The Ramifications of Female Sexuality: Cultural Uncertainty, Domestic Confinement, and Threatened Patriarchy in Robert Frost's "Two Witches"

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ABSTRACT

During World War I, American women entered the workforce in greater numbers than ever before. However, once their husbands or other family members returned home, women in the workplace were forced out of their jobs in order to support more traditional gender roles. These "New Women" were, for the most part, college-educated, empowered in their sexuality, and had higher aspirations than being a stay-at-home wife and mother. Robert Frost's 1920 poem "Two Witches" explores what forced domesticity did to New Women mentally, physically, and sexually. The narrative poem is split into two sections, "The Witch of Coös" and "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," and while progressive in its social politics, the poems still confine their protagonists and reaffirm the tradition of American patriarchy.

At the turn of the twentieth century, first-wave feminism and the Great War brought women out of their homes and into the workforce. According to acclaimed sociologist Dr. Michael S. Kimmel,

> In the public sphere, the rise of women's colleges, women's increased literacy, delayed age of marriage, an ideology of upward mobility, and capitalist development gave rise to the New Woman. Single, highly educated, and economically autonomous, she challenged existing gender relations and the distribution of power.[1]

For the first time, women were able to use their education and other skills outside of their homes as switchboard operators, nurses, stock takers, yeomen, and magazine editors,[2] offering an autonomy and freedom that only men had ever been granted.

Once the First World War ended and American soldiers returned home in 1918, many career women went back into the home despite earning the right to vote within a year.[3] The number of female writers and editors dissipated, giving rise to male influence in women's magazines where male decision-makers and editors began to push "the new image of woman as housewife-mother"[4] with the support of "religious theories [that] demanded women's return to the private sphere of hearth and home."[5] In doing so, those pushing this ideology "yearned nostalgically for the mythical separation of spheres that has served to keep women from explicitly challenging men in the public realm."[6] Unable to come to terms with the New Woman's independence and self-reliance, men who were threatened by the new world order needed to find ways to push women back into their domiciles and found that writing and publishing propaganda pieces on "true femininity" would do the trick.

With politics and culture changing swiftly, poet and academic Robert Frost and his wife, Elinor, moved their family to a farm in Derry, New Hampshire. In their first few years there, Frost's first-born son died, his mother was notified of a fatal cancer diagnosis, and Elinor's sister and father fell ill. To make matters worse, Frost learned

1. Michael S. Kimmel, "Men's Responses to Feminism at the Turn of the Century," *Gender and Society* 1, no. 3 (September 1987): 261–83, www.jstor.org/stable/189564, 265.

2. "Women in WWI," National WWI Museum and Memorial, 2024, https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/women.

3. "Women in WWI."

4. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1997), 49.

5. Kimmel, "Men's Responses," 262.

6. Kimmel, 261–83.

that his sister Jeanie was "increasingly disturbed."[7] Like Frost, his wife and sister both graduated with honors from Lawrence High School, one of the most esteemed high schools in the country, went to college, and worked as teachers.[8] They were the New Women that were able to use their education in order to educate others, a career that was respected and generated enough income to support their basic needs and then some. In her family memoir *You Come Too: My Journey with Robert Frost*, Lesley Francis, Frost's granddaughter, recounts, "Tragically, during World War I, Jeanie was arrested in Portland, Maine, for the exhibition of severe symptoms of paranoia. Under her brother's guardianship, she was committed in 1920 to the Augusta, Maine, state hospital, where Robert Frost continued to visit her until her death in 1924."[9]

Jeanie's arrest and subsequent committal is indicative of relations between the sexes after World War I. As a career woman, Jeanie was stable; however, she was surrounded by written and visual propaganda that stated that, in order to be a true woman, women like Jeanie needed to abandon their education and start a family. Contrary to Francis's claims about Jeanie, Jay Parini, noted Frost scholar and academic, posits that Jeanie was institutionalized for being too promiscuous with her male colleagues.[10] Once she was arrested—whether that be for paranoia, what second-wave feminist Betty Friedan calls "the problem that has no name,"[11] or for promiscuity— her brother was made responsible for her and found that "Jeanie had made the wrong decisions and she had paid dearly with her sanity."[12] Like many women in the early 1900s, Jeanie was forced to come to the realization "that the very meaning of her existence is not in her hands."[13]

