Snow, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, The Death of the Hired Man, Spoils of the Dead, The Disused Graveyard, Home Burial, Ghost House, Goodbye, and Keep Cold, Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter, An Old Man's Winter Night, and so on. The key words in the titles help the readers to gain an easier understanding of the themes.

Frost develops a tone of melancholy contentment throughout the poem Ghost House, which describes a sad but beautiful picture of the house in terms images of nature, triumphant over the homes, fences, and roads of man, and so on. However, a careful attachment is given to the rebirth and regrowth of this nature, maintaining the funereal tone of the poem.[10]

The poem Home Burial, which is one of the 11 containing 3 occurrences of dark energy related words, describes the destruction of a couple's marriage after the death of their child due to their inability in communication and mutual understanding, which Frost possibly referred to the tragic death of his first son during infancy. In the poem The Death of the Hired Man an ordinary man and his wife are engaging in a philosophically significant debate, representing two different attitudes and two ways to look at fellow beings or even life itself. The wife stands for love and sympathy, emotion and imagination, evaluating human beings not in terms of reasons but out of emotions, while her husband sees the affair from the perspective of a practical modern man, evaluating or judging people by their work, worth, contribution, etc. To put it more correctly, the husband represents "reason, intellect, utilitarianism, practicality, rationality, and the like".[11] Silas, who is the hired man, is now weak and unable to contribute to the work and in fact he is dying. But the wife still insists on hiring him again. The conflict between the couple ends as they finally come close to each other. In the poem, Frost emphasized the importance of reconciliation and expressed the idea that people could not stand alone and thrive and the people should provide a little substance to the needy in a stark modern world.

The other two poems like Come In and The Onset, though one is titled with a verb phrase indicating an action and the other with a nominal phrase indicating the beginning of an affair or activity, both having no death-related words in the titles, share similar themes of life and death. Rothman (2013) interpreted the poem Come In as the poet invites himself to the edge of the woods, and trying to quell his own impulses, in terms of the singing of a thrush somewhere in the trees, which the man hears when he approaches the edge of the woods but fails to see the bird for the woods are shadowed. Therefore, Joshua Rothman comes to the interpretation of the expression "come in" as "die".

Death does not necessarily have to be the end. Lakshmi (2010, p.8) stated that in death there is continuation of life. The poem the Onset is considered the remaining part of Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. Khan and Saddique (2014, p.122) said that the former poem presents the poet's consentment about the realities of life and death while the latter presents the conflict between commitments of life and peacefulness of death so one cannot decide whether to go to fulfill promises or to stay among woods and result is uncertainty and melancholy. Warren (1947, p.5) explained that the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" left the paradox or the problem that the capacity to stop by the roadside and the contemplation involving a repudiation of the world of action and obligation it canceled the definition of our humanity. Life and death are consistent and connected parts of humans.

B. Anxiety and Fear

Lionel Trilling remarked Frost's poems as "terrifying" in 1959. Though many were startle at the remarks, Frost's poems are indeed terrifying. Frost's Secretary Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant once quoted Robert Frost's words and said that the poem Directive indicated Frost's capture of his fears in terms of the values of the children's world.[12] The poem Design or In White[13] suggests that life is full of both evil and innocence and in front of massive nature, and human beings are just like the moth and the spider fragile and in constant hazardous state. The human beings are also products of these natural forces, not spiritual design, as indicated in the last two lines "What but design of darkness to appall?/ If design govern in a thing so small".[14] Pack (2003, p.163) interpreted Frost's Directive that it expresses the identical anxiety as the journeyer seeks "A broken drinking goblet like the Grail", but fears the mystery of salvation, for perhaps the goblet is "Under a spell so the wrong ones can't find it,/ So can't get saved as Saint Mark says they mustn't".[15] Similarly, in the poem After Apple Picking, the narrator expresses the anxiety and fear of being rejected and finally judged worthless. The poem Two Look at Two reveals the existential fear the lovers have about each other. This fear that essentially there is nothing unique in being human must be overcome if love is to flourish. (Pack, 2003, p. 166)

Frost integrated gentle observation and evocative rural scenes, and expressed his sense of being lost in the universe in the poem like The Star Splitter tells of a New England farmer who "burned his house down for the fire insurance and spent the proceeds on a telescope to satisfy a lifelong curiosity about our place among the infinities". (Abel, 1980) After

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[10] Referring to the website: http://letsstalktreasure.blogspot.kr/2010/11/tone-analysis-ghost-house-by-robert.html (accessed 23/11/2015).

[11] Referring to the website: http://www.bachelorandmaster.com/britishandamericanpoetry/the-death-of-the-hired-man.html (accessed 23/11/2015).

[12] Referring to the website: https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/25/specials/frost-terror.html (accessed 23/11/2015).

[13] Frost's poem "In White" is the first draft of what became to be the poem "Design". The differences are minimal, only some grammar changes that don't affect the overall meaning of the poem.

[14] Frost. (2006). Design. 233-234.

[15] Frost. (2006). Directive. 237-238.

long looking at the stars, the farmer and his friend the poet-narrator found them as indifferent to man. The farmer McLaughlin's crazy but eccentrically sensible justification for buying the telescope impresses us with his imaginative, haphazard nature, which "stands a sharp contrast with the deep-rooted pragmatic, nose-to-the-grindstone farming folk of the town."[16]

As seen from Table 1, there are 21 Frost's poems employing *star* or *stars*. Similar to The Star Splitter, poems like Stars is the symbol of the longest reach of man's speculation. That indicates that there is an equation of ratio to threat of nature against man: threat is measured as force divided by distance. The threat of stars is greatest in force, but is so remote in distance, which means slight time.

