

ANALYSIS

“Two Tramps in Mud-Time” (1934)

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

“In splitting wood, a man may find a physical and emotional pleasure similar to the one Frost describes in this poem and in ‘Mowing.’ Suppose, though, that someone who has a financial need for work asks for the ax or the scythe? This question is posed by ‘Two Tramps in Mud-Time.’ Cleanth Brooks notices that the opening stanzas ‘establish the character of the speaker so that the generalization...is dramatically justified.’ He criticizes Frost, however, because here the generalization ‘is made finally in the mode of prose rather than in terms of symbol.’ The criticism might not be valid if, as some may hold, is not Frost’s own, or if the solution—like the moral of ‘Mending Wall’—has emotional and logical implications above and beyond those explicitly stated.”

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States 2
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 935

“‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’ opens with the poet as wood-splitter in the thawing time of late winter, suffering the interruption of two unemployed loggers; this is good localized description, the kind Frost was master of. But then he appears not to know what to do with his opening. The poem wanders into further unnecessary description: the April day, the bluebird, the snow and water; and then it ends in four stanzas of virtually straight editorial matter. The two tramps and the mud-time are left utterly stranded. When one thinks how Frost would have used these figures at the time when he was writing his earlier dramatic and narrative poems, one can see clearly, I believe, how he had deserted his own imagination and how he tried to make up the deficiency through conscious manipulation and force.”

Hayden Carruth
“Robert Frost”
Parnassus: Poetry in Review
(Spring-Summer 1975)

“Like many of Frost’s poems, ‘Two, Tramps in Mud Time’ unites divergent lines of thought by placing in tension opposed or contradictory values: the self and the other, the literal and the symbolic, the general and the particular, the straight-forward and the ironic, and so on. It is generally agreed that, at the end of the poem, Frost leaves it to his readers to apply to their own lives, to their ‘avocations and vocations,’ the maxim that love and need, work and play, can and should be one. But less agreement exists as to the message and quality of this ‘editorializing’.... Regarding the poem’s message, critics have focused on whether or not the narrator-author should be understood to have surrendered his job of wood-cutting to the tramps who need the work. The wood-cutting is obviously symbolic, so the matter is usually re-framed as follows: is Frost urging that we sacrifice self for others, or are we to expect those ‘others’ to look out for themselves?....

‘Be glad of water, but don’t forget / The lurking frost in the earth beneath...’ Frost’s admonishment to us here not to forget to accommodate antithetical norms illustrates the fact that we do forget, that we normally seek to avoid or escape oppositions of the sort that we find in stanzas one through eight, which are themselves reconciled only in stanza nine: the tension, for example, between the various contradicting images and values in one through five; between pleasures we naturally love and the reasonableness or prudence we know we need; and ultimately between one code of prudence (the tramps’) and another (the narrator’s). These tensions are so arranged as to climax on an emotional level in the excerpt from stanza five above, with the images of water and frost, the pleasurable preferred to the painful (so the narrator needs to remind us, ‘don’t forget’); and on a more intellectual level in stanza eight, with the logic of the tramps over the weaker right attributed to the narrator—reason over feeling, prudence over pleasure (hence the easy ‘agreed’).

Although diverse, these contrasting images, values, and ideas align in sequences of association summarized in the topics 'love,' 'need,' 'work' and 'play.' For instance, love and play first represent the physical delight both in 'muscles rocking soft / And smooth and moist in vernal heat,' and in the other vernal images as well; and then represent more generally (in stanza eight) any pleasure in life or life of pleasure ('My right might be love...'): love-play: narrator, woodcutting, warmth, air, brightness, bird, water, life of muscles, vernal heat—in short, everything in life we are 'glad of,' symbolized most effectively by the vital water of 'brook' and 'pond' in five. By contrast, need and work first represent tactics for survival in the marketplace, and then more generally any struggle, difficulty or necessity that 'lurks' or 'hulks' 'out of the mud' or woods, or just out of sight: work-need: strangers, blows, coldness, earth, darkness, silence, frost, tramps, cold logic—in short, everything in life we 'dare not speak,' 'spare to strike,' and wish to 'forget.'

