

## SEMANTIC PERSPECTIVES ON CONNOTATIVE MEANING IN ROBERT FROST'S POEM *A CLIFF DWELLING*

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### Abstract

Poetry, as a form of literary art, embodies the author's imaginative expression and conceals layers of implied meaning beneath its surface. Its linguistic and stylistic complexity demands in-depth analysis to uncover the richness of its content. This study focuses on Robert Frost's poem *A Cliff Dwelling*, which encapsulates profound and intricate connotative meanings. Previous studies on Frost's works have predominantly explored thematic, stylistic, or symbolic aspects, yet few have investigated the semantic dimension of connotative meaning within his poetry, particularly in *A Cliff Dwelling*. This limited attention leaves a gap in understanding how semantic analysis can uncover deeper layers of interpretation in Frost's linguistic choices and artistic expression. Investigating the connotative meanings in this poem is significant because they reveal how Frost uses language to portray the relationship between humanity and nature, the endurance of early civilization, and the transience of human existence—central themes that define his poetic vision. Employing a semantic approach, this research aims to identify and interpret the connotative meanings embedded in the poem and to uncover the multiple layers of interpretation it conveys. Leech's (1981) theory of connotative meaning and aspects of meaning serve as the theoretical foundation of this study. Using a qualitative descriptive method, the analysis presents data in the form of words and interpretive descriptions. The findings indicate that connotative meaning encompasses the associative and emotional dimensions of words, shaped by the cultural perceptions and psychological responses of both the writer and the reader. These meanings, as reflected in Frost's poem, portray human experiences and existential struggles expressed through poetic imagery. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the semantic richness of Frost's poetry and offers insights into his worldview and artistic vision.

**Keywords:** *A Cliff Dwelling*, Connotative Meaning, Poetry Analysis, Robert Frost, Semantic Analysis

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, semantic approaches to literary texts have gained increasing attention for their ability to bridge linguistic theory and literary interpretation, providing a systematic way to uncover hidden layers of meaning in poetic language. Literary works are the result of human creativity expressed through beautiful, structured, and meaningful language. They often reflect human experiences, emotions, thoughts, and cultural values that authors wish to communicate to their readers. Through literature, writers portray various dimensions of human life, such as love, conflict, justice, and morality, making literary works not only a source of entertainment but also a means of education and reflection on human existence and civilization. Generally, literary works are classified into prose and poetry. Poetry, as one of the most expressive forms of literature, is characterized by its condensed, rhythmic, and imaginative use of language. As Haslinda (2022) states, poetry can be defined as a composition in the form of stanzas, rhymed and rhythmic, with poetic words that have a beautiful sound, while Sayuti (2002) defines poetry as a form of language utterance that takes into account the sound aspect by expressing the poet's imaginative, emotional and intellectual experiences drawn from his life. Poetry thus represents a synthesis of emotion, imagination, and linguistic artistry.

From a linguistic perspective, poetry is rich with semantic depth. Semantics, a subfield of linguistics, concerns the study of meaning and how language conveys it (Kreidler, 1998). It examines both the lexical and grammatical dimensions of meaning, as well as the relationship between words and their interpretation within a cultural context. One essential aspect of semantics is connotative meaning, which refers to the emotional, cultural, and associative dimensions of words beyond their literal, denotative meanings (Leech, 1981). Chaer (2013) explains that a word carries a "sense of value" if it evokes positive or negative feelings, while neutral meanings lack such associations. Connotative meaning thus depends heavily on cultural perception and individual experience, making it a rich subject for literary analysis. In poetry, connotation plays a crucial role in shaping

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imagery, emotion, and interpretation, as words often carry multiple layers of implied meaning that transcend their surface definitions.