It is not surprising then that the man whom Francis calls an empathetic poet wrote "Two Witches," a piece exploring the feminine voice as well as the ramifications of female sexuality and domestic confinement, in the summer and fall of 1920,[14] the same year that he was made guardian of his sister and put her in an asylum. Frost's respect

7. Lesley Lee Francis, *You Come Too: My Journey with Robert Frost* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 5.

8. Francis, *You Come*, 221.

9. Francis, 31.

10. Jay Parini, *Robert Frost: A Life* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 197.

11. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine*, 1.

12. Parini, 200.

13. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2011), 485.

14. Parini, 197.

for gossip[15] and empathy for the plight of women[16] ran concurrently with his own internalization of the ubiquitous patriarchal propaganda. The sentimentality of poetry did not reinforce the masculine identity of Modernist poets that upheld patriarchal beliefs. Recognizing this, Frost made a bold declaration by including "Two Witches" in *New Hampshire*, his fourth published book of poetry, as it gives an authoritative and autonomous voice to two separate women living on the outskirts of society, two women who, like his sister, had been made out to be too paranoid and too promiscuous. It is one of Frost's most haunting and unsettling poems as it perceives the societal and emotional boundaries women, who threaten the patriarchal order, face every day.

Split into two sections, "The Witch of Coös" and "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," "Two Witches" features women who are characterized as highly sexual and, as such, a threat to the American puritanical patriarchy. Feminist theorist Katherine Kerns writes in her book *Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite*, these women and their "salient differences function as a means by which the male more firmly establishes his oppositional identity."[17] In "The Witch of Coös," this is represented as her husband and the male traveler recording the conversation; for "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," her narrative is littered with men forcing her out of town because of her sexuality.[18] In every instance, it is men who are doing the pushing, the aggravating, the imposing, and the imprisoning in an attempt to control the women in their lives.

Simultaneously, Frost's omnipresent cultural uncertainty[19] seeps through the lines of this poem in search for a deeper understanding of power and subordination between the sexes. In "Two Witches," it is as if Frost acknowledged that, because he had never lived as a woman, he was ignorant of the problems that plagued them. However, it is clear that he very much valued intelligence in the women with whom he surrounded himself: his wife, his sister, his mother, and the female writers with whom he was acquainted (e.g. Amy Lowell, Susan Hayes Ward, etc.) and must have regularly seen them struggle with the "unfeminine" career woman and the "feminine" housewife. His poetic practice shrouded in empathy leads him to investigate that which he does not

15. Robert Frost, Richard Poirier, and Mark Richardson, *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York, NY: The Library of America, 1995), 685.

16. Karen L. Kilcup, *Robert Frost and Feminine Literary Tradition* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 123.

17. Katherine Kearns, *Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 97.

18. Frost, *Robert Frost: Collected Poems,*192-194.

19. Robert Pack, *Belief and Uncertainty in the Poetry of Robert Frost* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2003), 189.

know, and with "Two Witches," Frost raises the question: what happens to the women we marginalize and/or subordinate?

In *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*, Richard Poirier sees Frost's marginalized women as a way to "recall a nineteenth-century novelistic convention in which the repression of women and the restriction on their active participation in the outdoor world force them into exercises of free imagination and fancy."[20] Frost conveys the patriarchal and societal restrictions placed on women during the early 1900s in "Two Witches" by confining his female protagonists either within the domicile or through forcing them to argue their personhood. Poirier even notes that "Frost's best poetry emerged from a central nervous tension about 'home' and 'extravagance.'"[21] For Frost, the idea of home was often a source of fear, thus mirroring many arguments from second-wave feminists that surfaced towards the end of Frost's life.