Now the point is that these associated images, ideas, and values are arranged and treated by a method of disjunction and subordination, a pattern which structures and determines how we consciously react to the world presented in stanzas one through eight. Here it is not so much that we agree with what the tramps say, as that we see things in the way they do, by division and negation. This is the tramps' own method and *modus vivendi*—one hardly unfamiliar to us, or opposed to the way we normally act—which Frost exploits in the form of the poem itself. We are all adept enough in life at being 'glad of' what gives pleasure and at shunning ills, just as we are, on the other hand, prudent enough to subordinate pleasure to the need to survive. Thus we appreciate what in nature is pleasurable, and tend to avoid what is difficult and associated with struggle and need (the cold, dark, silent, frozen).

Rhetorically, this tendency to see things as existing 'in twain' (separate in the sense of opposed and contradictory) is the 'common place' we occupy at the beginning and throughout most of the poem ('yield who will to their separation'), which Frost explores for its powers and limits. Accordingly he has us identify on the one hand with the narrator and the images associated with him, and to feel reserve toward those 'strangers' who 'put him off,' and caution or fear at the images associated with them (mud, mid-March, frost, teeth). On the other hand he has us agree with the tramps against the pseudo-narrator's sentimentalized love and self-absorbed play. The point is that in both cases the two exist 'in twain.'

As a result, commentators have always seen the tramps and narrator as locked into opposition! And yet, although we don't come to realize it until stanza nine, in stanza eight we don't know what the narrator really believes. Actually he is not opposed to the tramps at all: his 'right' only 'might be love' (pleasure, etc.), and turns out not to be. Until the last, however, the narrator's true position is subordinated to the one attributed to him (which is subordinated in turn to the tramps' own view). The narrator, Frost himself, is 'lurking' behind a second or pseudo-self, momentarily eclipsed by a world-view in which the terms of the debate are set—and more importantly by a worldview whose chief characteristic is that there is a debate at all. In short, Frost achieves his effects by manipulating the point of view from which we see and understand the world of the poem.

This becomes clearer in stanza nine, which not only talks about those preceding oppositions as unities, but which unifies them with various rhetorical devices: paradox ('work is play'), pun ('play for mortal stakes'), simile ('as my two eyes make one in sight'), repetition of the conjunctive 'and,' unity of idea (the idea of unity itself), and the unifying of form and content of the previous two sections. As a result we learn (or remember) a way of seeing oppositions as unified wholes, which resolves conflict not by avoidance or negation, but by asserting the equal importance of the opposed parts, in nature (cold and warm, water and frost), in self (body and soul, avocation and vocation), in human relations (love and need, narrator and tramps), and in our relations with the transcendent (Heaven and the future's sakes).

Again, contrast this view and its methods with our mode of apprehension in the first two sections. Section one (1-5) controls how we evaluate its images by juxtaposing opposites, presenting first what is the more obvious and pleasurable, and then balancing that with the less obvious and somehow more threatening or difficult. Arrangement is crucial, for it suggests the precariousness of our satisfaction with the seemingly self-evident (the 'cheery' tramps, the 'unimportant' wood, the sun, the bluebird, the water, the 'right' of love). It does so by juxtaposing these with the need to provide ('don't forget') for what is no less real for being less obviously pleasant or present. But note that this is accomplished with our attention

directed, not to this one-sidedness of ours, but to the emotional pleasure of act and scene—the implications of inadequacy are only ‘lurking.’ Similarly, section two (6-8) brings this pattern to its logical conclusion by sharpening the differences between the pseudo-narrator and the tramps, and by sacrificing one of those ‘sides,’ love and play, to the need to work.