Several previous studies have explored connotative meaning in poetry. For instance, Rahayu (2010) analyzed connotative meanings in William Wordsworth's poems using semiotic theory and historical context, while Rahmawati, Muhid, and Miswaty (2022) examined the dominant connotative meanings in Joko Pinurbo's works. However, these studies primarily focused on either the cultural-historical context or the frequency of connotation types, with less emphasis on the semantic mechanisms underlying connotative interpretation. Moreover, limited research has investigated connotative meaning in Robert Frost's poetry, particularly in "*A Cliff Dwelling*." This poem stands out for its profound depiction of human resilience, the passage of time, and the interplay between humanity and nature—central themes in Frost's oeuvre that are intricately constructed through connotative language.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this research gap by conducting a semantic analysis of connotative meanings in Robert Frost's poem "*A Cliff Dwelling*." This analysis is significant because it reveals how Frost employs linguistic choices to express philosophical reflections on civilization, survival, and the transience of human life. By applying Leech's (1981) theory of connotative meaning, this research seeks to uncover the associative values and emotional nuances that enrich the poem's semantic texture. Specifically, this study investigates how connotative meanings operate within Frost's diction to construct thematic depth, emotional resonance, and symbolic interpretation. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how connotative meaning functions as a bridge between language and interpretation, offering new insights into Frost's poetic worldview and the broader relationship between semantics and literature.

In addition, this research highlights the interdisciplinary connection between linguistics and literary studies. While poetry has traditionally been interpreted through literary criticism or stylistic analysis, applying a semantic approach allows for a more systematic and scientific understanding of how meaning is constructed and conveyed. By focusing on the semantic elements of connotation, this study emphasizes that meaning in poetry is not arbitrary but shaped by linguistic choices that resonate with readers' cultural and emotional frameworks. This approach also demonstrates how linguistic theories, such as Leech's taxonomy of meaning, can enhance literary interpretation by providing tools to decode subtle layers of meaning embedded in poetic texts.

From a theoretical standpoint, Leech's (1981) categorization of meaning, conceptual, connotative, social, affective, reflected, collocative, and thematic, provides a comprehensive foundation for analyzing how words operate beyond their denotative level. Among these, connotative meaning is particularly vital in poetry because it reflects the associative and affective potential of language. Previous linguistic studies, such as those by Palmer (1981) and Ullmann (1972), have emphasized that connotation connects linguistic form to cultural and emotional perception. However, empirical applications of Leech's theory in literary contexts remain relatively limited, especially in examining how poetic language constructs meaning through associative networks. This study extends Leech's framework by applying it to Frost's work, demonstrating how theoretical linguistics can illuminate the interpretive depth of poetry.

Previous research on Robert Frost has largely concentrated on his imagery, symbolism, and philosophical themes rather than his use of connotative meaning. Classic critics such as Lathem (1969) and Thompson (1973) emphasized Frost's depiction of rural life and human endurance, while Gerber (2002) explored his tension between nature and civilization. However, more recent studies have begun to investigate Frost's poetry through semiotic, stylistic, and symbolic perspectives. Gregoriyani (2024) analyzed Frost's symbolism and found that his simple diction conceals profound emotional and philosophical implications, while Jumino (2019) examined Frost's portrayal of human existence and revealed how linguistic expression mirrors existential struggle. A stylistic analysis conducted in 2022 also highlighted Frost's mastery of diction and imagery as a means of expressing human emotion and natural harmony. These contemporary studies collectively affirm Frost's linguistic subtlety but still focus primarily on symbolism and stylistic aspects rather than on semantic depth.

Therefore, little attention has been given to how Frost's diction encodes connotative and associative meanings that enrich his philosophical vision. The current research seeks to bridge this gap by applying Leech's (1981) semantic framework to analyze the connotative meanings embedded in Robert Frost's poem "*A Cliff Dwelling*." By interpreting the poem through the lens of connotative semantics, this study expands the scope of Frost scholarship beyond stylistic and symbolic readings, offering a deeper understanding of how language operates to convey emotional resonance, cultural perception, and spiritual reflection within his poetic world.