C.   Isolation and Depression

John T. Ogilvie (1957, p.72) in his critical essay From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost's Poetry comments, "In several of Frost's poems…The dark woods stand for the privacy of the self, the sacred domain where poetry is made. Their area is the area of the poet's introspective life, his subjective experience. ..The poet guards and cherishes the woods as his own."

Poems like An Old Man's Winter Night, Once by the Pacific, Acquainted with the Night show a preoccupation with the themes of isolation and depression, and the poem An Old Man's Winter Night never offers the reason why the old man is alone, but reiterates his complete isolation and inability to have the comfort of companionship. And the old man himself remains silent throughout the poem. The time he does make sound, he stomps his feet more animalistically rather than give out his voice. By rendering the old man mute, Frost tries to make the readers feel the same sense of isolation that the old man himself is experiencing.[17] In Acquainted with the Night, the narrator is overwhelmed with the feeling of isolation and depression as he walks the isolated city streets at night. Even though at the time of coming across a watchman and hearing a cry from a nearby street, the narrator, the sole "I," remains solitary as "I" look up at the moon in the sky and acknowledge that time has no meaning for "me" because the isolation is unending.

What's more, poems such as After Apple-picking and The Death of the Hired Man discuss particularly the loss related to the changing seasons and the sense of isolation inherent in New England's rural environment.

IV.   CONCLUSION

Though the poems in question are not the complete volumes of Robert Frost, by investigating into the dark energy in Robert Frost's poems, in terms of images like *snow, winter, dark, black*, and so on, it helps to shed light on the poet's real inner world, which also resonates the common psychological thinking among the human beings.

A high percentage of Frost's poems reveal his contemplation involving the contrasts between humans and nature. There are two layers of dark references in Frost's poems. On the surface, it refers to the real wood, the snow, the night or the nature. On the deeper layer, it connotes the sinister beauty and peace of the wood or the treacherous beauty and peace of the nature, which are suicidal to the humans. Human's repudiation to surrender to the beauty or peaceful nature and the struggles and resistance to the pulling of nature arouse resonance within the readers and shed light on the meaning of life itself.

APPENDIX 1

TABLE 1:
THE RESULTS OF DARK ENERGY RELATED WORDS

dark energy related words	frequency	total frequency	number of poems
dark	32	32	23
darkness	6	6	6
darken/darkened	1+3	4	4
black	20	20	12
night/nights	70+1	71	48
evening/evenings	9+0	9	7
woods[18]	31	31	24
winter	20	20	12
snow/snows	44+1	45	31
moon	22	22	9
star/stars	19+21	41	21
sleep/slept/ sleeping	15+7+2	24	16

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[16]   referring to the website: http://thegoodtypist.blogspot.kr/2008/12/review-star-splitter-by-robert-frost.html (accessed 23/11/2015).
[17]   Referring to the website: http://www.gradesaver.com/the-poetry-of-robert-frost/study-guide/summary-an-old-mans-winter-night-1916 (accessed 25/11/ 2015.
[18]   Here only the plural form is investigated because the woods and its singular form have different reference. The reference of the plural one is what the present research concerns.

APPENDIX 2

TABLE 2:
OCCURRENCES OF POEMS OF DARK ENERGY RELATED WORDS

occurrences	poems	Total numbers
8	The Onset; The Death of the Hired Man	2
7	The Bonfire	1
6	The Star Splitter; An Old Man's Winter Night	2
5	Design; Maple; Reluctance; In the Home Stretch; Spoils of the Dead; Evening in a Sugar Orchard; Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening	7
4	In white; Come In; Ghost House; Christmas Tree; Two Look at Two; Spring Pools; A Star in the Stone Boat; Wind and Window Flowers Desert Places; Place for a Third; They're Welcomed to Their Belief	11
3	Birches; The Axe-Helve; Paul's wife; Iris by Night; The Black Cottage; Once by the Pacific; After Apple-picking; Home Burial; Canis Major; Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter; On Looking up by Chance at the Constellations	11
2	Out, Out; The Code-heroics; The Fear; The Mountain; Blueberries; God's Garden; Departmental; A Line-storm Song; The Gum Gather; Tree at My Window; The Freedom of the Moon; My Butterfly; Stars; Hyla Brook; In a Disused Graveyard; The Trial by Existence; The Oft-repeated Dream; The Most of It; My November Guest; Good-bye, and Keep Cold; Mending Walls; A Dream Pang; The Wood-pile; The Tramps in Mud Times; Misgiving; Storm Fear; The Hill Wife (also titled The Impulse)	27
1	Acquainted with the Night; Waiting; In a Vale; Bond and Free; The Exposed Nest; Putting in the Seed; Love and a Question; Leaves Compared with Flowers; The Telephone; Relevation; The Tuft of Lovers; A Servant to Servants; A Cliff Dwelling; A Prayer in the Spring; The Road not Taken; Waiting- a Field at Dust; Lodged; A Patch of Old Snow; Plowmen; In a Vale; Dust of Snow The Vantage Point; Not to Keep; In Equal Sacrifice; The Line-Gang; A Considerable Speech; Directive; A Question; Into My Own; The Hardwood Groves; Fragmentary Blue; The Generation of Men; Asking for Roses; Love and a Question; Pan with Us; Never Again Would Bird's Song be the Same	36

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