Here again our attention is elsewhere, on the prudential over the pleasurable, and again the explicit view is that these elements are at odds. Hence, throughout both sections elements are joined only by the disjunctive ‘but’: ‘But if you so much as dare to speak’; ‘But he wouldn’t advise a thing to blossom’; ‘My right might be love / But theirs was need’; ‘The sun was warm but the wind was chill.’ In sum, careful selection and arrangement of images and actions analogically related to each other and connoting good and bad, the separation of emotion and reason, and various syntactical and stanzaic divisions dichotomize the reader’s perceptions and responses, leading him to see the world as the tramps do—dualistically. This is so successfully accomplished, in fact, that we have to ask ourselves how it is that we come to find the claims about unity in stanza nine persuasive at all. Why not agree with Cowley that stanza nine is a sententious sermon, or with Poirier that the poem is a ‘failure?’ Surely stanza nine alone does not overcome the world-view enacted in the preceding eight: Why then accept it?

The answer lies, I think, in the fundamental ambiguity of the poem’s images, actions, terms, and methods of dividing and uniting. Frost does counter each of these with its opposite, but he does so ambiguously, encouraging us in effect to see the elements of each pair not simply as separated, but also as united. This means that Frost does not rely in the ninth stanza on abstract sermonizing extraneous to the rest of the poem, as Cowley, Cook and others allege, but simply recommends at the end of the poem what he has been surreptitiously doing all along, uniting opposites....

From this perspective we can now grasp the whole poem as an argument whose conclusion is drawn in stanza nine. Past disjunctive pairs can now be understood as so many examples of unity-in-division, related to each other by analogy, which simultaneously, but on different levels of the reader’s awareness, (1) show the powers and limits of the tramps’ view, and more importantly (2) prove by inductive generalization the maxim with which the poem ends. We are persuaded, moved to a new ‘place,’ by virtue of our having experienced several plausible examples, whose terms then become, in Kenneth Burke’s formulation, ‘equipment for living.’

And this explains, I think, why Frost refrains from telling us how he responded to the tramps’ putative request. It is not that this request is insignificant or irrelevant, since this situation is morally as real as any other we might imagine. Rather, Frost has us answer our own question by requiring us to apply the message we learned from the poem. And we can only answer that the narrator must give the work because, to put it negatively, not to give would be to ignore that ‘common good’ and those ‘mortal stakes’ now before him (and us) in the persons of the needy tramps. To imagine refusing this unity of ‘self’ and ‘other’ in the act of giving is simply to have missed the ‘message,’ to have failed to grasp what the poem enacted. To put this more positively, to give the woodcutting is itself a creative ‘deed’ which unites the narrator’s love and need just as the woodcutting itself had previously done for him. Indeed, the narrator has been giving (by denying himself) for a long time: ‘The blows that a life of self-control / Spares to strike for the common good...’

Furthermore, by giving the job Frost in effect concedes that values do often exist ‘in twain’ (the tramps, for one, simply have no choice about uniting values such as love and need, work and play); the narrator’s giving thus signals the fact that his ideal realistically admits the tramps’ view, and qualifies it without simply negating it: narrator and tramps are thus unified again in their separation. What Frost has done, then, is to equip us, not with Christian, liberal, or any other kind of determinate doctrine, but with a language and experience requiring innovative thought and feeling, practical ‘wisdom’ which completes and finally becomes our ‘delight’....

Applied to poetry itself, then, love and need, work and play signify Frost’s ideal of the ‘philosophic poet’ as one who unites knowledge and action in the unity of art and propaganda, poetic and rhetoric. The poet as philosopher is the rhetorician, not in any narrow partisan sense, but as one seeking to stimulate inquiry, to transform commonplaces, and to move to new perceptions of self and world. It is the classical rhetorical ideal of Cicero, Horace and Sidney, for whom the offices of poet, as of orator, were to teach,

move and delight. For too long critics have one-sidedly favored the poetic against the rhetorical, and the romantic 'I' against the more pragmatic 'we,' and in consequence have failed to do justice to one of Frost's most representative poems. It is not unlikely that more rhetorical analyses can enrich our sense of Frost as communicator, and of his work as play for mortal stakes. We have not yet found the lurking Frost."