Furthermore, the exploration of connotative meaning in Frost's *A Cliff Dwelling* contributes to the appreciation of his philosophical and humanistic vision. The poem's imagery of ancient dwellers, their perseverance, and eventual disappearance encapsulates the tension between permanence and decay, civilization and nature. Analyzing these concepts semantically enables readers to grasp how Frost's diction evokes emotional and symbolic associations that extend beyond literal interpretation. Thus, this study not only enriches the semantic understanding of Frost's poetry but also promotes a broader discussion about how language operates as a vehicle

for human thought, cultural memory, and artistic expression. Through this lens, the study underscores the enduring relevance of semantic analysis as a method for uncovering the depth and universality of poetic meaning.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, which focuses on providing a detailed and systematic description of linguistic phenomena within a literary text. The qualitative approach emphasizes depth of understanding rather than numerical measurement, allowing the researchers to interpret meanings, concepts, and patterns as they naturally appear in the data. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1975, as cited in Moleong, 2004), qualitative research is a procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observable behavior. In this study, qualitative description is used to explore and interpret the connotative meanings found in Robert Frost's poem *A Cliff Dwelling*.

The data source of this study is the poem *A Cliff Dwelling* by Robert Frost. The data consist of words, phrases, and expressions that potentially contain connotative meanings. The researchers serve as the main research instrument, supported by a data analysis table to categorize and interpret the connotative meanings according to Leech's (1981) theory of meaning. This self-involvement allows for interpretive sensitivity in identifying nuances of meaning that might otherwise be overlooked in purely quantitative approaches.

The data collection process was carried out through several systematic steps. First, the poem *A Cliff Dwelling* was obtained from reliable online literary sources. Second, the text was carefully read multiple times to achieve a comprehensive understanding of its overall meaning. Third, words, phrases, and lines that indicate connotative meaning were identified and highlighted. Fourth, the selected data were classified based on their associative, emotional, or cultural connotations. These steps ensured that the data were collected and organized systematically for analysis.

For the data analysis technique, the researchers applied qualitative descriptive analysis. Each identified word or phrase was analyzed to determine its connotative meaning and its relation to the poem's thematic and emotional depth. The analysis followed a systematic four-stage process to uncover the poem's associative meanings. First, the poem was closely examined to identify linguistic elements, such as emotionally loaded words, symbolic images, and metaphorical expressions, that carry connotative potential. Second, each of these elements was interpreted by considering both its immediate textual context and broader cultural or literary associations, allowing the analysis to reveal the emotional, symbolic, or evaluative meanings that readers might infer. Third, the associative meanings identified were classified according to Leech's framework, including affective, social, reflective, collocative, and thematic meanings, to provide a structured understanding of how each linguistic item contributes semantically. Finally, the findings were synthesized to determine how these layers of meaning enhance the poem's overall message, shaping its tone, reinforcing its themes, and revealing the semantic richness characteristic of Robert Frost's poetic language.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **A Cliff Dwelling (Robert Frost)**

There sandy seems the golden sky  
And golden seems the sandy plain.  
No habitation meets the eye  
Unless in the horizon rim,  
Some halfway up the limestone wall,  
That spot of black is not a stain  
Or shadow, but a cavern hole,  
Where someone used to climb and crawl  
To rest from his besetting fears.  
I see the callus on his soul  
The disappearing last of him  
And of his race starvation slim,  
Oh years ago - ten thousand years.

There are thirteen words in Robert Frost's poem *A Cliff Dwelling* that carry connotative meanings, and their classification is clearly presented in the following table.