One such feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, dedicates an entire chapter to domestic married life in her renowned The Second Sex. She compares the home to "an isolated cell,"[22] a kind-of solitary confinement, that "becomes the center of the world and even its own one truth…refuge, retreat, grotto, womb, it protects against outside dangers."[23] Yes, the home does protect from outside dangers as can be seen in Frost's "The Witch of Coös" via the reclusive relationship between the mother and son; nevertheless, as de Beauvoir offers and Poirier recognizes, the home is a place riddled with anxious fear, specifically by the women who are imprisoned there, where "neither time nor space escapes into infinity but instead quietly goes round and round."[24] Frost's women, shackled within the confines of the home, slowly start to become paranoid and lose their sense of self, something he knew all too well from his sister Jeanie. No matter what happens, this struggle that the empathetic poet wants to understand is one that "begins again every day."[25] The only way out of this timeless, confined loop is through imagination, and it is here where Frost's "Two Witches" is rooted.

Showcasing Frost's terrified fear of the home and what happens when one is forced into confinement, Poirier says,

20. Poirier, *Robert Frost*,112.

21. Poirier, 100.

22. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2011), 469.

23. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 471.

24. de Beauvoir, 469.

25. de Beauvoir, 474.

> Especially when a woman is the speaker in such poems the bursting out of imagination comes in the form of images at once terrifying, comically macabre, and sexually charged. These are poems of the mind's extravagance not supported by the feet, of women stuck at home rather than of men wandering beyond the boundaries of the homestead.[26]

It is not the fear of someone who has the option to leave a given situation, a predominantly masculine option, but the fear of someone who cannot leave, an integral part of the female existence. The women of "Two Witches" are "bent on subverting" the idea that women belong in the home[27] and subtextually illustrate that "witchness is immanent in the female form" and surfaces "even in the most seemingly domesticated woman."[28] For both witches, it is their womanness, their femininity, that "is both alluring and deadly, provocative of madness and of delight,"[29] that Frost dangerously explores while questioning patriarchal certitude.

The first section of "Two Witches," "The Witch of Coös," first appeared in the January 1922 issue of *Poetry*[30] and is the transcript of a conversation held at the home of a mother and son as recorded by an assumed-male traveler staying with them for the evening.[31] Like the transcriber, the reader of the poem feels a sense of intimacy in each of the poem's lines (e.g. "I never could have done the thing I did,"[32] "I don't remember why I ever cared,"[33] "That made him throw his bare legs out of bed"[34]). Critic Karen Kilcup proposes that this is because the poem contains the "dangerous, sexualized, and seductive gossip of rural life along an uncertain continuum of intimacy with the reader, as the events described are bordered by a reporter whose desires are frequently ambivalent and guarded and whose situation as outsider or insider is in question."[35] It is almost as if the transcriber is spreading a rumor that he knows is not something he should spread, a sort of forbidden fruit that he cannot help but bite into. And yet, he is

26. Poirier, *Frost*, 119.

27. Kearns, *Frost*, 87.

28. Kearns, 97.

29. Kearns, *Frost,* 106.

30. Lesley Lee Francis, *You Come Too: My Journey with Robert Frost* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 46.

31. Frost, *Robert Frost: Collected,* 187-192

32. Frost, *Collected*, 189.

33. *Frost*, 191.

34. *Frost*, 190.

35. Kilcup, *Frost*, 113.

the one telling the story, so the reader has no choice but to believe him – even though Frost has taught his readers never to believe anyone or anything as it is presented.