Walter Jost
"The Lurking Frost: Poetic and Rhetoric in 'Two Tramps in Mud Time'"
On Frost: The Best from American Literature
eds. Cady, Edwin H. and Louis J. Budd
(Duke 1991)

"'Two Tramps in Mud-Time' was first published in 1934. At the time Frost remarked that he considered the poem to be 'against having hobbies.' Two years later, when he collected it in *A Further Range* as one of ten poems to be 'taken doubly,' he added to its title in the list of contents the thematic phrase, 'or, A Full-Time Interest.' In both instances Frost provided a clue to his intended meaning. Unfortunately, critical interpretations of the poem have seldom pursued the leads suggested by the poet. Two such commentaries, published twenty years apart, are particularly instructive regarding the manner in which each reaches out for the meaning of the poem. Each sees the poem as a vehicle for an idea, for a social ideology; but neither finds it necessary to locate the poem in the context of traditional American thought and literature.

Denis Donoghue, writing in 1965, reads 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' as a clear instance of the relation between Frost's 'temperament and the ideas of Social Darwinism.' The poet did not find compelling the arguments for giving the tramps a job, and hence Donoghue reaches this puzzling conclusion: 'So need is not reason enough. The narrator has need and love on his side, hence he survives and nature blesses him as the best man. The tramps are unfit to survive because they have only their need, and the Darwinist law is that they should not survive.' Donoghue's overall reading of Frost's poem, not to mention his extraordinary application of Darwinist law, defies explanation. The idea that conjoined need and love constitute in themselves a higher claim for survival than need alone is a curious form of Darwinism. Frost's poem does show a concern with personal integrity and the survival of the human spirit, but nowhere does it come close to hinting that need without love, lamentable as it may be, actually renders the mud-time tramps unfit for survival. The narrator may have need and love 'on his side' (as Donoghue puts it), but this fact hardly constitutes evidence either that the situation enables him to survive or that 'nature blesses him as the best man.' There is no indication, either within the confines of the poem or in the facts of the poet's life as we know them, that 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' is intended to recall Charles Darwin or to echo the Social Darwinists.

Donoghue's reading bears a curious relationship to Malcolm Cowley's famous commentary on the poem, made more than forty years ago. His Darwinist interpretation is an offshoot of Cowley's 'liberal' chastisement of Frost in the *New Republic* in 1944. Donoghue offers a specific reason for Frost's behavior toward the tramps, while Cowley describes and deplores the poet's reaction to their request. But both critics are interested in faulting the poet for his inhumanity. 'In spite of his achievements as a narrative and lyric poet,' argues the dissenting Cowley, there is 'a case against Robert Frost as a social philosopher in verse and as a representative of the New England tradition' of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Assuming that the poem reflects an actual incident of the depression years, Cowley criticizes Frost for evading the socioeconomic fortune of the masses and retreating into 'sermon.' Instead of helping men who want work, preaches Cowley, 'Frost turns to the reader with a sound but rather sententious sermon on the ethical value of the chopping block.'

To acknowledge that Cowley's account of the poem has some, albeit limited, merit, is not, however, to endorse his vestigial reading with its earmarks of the 1930s. It may be granted that Frost was an early outspoken foe of the social excesses he found exhibited in Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the administrators of his New Deal. But to insist unequivocally that in this poem Frost lacks all social conscience is to mislead grievously: Cowley's concept of a social conscience is at best limited.