Table 1. Connotative Meanings in Robert Frost's poem *A Cliff Dwelling*

Row	Connotative	Explanation
"There sandy seems the golden sky"	"Sandy" here can refer to the colour and texture of dry, barren land, but "golden" suggests luxury or hope. "Golden sky" can symbolize serenity or the splendour of the natural world.	This line describes a natural scene that looks warm and beautiful, as if the sky you see is a golden sky, creating the impression of a peaceful and serene atmosphere.
"And golden seems the sandy plain"	"Golden" is again used to describe beauty, while "sandy plain" indicates a wide plain that is barren and dry. This combination perhaps emphasizes the subtle beauty of the harsh landscape.	This vast and barren natural landscape still looks beautiful, but it also shows a harsh and challenging landscape. The concept of "golden" indicates that even though it is barren, this place has its own beauty value.
"No habitation meets the eye"	"Habitation" refers to a place where humans live or live. "Meets the eye" shows that nothing is directly visible.	This line shows that there are no visible signs of human life, as if the place is empty and uninhabited.
"Unless in the horizon rim"	"Horizon rim" refers to a distant line of sight on the horizon, indicating something far away, perhaps beyond human reach.	This line shows that the only thing that may be visible is something that is at the limit of the horizon, that is, a place that is far from reach.
"Some halfway up the limestone wall"	"Limestone wall" refers to a limestone cliff, which indicates natural strength and resilience. "Halfway up" can symbolize a position that is halfway between life and nothingness.	It depicts a high limestone cliff, with something situated in the middle of the high point, perhaps referring to the remains of past life hidden there.
"That spot of black is not a stain"	"Spot of black" refers to a dark spot, which can suggest something that seems strange or unusual. "Not a stain" gives the impression that it is not something bad or undesirable, but rather something important.	This line illustrates that the black spot seen on the cliff is not a stain or damage, but something that has a meaning or role, perhaps a cave or sanctuary.
"Or shadow, but a cave hole"	"Cavern hole" refers to a large cave that can be a place of refuge or residence. "Shadow" here gives the impression that perhaps something dark and mysterious is going on.	Confirms that the black dot is a cave opening, not just a shadow, which indicates a place of refuge or human habitation in the past.
"Where someone used to climb and crawl"	"Climb and crawl" describes physical activity full of struggle, which shows human efforts to survive in difficult conditions.	This line describes how someone might have climbed and crawled into the cave to take shelter or seek safety from existing threats.
"To rest from his besetting fears"	"Besetting fears" refers to a fear that is persistently disturbing or threatening. This indicates a life full of threats and fear.	Describes how ancient humans may have sought refuge in the cave to escape the fear and threats that continued to haunt them.
"I see the callus on his soul"	"Callus" usually refers to a patch of skin that is hard due to friction, but here it is used metaphorically to describe a soul that has experienced injury and tension, that is hardened by experience.	This line shows that the human soul has been wounded and hardened due to fear and long struggle, reflecting a life full of suffering and inner battles.
"The disappearing last of him"	"Disappearing" suggests that the person has almost vanished or disappeared, and may also refer to civilizations or traces of human history that are slowly disappearing.	This depicts how the humans who once existed in that place have now almost disappeared completely, perhaps due to death or because of their civilization fading away.
"And of his race starvation slim"	"Starvation slim" indicates a severe lack of resources and starvation. "Race" refers to a human group or civilization.	This line depicts that this race or group of humans almost became extinct due to extreme hunger and hardship, depicting the extremely harsh living conditions of that time.
"Oh years ago - ten thousand years."	"Years ago" indicates a very long time that has passed, and "ten thousand years" gives the impression of a very long time, perhaps indicating a very ancient history.	This line emphasizes that all of this happened a very long time ago, around ten thousand years ago, hinting that these are the remains of a long lost and forgotten civilization.

## DISCUSSION

### **The Classification and Interpretation of Connotative Meanings in Robert Frost's *A Cliff Dwelling* Based on Leech's (1981) Semantic Framework**

Based on Leech's (1981) theory, connotative meaning can be classified into several subtypes, including emotive, social, reflective, and collocative meaning, each revealing different layers of implied significance in Robert Frost's poem "*A Cliff Dwelling*."

The emotive meaning is illustrated in the phrase "*Callus on his soul*." This expression evokes deep emotional resonance, reflecting inner pain, endurance, and emotional numbness resulting from long-term suffering. The word "*callus*", which literally means hardened skin, metaphorically conveys a hardened soul shaped by fear, loss, and existential struggle. It captures the emotional desensitization of humankind after enduring prolonged hardship.