"The Witch of Coös" begins in the transcriber's voice: "I stayed the night for shelter at a farm/ Behind the mountain, with a mother and son,/ Two old-believers. They did all the talking."[36] The poem proceeds in a play-like narrative structure with speakers noted, yet the reader must not forget that these lines have been passed through at least one other person, the one who is recording them. Thus, the assumption that the lines spoken by mother and son cannot and should not be seen as absolute truth, calling into question the transcriber's authority and his position of power. In the transition of speakers, Frost incorporates his first use of empathetic understanding for female confinement for even within his own narrative Frost confines this mother and her son to the story of another man; their story does not belong to them. The recorder passes a narrative of murder, promiscuity, and madness, but "in spite of the horror, he finds such merging with a female alter ego seductive."[37] He simply cannot resist telling her story for it is at once foreign and titillating, an unexpected kind of intimacy that he did not expect when stopping for shelter. Kilcup notes, "As his proxy, the witch speaks from a maddened and maddening 'I' that simultaneously concerns itself utterly with relationships to the lover, the husband, the sons, the visitors, the reader – and situates herself as their confounding matrix of meaning."[38] He becomes her, an intentional crossing of gender boundaries that Frost hides within the first lines of his poem.

Even as the poem moves into the narrative, the Witch of Coös continues to face patriarchal restrictions, speaking only about her deceased husband, about her former lover, to her son, and to the transcriber. She exists only in relation to other men, completely devoid of any other relationship. In fact, the title of the poem "The Witch of Coös" is synonymous with "The Witch of Whore" for, in New England at the turn of the century, "coös" was a slang term for a prostitute or promiscuous woman.[39] Frost's naming of her is deliberately damning, showing how he views her actions despite giving her voice. Furthermore, the home where the witch inhabits notably has a cellar and an attic where she keeps the bones of her dead lover. Kearns asserts, "The cellar hole is traditionally a place of potential horror, often associated with sexual betrayal."[40]

36. Frost, *Collected*, 187.

37. Kilcup, *Frost*,152.

38. Kilcup, 121.

39. Kilcup, *Frost,* 156

40. Kearns, *Frost*, 93.

Especially in "The Witch of Coös," the cellar is a literal representation of the mother's sexual transgressions for it is here where her husband attacks and kills her lover. Kearns continues, "'Cellar holes' become pits that represent female sexuality, birth, death, and the grave, and attics are minds filled with the bones of old lovers."[41] It can be thusly assumed that the cellar is not only a representation of her sexual transgressions but also indicative of her vagina, the hole in which these sexual transgressions took place. Her home becomes a metaphor for her person, the cellar a metaphor for her sexuality, the attic a metaphor for her sanity. Because of the witch's relationship to her home, she will never be able to leave it. The lines stating, "The bulkhead double-doors were double locked/ And swollen tight and buried under snow," are a clear example of this metaphor, noting that her breasts were wrapped up in at least two layers of clothing and no sex drive permeates her vaginismus. Most importantly, Frost denotes that all of this is "buried under snow" to show that the Mother is cold and frigid to male advances.

When women are categorized as "cold" for refusing sexual advances, their "frigidity[…]can be seen as a punishment that woman imposes as much on herself as on her partner: wounded in her vanity, she resents him and herself, and she does not permit herself pleasure,"[42] a prevalent through line in a lot of the propaganda against The New Woman that surfaced around the same time as "Two Witches." It painted "domesticated sexuality" specifically as "pale and fruitless,"[43] but by the time second-wave feminism came onto the scene in the late 1950s, enough married women had shared their stories of a lackluster sex life that Simone de Beauvoir is able to claim, "Apathetic and languid women are always cold; there is a question as to whether constitutional frigidity exists, and surely psychic factors play a preponderant role in the erotic capacities of woman; but it is certain that physiological insufficiencies and a depleted vitality are manifested in part by sexual indifference."[44] In layman's terms, women who are seen as cold are not really cold and are either no longer sexually aroused by their partner, mentally stimulated as a result of their confinement to the home, and/or depressed for both aforementioned reasons. The sheer fact that the Witch of Coös seeks sexual validation outside of her marriage indicates that she was not happy with her husband, sexually or emotionally. She sought intimacy with another partner in order to fill a void, like her cellar, that second

41. Kearns, 89.

42. de Beauvoir, *Second*, 414.

43. Kearns, 89.

44. de Beauvoir, 390.

and third wave feminists knew/know cannot ever be filled: the impossible patriarchal standards to which all women must adhere in American culture.