That the strangers who come at him 'out of the mud' display great need, Frost acknowledges. Too readily is his head filled with the narrow logic that he has 'no right to play / With what was another man's

work for gain.’ ‘My right might be love but theirs was need,’ he admits; ‘and where the two exist in twain / Theirs was the better right—agreed.’ Frost is not insensitive to the tramps’ need for ‘gain,’ for shelter and food perhaps, but, individualist that he is, he is too thoroughly self-reliant and humanistic to assign all priority to satisfying such basic needs. Rather, he hopes to remind us, in offering himself as example, that men have other kinds of need as well and that their failure to meet those needs results from their inability to recognize the high necessity that ‘love and need’ must make one (‘as my two eyes make one in sight’). This failure, common to men everywhere, is particularized for the moment in the tramps whose only thought was that, claiming economic need, ‘all chopping was theirs of right.’ Frost deplures, of course, the plight of the unfortunates who for whatever reason must totally dissociate need and love, vocation and avocation. He does not deny that poverty is problematic to society; but he does indicate that the necessity for any man to work much or all of his time for pay alone will rapidly dissolve his sense of other values of self and spirit. He concludes triumphantly: ‘Only where love and need are one, / And the work is play for mortal stakes, / Is the deed ever really done / For Heaven and the future’s sakes.’

Frost’s ideology in this poem has its roots deep in the nineteenth century; and to understand his poem’s relationship to that century; we must turn, pace Donoghue and Cowley; to the traditions of Concord transcendentalism. Specifically; we must look to Henry Thoreau, whose work, encountered early, had a pervasive and formative impact on Frost’s life as well as on his poetry. The spiritual morality of the individual self expressed in ‘Two Tramps’ is endemic to both Thoreau and Frost, while Frost’s economy accords perfectly with Thoreau’s views on work and labor as nurture for the human spirit. In ‘Two Tramps’ the kinship of Frost and Thoreau is evident at every turn. In situation, motif, and theme...*Walden* offers a meaningful context for ‘Two Tramps.’

For a full understanding of the transcendental tradition behind Frost’s poem, however, a more useful document is Thoreau’s brilliant essay ‘Life without Principle.’ A discursive presentation of his central ideas on society, labor, and the self, this essay was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863, after having served for several years as a lyceum talk. It is an important manifestation of Thoreau’s dedication to the spiritual needs of the self and to the idea that the self must be served constantly in its struggle against the destructive pressures of socialization. As such, it can now serve us as a kind of manifesto of the intellectual and literary tradition to which ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’ properly belongs.

Frost is wary of those who want to take his ‘job for pay.’ Thoreau’s more generalized complaint makes the same point. ‘The ways by which you may get money almost without exception lead downward. To have done anything by which you earned money merely is to have been truly idle or worse. If the laborer gets no more than the wages which his employer pays him, he is cheated, he cheats himself.’ In fact, such a laborer is deceived in that he is ‘paid for being something less than a man’ when his aim should be ‘not to get his living...but to perform well a certain work.... Do not hire a man who does your work for money,’ cautions Thoreau, ‘but him who does it for love of it.’

Frost takes these Thoreauvian ideals and dramatizes them in his lyric poem. It is not the tramps who work for the love of the work, it turns out, but the poet himself, and consequently he cannot without compromise and self-betrayal give way to those who work merely for wages. He must, in Thoreau’s words, ‘be fastidious to the extreme of sanity, disregarding the gibes of those who are more unfortunate than ourselves.’ Thoreau reminds us that, surprisingly, ‘a man may be very industrious, and yet not spend his time well’: ‘There is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living. All great enterprises are self-supporting. The poet, for instance, must sustain his body by his poetry, as a steam planing-mill feeds its boilers with the shavings it makes. You must get your living by loving.’

The values that Thoreau conveys discursively and didactically in ‘Life without Principle’ Frost exalts in narrative subsumed by lyric. Given such commitments, there is no question that Frost must fail Cowley’s test in socioeconomics and collectivist philosophy, but so must Thoreau. Frost might have said, with Thoreau: ‘To be supported by the charity of friends, or a government pension,—provided you continue to breathe,— by whatever fine synonyms you describe these relations, is to go into the almshouse.’ Frost did say that a man ‘should be a large-proportioned individual before he becomes social.’