The social meaning appears in the line "*No habitation meets the eye*." This phrase signifies social emptiness and the absence of human presence or community. It reflects a desolate world devoid of civilization, where human interaction and social connection have vanished. Through this line, Frost highlights isolation and the decline of early societies, suggesting the transience of human existence in contrast to the permanence of nature.

The reflective meaning is embodied in "*Golden sky*." The adjective "*golden*" transcends its literal sense of color and reflects spiritual elevation, divinity, and hope. It mirrors a sense of transcendence and the human longing for peace and eternal beauty beyond the harshness of earthly life. This reflective meaning suggests Frost's spiritual contemplation of nature as a symbol of higher truth.

Lastly, the collocative meaning is found in "*Starvation slim*." The word "*slim*" typically carries positive associations such as beauty or health, but when collocated with "*starvation*," it generates a grim and ironic connotation. The combination evokes images of deprivation and suffering rather than attractiveness, illustrating how contextual pairing reshapes meaning. This collocative usage intensifies the depiction of human struggle and decay in Frost's portrayal of an ancient civilization.

In conclusion, the connotative meanings identified in Robert Frost's *A Cliff Dwelling* reveal the poet's mastery in embedding emotional, social, reflective, and associative nuances within his language. Through emotive meaning, Frost exposes the inner suffering and resilience of humanity; through social meaning, he depicts isolation and the disappearance of civilization; through reflective meaning, he invites readers to contemplate spiritual transcendence and the harmony between humanity and nature; and through collocative meaning, he highlights the irony and harshness of human existence. These layers of meaning collectively enrich the poem's interpretation, showing that Frost's diction is not merely descriptive but deeply symbolic and evocative. By employing Leech's (1981) framework, this analysis demonstrates that connotative meaning functions as a vital tool for uncovering the emotional depth and philosophical vision embedded in Frost's poetic language, offering readers a profound understanding of human endurance, loss, and the timeless relationship between mankind and nature.

### **Connotative Dimensions and Thematic Representations in Robert Frost's *A Cliff Dwelling***

#### ***The Beauty and Contrast of Nature (Rows 1-2)***

The opening lines highlight a landscape that is both beautiful and harsh. The phrases "*sandy seems the golden sky*" and "*golden seems the sandy plain*" create a contrast between "sandy" (dry, barren) and "golden" (luxurious, warm, hopeful). These connotations show that beauty can still exist within desolation. Frost emphasizes the paradox between natural splendor and emptiness, suggesting that even barren places possess their own serenity and quiet magnificence.

#### ***Emptiness and Distance from Human Life (Rows 3-4)***

The lines "*No habitation meets the eye*" and "*Unless in the horizon rim*" evoke a sense of isolation and distance from human existence. The connotations of "no habitation" and "horizon rim" suggest the absence of visible life and something far beyond human reach. Symbolically, these lines depict detachment and abandonment, an environment that once may have been alive but now stands silent and deserted, representing separation between humanity and nature.

#### ***Traces of Civilization and the Strength of Nature (Rows 5-7)***

Phrases like “limestone wall”, “spot of black”, and “cave hole” convey both the solidity and mystery of the natural world, as well as remnants of human habitation. The cave is not merely a hollow in the rock but a symbol of protection, endurance, and the lingering presence of past life. Here, nature is portrayed as a silent witness to human struggle—preserving traces of existence within its unyielding form.

### ***Human Struggle and Fear (Rows 8–9)***

Expressions such as “climb and crawl” and “besetting fears” represent both physical and emotional struggles for survival. These connotative meanings reveal a life filled with hardship, danger, and persistent fear. Frost illustrates early humans’ battle not only against the harshness of nature but also against the anxiety within themselves, reflecting a universal human condition of endurance and inner turmoil.

### ***Inner Wounds and the Loss of Civilization (Rows 10–13)***

The final lines (“callus on his soul,” “disappearing last of him,” “starvation slim,” “ten thousand years”) evoke the erosion of both humanity and civilization over time. “Callus” symbolizes emotional hardening from suffering; “disappearing” and “starvation slim” suggest physical and spiritual decline; while “ten thousand years” underscores the vast passage of time that has erased human traces. Connotatively, this section represents the fragility of human existence, the scars of suffering, and the eventual fading of once-thriving civilizations.

