

Amherst CHI Symposium

On the Occasion of the Hundredth Anniversary of the College First Hiring Robert Frost:

The Permanence of Frost

I am Paul Dimond, Class of 1966, and I will serve as the moderator for this panel. When I headed west from Michigan to the College in the fall of 1962 at the age of 18, Robert Frost headed east to Michigan to continue to campaign for his poetry before 8500 students, faculty and admirers at the largest basketball arena in my home state at the age of 88. I am as surprised as you that I return on this occasion, 55 years later. For much of the past decade, however, I lived with Frost as poet and man writing an historical novel. It's about a reclusive woman poet born in Glen Arbor in the shadow of Sleeping Bear Dunes at the end of the 19th century and weaned by her mother on Emily Dickinson's poems. My Belle moves to Ann Arbor in the fall of 1921 after Frost quit Amherst College for the first of three times to become a Creative Fellow at Michigan. At the University she meets the already great poet and grows from Frost's student and mentee to trusted colleague, correspondent and lifelong friend. They exchange their poems and challenge each other to compose better ones, including a handful of different remembrances of their mothers. I suppose that makes me a personal example of Frost's permanence, as *The Belle of Two Arbors* will be published a week from now.

Gathered with me here are three panelists whose association with Frost started early and continues. Each has a different perspective on Frost's permanence. Here is how we will proceed. I will introduce them in order, and each will offer their unique insights for fifteen minutes. I will also introduce an 8-minute video that shows in the public remarks of Robert Frost and President Kennedy how their dialogue about the proper role of Poetry and Power from 1959 to 1963 still has meaning today.

So now the panelists and the order in which they will appear:

1. Bill Pritchard, Folger Emeritus Professor of English, is without question the College's most revered teacher throughout six decades and counting. Bill will begin by explaining how Frost first came to the College 100 years ago; and then share his views on Frost's permanence today, 33 years after he published the best literary biography of the poet in 1984, titled "A Literary Life Reconsidered."
2. Donald Sheehy is Professor of English and Philosophy at Edinboro University. For his entire academic career, including for his Ph.D. at the University of Virginia, he has studied and written about Frost and his poetry, written the three best critical essays ever on the man, served as President of the Frost Society, and is currently the lead Editor of the planned 5-volume Frost Letters, Vols 1-2 through 1928 already completed and Vol. 3 in the works. Donald will share his views on what the Frost Letters have to say about Frost's poetry and position today.
3. I will then tee up the video of Frost and Kennedy so you can draw your own conclusions about the continuing relevance of their words.
4. Vievee Francis, a graduate of Fiske and the MFA program at Michigan, is a professor of poetry and creative writing at Dartmouth. In the past 6 months she has gained the most acclaim of any poet in America for her most recent book of poetry, *Forest Primeval*: In October the winner of the Hurston-White Black Writers' Poetry Award; and in February the

winner of the Kingsley-Tufts Poetry Award, the largest money prize for poetry save for the Nobel Prize.

As we proceed don't be surprised if each of us shares a Frost poem or two.

1. "Bill (holding up his book), as you see from the dog-ears, I thank you for keeping me busy for the past ten years. Please proceed." Pritchard's conclusion: "Frost now stands as the acknowledged lead of all 20th century American Poets, the most taught, the most read, the most influential."

2. "Donald, (holding up my novel), I thank you for sharing an advance copy of Volume 2 of the Frost Letters, plowing through my manuscript and sharing your insights on Frost the poet, the man and the character so that my historical novel although fiction would read as authentic. The floor is yours." After Sheehy illustrates the wide variety of forms of poetry Frost used in his long career, he concludes, "Frost is the most surprising, varied, studied, influential, and, yes, the best American poet of the 20th century."

3. Allow me to set the context for the video. In the fall of 1960 I witnessed Jack Kennedy end a whistle stop speech from the back of a train by quoting the last lines of Frost's poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" – "But I have promises to keep/And Miles to go Before I sleep." No death poem that, it became a rallying cry for the election of a President promising to scale "A New Frontier" and so much more for the country. Little did I then realize that in the spring of 1959, before JFK announced his candidacy, Robert Frost had already nominated the junior Senator for Massachusetts as the next President! Responding to a reporter's question about the supposed decline of New England before his gala 85th Birthday party at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City, Frost answered, "The next president of the United States will be from Boston. Does that sound as if New England is decaying? He's... named Kennedy." Jack Kennedy sent a gracious thank you note to Frost. For the next 18 months wherever Frost spoke he kept touting Kennedy as the next President.