In sum, 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' should not be read as the one-sided, frontal attack on socialist or collectivist thinking that Cowley would have it be, nor should it be read as Donoghue's illustrative apologia for the wondrous workings of Darwinist law. Grounded in social and transcendental ideas the poet shares with Henry Thoreau, the poem stands in opposition to that capacity for self-betrayal and degeneration which inheres in each and every man: that propensity to 'quarter our gross bodies on our poor souls, till the former eat up all the latter's substance.' When the thematic and ideological affinities of Frost and Thoreau are fully recognized, we shall have a surer sense of what Frost is about in his poem 'against having hobbies.' Thoreau's statement that 'the whole duty of life is contained in the question how to respire and aspire both at once' is an adage the import of which Frost seems not to have missed. As he insisted in the early 1950s, at the age of seventy-eight, 'I have never outgrown anything that I ever liked. I have never had a hobby in my life, but I have ranged through a lot of things'."

George Montiero
Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance
(U Kentucky 1988)

"The question of respect for one's own needs despite an apparent selfishness is raised in 'Two Tramps in Mud Time.' Because the speaker has had no previous relationship with the tramps—they are 'two strangers'—the question can remain the abstract one of what one owes to one's fellow man, what one must give of one's self to the claims of another if the claims conflict, even if there is no obligation to that person, no claim by right of anything except common humanity, human kindness, or guilt in the face of another person's need. One issue in this poem, then, is simply that of selfless giving up as opposed to keeping something for oneself. It is a question relevant to the artist's need to hoard himself as opposed to his human obligation to give himself; it illustrates the kind of conflict in Frost that was generated by his mother's hero tales of self-sacrifice and his opposite need to work for himself in asserting his creative originality.

Like the question in 'Love and a Question,' this poem too asks how far one is supposed to go in self-sacrifice, how one is to draw the line between personal rights, property, or needs and some other's right to make a claim on his sympathy, to make him feel guilty, or to make him give up something that he need not have given up. In this case the conflict is further complicated because it seems to be between something that is of little consequence to the speaker, yet vital to the tramps. The claims are not of equal weight: they are work as opposed to play, need as opposed to love. The last stanza, which declares the necessity for uniting vocation and avocation, love and need, work and play as the ideal way of doing a deed, does not resolve the dilemma of who should be chopping the wood. There seems to exist a separation between love and need, work and play.

Yet there is need and need: there is financial need and there is emotional need. There is also right and right—the right of a man to expect sympathy for his need to earn a living and the right of a man to chop wood—especially if it is on his own property—if he wants to do so. In fact the recognition on the part of the speaker is a generous and an unselfish one.... The claim on his conscience may not have been valid or fair, but it worked all the same. Their 'logic' did fill his head as they had counted on its doing, and whether he gives up the task or not is irrelevant, for once their logic had fined his head, the pleasure in the task would be gone.

At first their claiming the task simply intensified his love for it ('The time when most I loved my task / These two must make me love it more / By coming with what they came to ask'); but then that was before their logic filled his head. The resolution of the poem will depend on whether feeling wins out over logic, and then the question is which feeling—sympathetic feeling for another or feeling about the task that unites work and play, love and need. The separation the speaker sees between work and play, love and need, is, after all, the separation he assumes the tramps to see—it is their logic, and he shows himself to be very sensitive in assuming it. If the conflict is resolved on his terms, we must assume he will give up the task should these claims remain separate; that he will continue to do it should they be united. 'Theirs was the better right' only 'when the two exist in twain.'

Here, as elsewhere in Frost, we are shown the seriousness of 'play,' for this activity was 'play' as long as one did not do it from motives of gain. Pay then was what defined it as work rather than play, that made it vital and 'right.' That it was hard work in either case is beside the point; that there was something at

stake—pride in the quality of the workmanship and the aim—is beside the point. The crucial question is what will be the gain. Of what importance is it to the chopper? At least that becomes the question once the speaker feels himself to have been ‘caught’ in the act (a tacit admission of guilt), which leads him to consider the wood ‘unimportant’ despite the fact that he was losing his soul, giving vent to whatever was pent up—‘the blows that a life of self-control / spares to strike for the common good’ (357). Losing his soul in spending these blows on the wood is an important activity whether the wood is important or not.