Viewed from a semantic perspective, Robert Frost’s *A Cliff Dwelling* presents a profound reflection on the relationship between humanity and nature through its rich connotative language. Each image and phrase carries layers of meaning that reveal both the beauty and desolation of the natural world, portraying nature as majestic yet indifferent. The poem traces a journey from the serene splendor of the landscape to the emotional and physical struggles of early humans, highlighting the tension between endurance and decay. Through contrasting images such as “golden sky” and “sandy plain,” Frost captures the paradox of beauty within barrenness, while expressions like “callus on his soul” and “starvation slim” expose the deep scars of human suffering and the inevitable decline of civilization.

Ultimately, the connotative meanings in the poem serve as a bridge between the external world and the inner human experience. They reveal Frost’s philosophical vision, one that sees nature as eternal and resilient, while human existence remains fragile and transient. By intertwining imagery of struggle, isolation, and endurance, Frost not only commemorates the remnants of ancient life but also invites readers to contemplate the impermanence of human achievement and the enduring power of nature’s silence.

The findings of this study both align with and extend previous research on Robert Frost’s poetry. Similar to Latham (1969), Thompson (1973), and Gerber (2002), this analysis reveals themes of human endurance, isolation, and the tension between humanity and nature, which emerge through connotative expressions such as “no habitation meets the eye” and “ten thousand years.” The results also resonate with more recent studies by Gregoriyani (2024) and Jumino (2019), particularly in showing that Frost’s seemingly simple diction carries deep emotional and existential implications, as reflected in phrases like “callus on his soul” and “golden sky.” However, unlike earlier studies that focused primarily on symbolism, imagery, or stylistic features, this research offers a new contribution by applying Leech’s (1981) semantic framework to systematically classify connotative meanings. This methodological difference provides a more detailed and structured understanding of the associative layers in Frost’s language, revealing semantic nuances that previous studies did not explicitly address. Consequently, this study enriches the discussion by demonstrating that Frost’s poetic depth arises not only from symbolic interpretations but also from the complex interplay of emotive, social, reflective, and collocative meanings embedded in his diction.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the semantic analysis of Robert Frost’s *A Cliff Dwelling* reveals that connotative meanings play a crucial role in constructing the poem’s emotional and philosophical depth. Through emotive, social, reflective, and collocative meanings, Frost conveys the tension between human endurance and decay, the harmony and indifference of nature, and the transience of civilization. The analysis demonstrates that words such as “callus on his soul,” “no habitation meets the eye,” “golden sky,” and “starvation slim” carry associative and affective layers that transform literal descriptions into profound reflections on humanity’s existential struggle.

Furthermore, this study concludes that Frost’s poetic diction functions as a semantic vehicle that unites language, emotion, and philosophy. By applying Leech’s (1981) framework, the research highlights how connotative meaning enriches interpretation and reveals Frost’s worldview, where nature stands eternal and human life remains fragile yet meaningful. These findings affirm that semantic analysis is not merely a linguistic exercise but also a powerful interpretive tool that bridges theory and literary insight.

Building on these insights, the implications of this study extend beyond literary scholarship to the field of education, particularly in the teaching of literature and language. The findings show that integrating semantic analysis, especially the identification of connotative meanings, can help students move beyond literal comprehension and engage more critically with the emotional, cultural, and philosophical layers of poetic language. By incorporating frameworks such as Leech's (1981) into poetry instruction, teachers can enhance students' linguistic awareness, develop their sensitivity to nuance, and strengthen their analytical and critical reading skills. This approach not only fosters a deeper appreciation of literary texts but also equips learners with practical tools for interpreting complex meanings, making the study of literature more meaningful and intellectually enriching. Ultimately, understanding the semantics of poetic language enriches both literary interpretation and educational practices.

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