Once the Witch of Coös's husband finds out she is cheating on him, he kills her lover. She recounts, "Tell the truth for once./ There were a man's his father killed for me./ I mean a man he killed instead of me./ The least I could do was to help dig their grave."[45] What is more is that the husband kills this lover *instead* of his wife, hinting that she is the one with whom he is truly upset. Many of the antifeminist texts produced after the First World War "argued that if masculinity was in crisis, it was women's fault, and the solution to the crisis was the revival of the subordination of women."[46] With this knowledge, these lines hint that the Witch of Coös's husband claimed her sexual transgressions were responsible for the murder of her lover and reasserted his dominance by making her oblige to help him dig the ex-lover's grave. The reason he is able to do this is through his "privileged situation" as "biologically aggressive" and "social function as chief and master." De Beauvoir argues, "Because man is sovereign in this world, he claims the violence of his desires as a sign of his sovereignty…on the contrary, woman being only an object is considered *hot* or *cold*; that is, she will never manifest any qualities other than passive ones."[47] Her husband is quick-tempered, violent, and murderous; his sovereignty permits and excuses this behavior, a temper-tantrum gone wild, because of his gender and status within the world. Enchanted with jealousy steeped in his wife's sexual prowess, the husband's actions to claim her transform him into the bestial form of a power-hungry man.

Only through both of her sexual partners' deaths is the Witch of Coös able to live freely and without patriarchal constraints—although she did "merge" with her home and is poetically unable to leave her domestic confinement. She still lives with the trauma of her infidelity and its aftermath as represented by the ex-lover's bones in the attic trying to communicate with her and one of his "finger-pieces" being lost within her box full of buttons.[48] "Not only is the phallic residue of the lover missing; it is magically transformed into a flood of buttons. The witch's clitoral sexuality, significantly located 'in her lap,' is not singular but multiple, both comical and terrifying in its excess," Kilcup writes.[49] Throughout early twentieth-century women's literature buttons were often a

45. Frost, *Collected,* 191.

46. Kimmel, "Men's Responses," 266.

47. de Beauvoir, *Second*, 397.

48. Frost, *Collected*, 190.

49. Kilcup, *Frost,* 156.

metaphor for a woman's clitoris,[50] and, as a well-read and well-established poet, Frost would have known this, which is one possible reason why the "finger-piece," yet another metaphor but for the phallus, is amongst the buttons. The Witch of Coös, in placing the buttons in her lap, supposes personal ownership over her lover's penis, a comical subversion of patriarchal ideas. Instead of him dominating her with his phallus, she dominates him with her clitoris.

Throughout "The Witch of Coös," Frost is at his best with metaphor, expertly mixing the "literal and figurative: whimsically yet gruesomely, buttons and bones are mixed up, language signifies something other than it appears to, something adjacent to but not symbolic of 'reality,' as figure is detached from ground."[51] He knows the subversion of patriarchal customs will frighten his readers, mostly his male ones, but, at the same time, Frost delicately and beautifully weaves feminine hysteria through the Witch of Coös, her story, and her actions. Subtextually, the Witch of Coös sees herself as a sexual object who is only able to find happiness through her own sexuality, a concept which Friedan illustrates: "Since that endless search for status as a desirable sexual object is seldom satisfied in reality for most American housewives, it is very easily translated into a search for status through the possession of objects."[52] The Witch of Coös is satisfied by neither sexual partner and only becomes comfortable once both men are out of her life, leaving only tokens of their remembrance to add to her collection. Her independence following her undermined sexuality—and her casualness to it—is what makes the Witch of Coös so "terrifying to the male reader-narrator, for it offers not understanding but violent appropriation posing a threat to his coherent identity."[53]

In addition, the emotional and psychological grip the Witch of Coös has over her son is a strong warning that matriarchal power will only lead to "weak" men. The only man that seems to remain in adoration of her is her potentially illegitimate son in a Hitchcockian twist that, like the buttons and her sexual freedom, only makes the narrator and reader more uncomfortable. Kilcup argues that the son is the "'illegitimate' product of the untold union of the mother and her lover, a socially subversive 'utterance' of her body – but he inherits her 'knowledge' without her vision and remains silent until the end."[54] With only a few lines at the beginning of the narrative, her son serves as witness