In the inability of the tramps to understand his needs, Frost proves them inferior to the speaker who sees theirs. It is, once more, a matter of how one is reading the scene and what one brings to the reading. Frost reads them better than they read him. They see what their agenda permits them to see, a criticism we could level at the socialist critics who made the poem—and Frost—a target on their agenda, often unfairly, certainly missing rich possibilities of interpretation and maybe missing the point or mistaking the resolution. Another need that the task answers is for a physical connection, muscular exertion, pitting oneself against an earth, a tree, a nature that shows crystal teeth, that moves capriciously between March and May and back in a moment: A deed done ‘for...future’s sake’ must exert weighty grip and muscle in the face of so uncertain and capricious a future. It must require poise and balance as surely as does that boy mastering birches.

In this poem, as in ‘Birches,’ ‘love’ is introduced where it has not seemed to be the subject: love of the work, love of the feel of the earth, and ‘the life of muscles, rocking soft / and smooth and moist in vernal heat’; love as it relates to labor, love as it relates to need. We see that only in uniting these will the speaker be entitled to make a claim that equals the claim of the tramps, for love must be related to need and to effort. Only in applying this union to any relationship, any task, or act of creativity does the last stanza seem to be genuinely a part of the poem and not simply the gratuitous non-resolution of Frost’s poetic career, which it is so often taken to be.

In two separate letters, Frost relates this poem somewhat curiously to love of a woman. In his famous assertion that Elinor had been the unspoken half of everything he wrote, he went on to add: ‘and both halves of many a thing from ‘My November Guest’ down to the last stanzas of ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’ (SL 450). In writing about his view of imperfection, he said: ‘I am not a Platonist...one who believes...the woman you have is an imperfect copy of some woman in Heaven... I am philosophically opposed to having one Iseult for my vocation and another for my avocation; as you may have inferred from a poem called ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time’...a truly gallant Platonist will remain a bachelor...from unwillingness to reduce any woman to the condition of being used without being idealized’ (SL 462).

Love and need, then, must be one, or the relationship, whether in marriage, in friendship, or in art, is exploitation. But there is another factor in a love relationship—in a relationship with any other human being or with one’s task—which distinguishes love and need from exploitation, and that is ‘spending’ oneself rather than merely spending another: ‘be it art, politics, school, church, business, love, or marriage—in a piece of work or in a career. Strongly spent is synonymous with kept. The speaker in this poem speaks of the soul-losing blows he ‘spent on unimportant wood,’ and if anything entitled him to ‘keep’ the task rather than to give it up, it is the effort, the love with which he spent himself on the task.

In...‘A Constant Symbol,’ Frost had been speaking of writing poetry: ‘Every single poem written regular is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion and then be judged for whether any original intention it had has been strongly spent or weakly lost.’ Peculiar to relationships of love and creativity is the opposition of spent and lost. In commerce, one is short by what one spends; in love and in creation, one only keeps by spending, saves one’s heart with losing it; one only fulfills oneself by giving oneself. In ‘Two Tramps,’ strongly spent, being strongly spent, is the only real justification for keeping.

The question of respect for self, of integrity of self as opposed to giving up of self, is posed in two ways in ‘Two Tramps in Mud Time,’ for there are two relationships: the relationship between the speaker and the two tramps, and the relationship between the speaker and his work. If the relationship between himself and his work is one of love, need, and spending of himself for his task and the perfection of the job for its own sake, then that may take precedence over a relationship with two strangers where there is no love, no pride

in work, no effort, no mutuality of give and take. The self and its labor of love are united and preserved, kept, in the face of claims that would separate that unity. If, however, the task separates love and need, if nothing further will be 'spent' on it, then the job is exploitive. It had better be given to those who can use it for gain.