For the first time ever, President-elect Kennedy asked a poet to read a poem at an Inauguration. Frost replied in a telegram: "If you can bear at your age the honor of being made President, I ought to be able to bear at my age the honor of taking some part in your inauguration. I may not be equal to it, but I can accept it for my cause – The arts, poetry, now for the first time taken into the affairs of Statesmen."

Kennedy asked Frost, if he wasn't up to composing a new poem, to recite the 16-line poem of the history of the U.S., "The Gift Outright," with one possible change in the last line. Frost agreed, but two nights before the Inauguration the poet stayed up late in his hotel room composing a much longer history of the nation and the promise of the new President, an 80-line poem titled "Dedication" as a "preface" to reciting the short poem. The longer poem was supposed to end with Frost thanking the President for including the arts and poetry on the occasion of such a remarkable, peaceful transition of national power in our democracy for 172 years and counting: "A golden age of poetry and power/Of which this noonday's the beginning hour."

Now, listen to the President' fateful reflections on Frost, Poetry and Power on October 26, 1963, at the Groundbreaking of the Robert Frost Memorial Library, in which we now sit at Amherst College:

[Insert Link to Video]

No President could ever pay a higher tribute to a poet than thanking him for questioning the power of government, including himself and his Administration.

4. "Professor Francis (holding up my novel) thank you for encouraging me to write Belle and sharing the reports of the Nominating Committee for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, so I had to write yet another draft of the novel. Vievee will share her much more personal story of how Frost -- who died the year before she was born -- influences her poetry." After offering examples of Frost poems and their impact on hers, Francis concludes: "Frost's poems not only proved the most influential in my composing poetry, but the great poet is the founder of the lineage of more American poets today than any other, dead or alive and regardless of race or gender."

Round of applause and 15 minutes of Q & A

Conclusion: Consider the continuing impact on my novel of another Frost poem, "The Silken Tent." It is the loveliest of his love songs, whether understood as an invitation to a new lover; an elegy to a mother, aunt, daughter, longtime and much admired woman friend; or as a perfect sonnet rolling in a single sentence with its own rhythm, lilt, metaphor and sense of sound and touch.

My novel begins with Belle's invalid mother drowning in a terrible natural disaster while ice-fishing with her 13-year daughter and seven year-old son. As the ice breaks and the shanty falls into Lake Michigan, Belle's Mama instructs her to swim the little boy to shore and leave her. That evening, still dazed from hypothermia, Belle tries to compose an unfinished poem to her mother. Thus begins Belle's long quest to compose a better elegy for her mother buried under Lake Michigan's frigid waters.

As Frost's mother was named Isabelle, the great poet takes to calling Belle "My Second Belle" in the course of their long friendship and correspondence. After nearly two decades and several tries, Frost recognizes Belle's final remembrance of her mother -- "Goodbye to Mama" -- at the first Hopwood Awards ceremony in 1931.

All the while Belle challenges Frost to write a remembrance of his mother, but she found his first effort in 1927 inadequate because of its holding back. Near the end of 1937 Frost shares his new poem "The Silken Tent" with Belle. Read as an elegy for his mother, Belle exclaims it "sings beyond my challenge. Eons from now the elegist will still say it as a memorial, but your critics will longer debate its possible meanings. They miss the magic of your best poems: tied by the senses to daily experience on this earth, your voice soars by the pull of metaphor into a dream that sounds a different tune and meaning each time heard."

16 years later Frost concludes Belle's Memorial Service in the First Presbyterian Church here by reading The Silken Tent:

She is as in a field a silken tent

At midday when a sunny summer breeze

Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,

So that in guys it gently sways at ease,

And its supporting central cedar pole
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound,
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taut
In the capriciousness of summer air
Is of the slightest bondage made aware.

No poet could ever pay a higher tribute than Robert Frost saying this poem as an elegy for his "Second Belle."