50. Kilcup, 155.

51. Kilcup, 120.

52. Friedan, *The Feminine*, 322.

53. Kilcup, *Frost,* 119.

54. Kilcup, 116.

to her testimony, an unreliable one, and believes her to be the source of his concept of truth. In direct contrast, the transcriber goes to verify the old woman's story, another attempt to undermine her narrative, and makes himself known to his reader again in the last few lines of the poem: "I verified the name next morning: Toffile./ The rural letter box said Toffile Lajway."[55] Instead of solidifying her tale as fiction, he finds proof that, at the very least, her husband's name was Toffile. Kilcup inquires,

> What seems odd about this conclusion is that the narrator tries to verify only the witch's *husband's* name, as if he – and the mailbox, their link to the (rational) outside world – is complicit in silencing her. In the traditional terms of the patriarchal family, translated onto and into a masculine lexicon, her story is after all the story of the cuckolded Toffile.[56]

Even after she has intimately gossiped about the primary events of her life, a likely moment of desperation to chat with anyone who has not already heard the story, the narrator dismisses her unreliability as if nothing this woman could have ever said was true. However, as Kilcup posits, he is able to come to terms with the story only as it relates to the men whose paths the Witch of Coös happened to cross. As her Frostian name underlines to the male reader and narrator, the Witch of Coös is a whore and nothing more. With a deeper understanding of female hysteria and sexuality, her sexual transgressions are only the surface. If Frost has taught his readers anything, it is that what lies underneath— in the case of "The Witch of Coös," the causes and effects of her sexuality and subsequent hysteria—serves a much deeper and more significant critical reading.

While "The Witch of Coös" investigates what happens when a woman is forced to see her worth in terms of her domesticity, "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" examines the role of women who are not a part of the domestic sphere. This poem is told solely from a female speaker, the Witch of Grafton, as she tries to persuade a township to let her live there after being labeled a witch for sexual deviance before, during, and after her marriage to Arthur Amy.[57] Despite her outsider status, the Witch of Grafton still defines her worth in terms of her sexuality as do the town and men who have ostracized her. Katherine Kearns argues, "'The Pauper Witch of Grafton' reinforces Frost's implicit assumption that, degraded to their most natural state, women will become witches, metamorphic and powerfully seductive."[58] Kearns uses the word "implicit" to denote

55. Frost, *Collected,* 192.

56. Kilcup, 119.

57. Frost, *Collected*,192-194.

58. Kearns, *Frost*, 97.

Frost's patriarchal conditioning to automatically assume women are dangerously sexual, as is reinforced across twentieth century literature. In fact, Friedan also picks up on this in *The Feminine Mystique*, noting, "As American women have turned their attention to the exclusive, explicit, and aggressive pursuit of sexual fulfillment, or the acting-out of sexual phantasy, the sexual disinterest of American men and their hostility toward women, have also increased."[59] The Witch of Grafton chooses to be sexually liberated ("I took him out in his old age/ And rode all over everything on him"[60]), and it is this sole reason that she is easily painted as a witch ("But everybody took it for a proof."[61]). Her character "allows Frost to make explicit the paradox of sexual fear coupled with desire at the same time it allows him to repudiate her by showing the social and legal consequences of her extremism."[62] She is a woman who lived a life of sexual freedom in her youth, something which the Puritan-rooted patriarchy very much feared for if a woman was sexually free, then she would not be easily, and subserviently, controlled.