While the drama of the poem is more overtly social than sexual, the relationship between love and need, keeping and spending oneself, respect for the needs of the self and the other, and willingness or unwillingness to surrender to it are clearly also applicable to a discussion of love, especially as the poet has drawn attention to this poem in such a connection. If we see the sexual undertone of 'outspread feet. / The life of muscles rocking soft / And smooth and moist in vernal heat' it would not be the only poem, as we shall see, to connate earth and love, the act of earth-labor with the act of love."

Judith Oster
Toward Robert Frost: The Reader and the Poet
(U Georgia 1991)

"In some essential sense in Frost's poetry, 'mud time'--that precarious season between winter and spring, freeze and thaw, control and uncontrol--is always imminent; in that same sense, so too are the 'hulking tramps' who begin to wander through the landscape in that season, threatening the equanimity of the socially proprietous speaker and bringing him finally to recognize and reassert his own capacity for control. In 'Two Tramps in Mud Time,' the strangers materialize out of nowhere, startling the speaker so thoroughly that he mis-hits the wood: this is a dangerous game, axes being what they are in Frost's poetry, capable of striking like a snake, or biting. The strangers are there to take the speaker's job of woodcutting, again a dangerous game, for it is his job to channel his aggressive energy away from others and into the (temporarily inanimate) kindling: 'The blows that a life of self-control / Spares to strike for the common good, / That day, giving a loose to my soul, I spent on the unimportant wood.'

The tramps would deprive him of both his balance and his heat, elements condensed figurally into the dynamic precision of the titanically wrought woodchopper: 'The weight of an ax-head poised aloft, / The grip on earth of outspread feet, / The life of muscles rocking soft / And smooth and moist in vernal heat.' They would, in short, leave him to less harmless pastimes there in the crux between winter and spring. Warmth, the smooth and moist flow of muscles relaxed by vernal heat, has as its complement in this poem the water that fills every wheel rut and every hoofprint, but water without heat is ice. The speaker, warmed to a task, may be generative, but left to find other outlets becomes sinister: 'Be glad of water,' the speaker says, 'but don't forget / The lurking frost in the earth beneath / That will steal forth after the sun is set / And show on the water its crystal teeth.' What these silent strangers would take, then, is all that keeps the speaker from unrestrained appetite, that keeps F/frost from stealing forth in the dark to show his/its teeth."

Katherine Kearns
Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite
(Cambridge U 1994)

"'Two Tramps in Mud Time' opens in early spring when (as in 'The Ax-Helve') the speaker is interrupted while chopping wood. Two intimidating tramps want to 'take'--not do--the job for pay. Frost then shifts away from the main subject, as he often does, to a brilliant description of the treacherous New England spring, which suddenly changes from May to March. He returns, three stanzas later, to describe the intense pleasure he takes in physical labor and to consider the demands of the tramps. They are professional lumberjacks, who have left the forest and chosen not to work, and therefore have no pressing claim on his charity. The argument finally comes down to the speaker's love of work against their need of work for gain. He concedes that they have the better right, but the 'But' that begins the final stanza suggests that his point of view will prevail.

Using a daring Metaphysical conceit (like Donne's 'twin compasses' in 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning'), he says his aim in life is to write poetry and chop wood, just as his two eyes focus into single sight. Though it would be socially beneficial to give employment to the tramps, Frost believes--since the physical pleasure of chopping wood while observing the hesitant coming of spring is absolutely essential to the creation of his poetry--that his personal needs are paramount. The speaker looks after Number One

rather than Number Two. As he told Untermeyer, he was brought up to think of self-preservation as a virtue, not an instinct. Just as 'The Lone Striker' disappoints Left-wing expectations by advocating an individual's flight from industrial disputes rather than workers' solidarity and communal effort, so 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' resists the liberal impulse and sends the tramps back into the mud instead of responding to their urgent but unspoken demand for money. As the speaker cunningly says when describing the spring, the lurking frost will show its crystal teeth."

Jeffrey Meyers
Robert Frost: A Biography
(Copyright Jeffrey Meyers 1996)

Michael Hollister (2015)