For the Witch of Grafton, her life with her husband is described as sexually fruitful; she says in her own testimony, "Up where the trees grow short, the mosses tall,/ I made him gather me wet snow berries/ On slippery rocks beside a waterfall./I made him do it for me in the dark./ And he liked everything I made him do."[63] Her words tell of a healthy sex life between Amy and herself, one with manual stimulation, oral sex, and female orgasm. For a male poet to indulge in female sexuality and pleasure, and the female ownership of that pleasure, in such a way was truly novel, and, as prominent reviewer Randall Jarrell points out in his analysis of this poem for *The Kenyon Review* in 1952, "...there is more sexuality there than in several hothouses full of Dylan Thomas; and, of course, there is love, there."[64] Yes, there is supposed love there, but the reader also realizes that it is exactly this "love" during the witch and Amy's sex that causes Amy to paint her as a witch who should never be allowed to exist among other people. The witch divulges, "But he liked best/ To let on he was plagued to death with me:/ If anyone had seen me coming home/ Over the ridgepole, 'stride of a broomstick,/ As often as he had in the tail of the night,/ He guessed they'd know what he had to put up with."[65] Amy is

59. Friedan, *The Feminine*, 310.

60. Frost, *Collected*, 193.

61. Frost, 193.

62. Kearns, *Frost*, 98.

63. Frost, 194.

64. Randall Jarrell, "To the Laodiceans," *The Kenyon Review 14*, no. 4 (Autumn 1952): 535–61, www.jstor.org/stable/4333363, 555.

65. Frost, *Collected*, 194.

spreading rumors that his wife is a witch ("I guess he found he got more out of me/ By having me a witch."[66]) in order to make it easier for him to leave and start his life anew. The Witch of Grafton hints that she and Amy would have consensual intercourse in the early hours of the morning with "'stride of a broomstick," but her husband alleges that it was her witchy, deviously sexual ways that ensnared him rather than spousal sexual arousal. Kearns notes that through Amy's degradation of his wife, "Frost finally makes explicit the potential in women to induce sexual madness[…]These woman signs are not decipherable through logic and they do not appeal to rationality, but they instead short-circuit cerebral function and make their appeals more viscerally."[67] "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" does show how men paint women as inducers of "sexual madness" through Amy's claims and the witch vying for her right to live where she pleases, but to argue that Frost "makes explicit" that the witch induces such madness is questionable. By having her as the speaker and pairing it with "The Witch of Coös," it makes more sense that Frost is using his empathetic side to "put himself in another's shoes."

Likewise, Friedan emphasizes, "When woman was seen as a human being of limitless human potential, equal to man, anything that kept her from realizing her full potential was a problem to be solved: barriers to higher education and political participation, discrimination or prejudice in law or morality."[68] It is evident that Frost believed in the education of women as his mother, sister, and wife were all highly educated, and it is easy to suppose that he would want to understand the root of their hysteria. Through his poetry, Frost questions all existing realities to find the ultimate truth. Robert Pack adds that for Frost, "there is no such thing as simple truth, only speculation and uncertainty, grounded, as is highly likely, in illusion."[69] Especially with "The Pauper Witch of Grafton," Frost is searching for something, a potential empathetic understanding of why and how his sister went paranoid. What caused her to get this way? Do all women feel that their worth is bound to their sexuality, their partners, their domestic lives? De Beauvoir claims that the "patriarchal civilization condemned woman to chastity,"[70] which in turn highlights the notion that women, during the first half of the twentieth century, were seen as non-human and, thus, non-sexual, a status lower than that

66. Frost, 194.

67. Kearns, *Frost*, 100.

68. Friedan, *The Feminine*, 57-8.

69. Robert Pack, *Belief and Uncertainty*, 188.

70. de Beauvoir, *Second*, 386.

of the human male, making it easy for Frost to subtextually illustrate this patriarchal push for purity.

Frost is not the only man to pick up on this idea; in fact, Jarrell describes "The Pauper Witch of Grafton" as "where the testy, acrid mockery of the old pauper, of the 'noted witch' always plagued by an adulterous generation for a sign, turns into something very different as she remembers the man who first exposed and then married her."[71] What she turns into, though, is what she has been all along: a woman trying to exist in a world that tells her everything is wrong with her. It is only the men—Amy, Mallice Huse, and the men in power who believed them— who have made her out to be the subject of such scrutiny. "The power of naming lies, in large part, within paternalistic systems that may exploit and use the woman according to what they name her."[72] As evidenced by her testimony, the Witch of Grafton has been chewed up and spit out by the "paternalistic system," only to come back on her knees to beg for forgiveness for transgressions that never should have brought her excommunication. These men, while delighting in their earthly masculinity, are bound to face a judgment before their higher power for the spreading of such falsities. "The liar deceives himself by repressing his knowledge that God perceives his lie," Pack notes,[73] applicability to Amy and Huse resounding.

Furthermore, Kearns finds that the Witch of Grafton is "a parodic symbol of the aging (male) poet who fears that his inspirative powers are lagging, that his poetry can no longer attract and seduce,"[74] a reading that is significant but leads to a more self-centered Frost. Frost, despite his empathetic poetics, still has the need to encase his feminine empathy within boundaries, not letting his metaphors or understanding ever stray too far away from the masculine. Kearns explains, "Femininity, that which swells into the metaphoric language of poetry where metaphor is, indeed, the whole of thinking, must be encased in 'masculine' femininity."[75] Caging women within the confines of physical or poetical boundaries is a trend for Frost despite his inherent and progressive views on women's education. Poirier finds these restrictions "are a precondition for expression,"[76] and, for Frost specifically, they very much are. The women in Frost's poetry must obey society's rules, but he is also curious about how these rules drive them to madness,

71. Jarrell, "To the Laodiceans," 554.

72. Kearns, *Frost,* 98.

73. Pack, 183.

74. Kearns, 98.

75. Kearns, 106.

76. Poirier, *Frost*, 104.

paranoia, self-worth tied to sexuality, and hysteria. There are two Frosts actively coming out in "The Pauper Witch of Grafton:" one who wants to understand and another who wants to confine.

As specific and rooted in twentieth-century American culture as the poems within "Two Witches" are, they allow Frost to highlight "the local" as it transforms "into the universal."[77] The women and their supporting casts, all of whom are men, subvert traditional gender norms through the uplifting of female voices, dedicating most of the lines in each to spoken words by women. Frost does this to show that, as Poirier aptly suggests, "very often 'home' is the prison of madness, recognized as such by the keepers and so acknowledged by the victims…"[78] The home belongs to those who inhabit it, and, at the turn of the twentieth century, that meant women of cisgender-heterosexual families, one where the patriarch was king and his wife was a servant to his every need. For the educated career women, the thought of domestic confinement without intellectual or sexual stimulation induced paranoia and hysteria, often leading their husbands to violent outbursts as seen in "The Witch of Coös" or to brand them as a witch for easy disposal as Arthur Amy does to his wife in "The Pauper Witch of Grafton." Kearns stresses that

> Frost's witches literalize [the] capacity to transform and to be transformed, and they stand as cautionary figures who prove the powers of women who escape socially determined boundaries of behavior. Promiscuously inclined, morality, whether embodied in human form or in poetic language, represents the metamorphic, the seductive, and the maddening: those forces against which man must stand his ground.[79]

The Witch of Coös and the Witch of Grafton both undergo significant transformations as a result of what men in their life did in response to their sexuality and sex lives. Kearns argues that these women are almost like giant warning signs with bold letters saying, "if you, a woman, desire sexual satisfaction, then you will end up like these abandoned, mad, and confined women, a fate no one could or would ever want." Unlike the men in the poems, Frost, through the provocative and erotic feminine voice, empathizes with the plight of women, but he still suggests that their madness must be contained. Like a bear when looked in the eye, a sexually awakened woman, according to "Two Witches," is a danger to her society; with his verse, Frost is able, at the very least, to cage, if not tame, them. He highlights the wrongs of the men, an acknowledgement that is progressive and significant, but his poetic and confined structure reveals that that is where Frost's feminism comes to an end.

77. Parini, *Frost,* 212.

78. Poirier, 113.

79. Kearns, Frost, 89.

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