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Life and Personality of Robert Frost

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THE LIFE AND PERSONALITY
OF ROBERT FROST

A Paper
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Dr. Gilbert Morris
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Special Studies

by
Una Mae Atkinson
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The most important American poet since Walt Whitman is the New Englander, Robert Frost.¹ People who have never thought of reading poetry take to Frost. His words are simple words; the images are simple, most often country, things. The music of his poetry is the sound of everyday talk, and the ideas, on the surface, anyway, are plain and straight. Subjects of Frost's poetry are such things as nature, love and friendship, self-trust, fear, and courage.²

Thus, Robert Frost occupies a unique position in modern poetry. Unlike most contemporary poets, he has managed to win a wide popular audience while earning the almost universal acclaim of critics and scholars.³ No doubt there are three or four other modern poets whose claims to a permanent place in literature are equally secure, but none is better known than Frost, and few, if any, better loved. In order to see Robert Frost more realistically, and not merely as a myth, it is necessary to look at his life and at his personality. It is not the purpose of this brief examination to attempt to criticize the works of Frost, but instead to get a clearer picture

¹Lars Ahnebrink and Stephen Whicher (eds.), Twelve American Poets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 83.

²"Frost: 'Courage Is the Virtue That Counts Most,'" Newsweek, LXI (February 11, 1963), 90.

³John F. Lynen, The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 1.

of what the man Frost was really like.

First, it is helpful in understanding the writings of Frost to see the biographical facts of his life. Although, as a poet, he is solidly identified in the popular mind with New England, Robert Frost was born in 1874, in San Francisco and spent his early years there. His father was something of a drifter and did not provide very well for the family. When Robert was eleven, his father died and his mother took the family to Salem, New Hampshire, where she got a job teaching school.

His was a crowded youth. During school vacations, from age twelve on, he worked in the shoe shops of Salem, mending shanks and cutting heels, helping on the farm with the haying and pushing a bobbin wagon in a woolen mill in Lawrence, Massachusetts, where his grandparents lived.⁴ He attended high school in Lawrence and proved himself an excellent scholar, serving as co-valedictorian of his graduating class in 1892.

Upon graduation Frost knew exactly what he wanted to do; "he literally attached himself to poetry."⁵ First he made an attempt to please his father's family and get a formal education by going to Dartmouth College. After two months, he had had enough college for a while and came back home to stay.

⁴Robert Frost, Come In and Other Poems (ed. by Louis Untermeyer) (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1943), p. 7.

⁵Ibid., p. 7.

Two years after graduation, Frost's first commercially published poem, "My Butterfly," appeared in the Independent magazine and was featured on the magazine's front page. Although it promised little in terms of future distinction for its author, the poem was at least a beginning.⁶

Two years after his marriage to Elinor White, Frost once more tried to please the family and complete his scholastic education. He entered Harvard in his twenty-second year and remained until his twenty-fourth. He liked the study of philosophy, the classics, and the study of Latin and Greek, but he still was not willing to stay there because he said the place stifled his creativity.⁷

His grandfather was disappointed, but he gave his unambitious grandson a farm near Derry, New Hampshire, for a refuge.⁸ This refuge presented something of a challenge, and at twenty-five Frost began farming. He was anything but a born tiller of the soil, though he did make some sort of living exclusively as a farmer for five or six years. He continued his writing, and, in the end, he turned to teaching part of the time.

In 1912, at the age of thirty-five, Frost moved his family

⁶Philip L. Gerber, Robert Frost (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 22.

⁷"Frost: 'Courage Is the Virtue That Counts Most,'" op. cit., p. 90.

⁸Robert Frost, op. cit., p. 8.

to England for three years. Frost said: "I knew not one soul in England. But, I felt impelled to lose myself among strangers, to write poetry without further scandal to friends or family."⁹

The emergence in England of Frost as a fresh, exciting, and major discovery happened swiftly and dramatically after he found a publisher for his first book of verse in 1913. Then in 1915, Frost brought his wife and four children back to America. Although no welcoming committee greeted him, America stood ready to receive her new poet.

In the half century after his publication in England, American society fell over itself to honor the poet it had neglected for twenty years. The Pulitzer Prize for poetry was awarded to him four times. During 1958 he was consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress, and subsequently honorary consultant in the humanities at the library. On the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, the United States Senate adopted a resolution of felicitation for him, the first the Senate ever gave an American poet. He received some forty honorary degrees from colleges and universities at home and abroad.¹⁰

Frost died at age eighty-nine of combined pulmonary embolism and pneumonia, after having just brought out his twenty-second book of poems.

⁹Gerber, op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁰"Frost: 'Courage Is the Virtue That Counts Most,'" op. cit. p. 91.

Now that some of the biographical facts of Frost's life have been examined, it is helpful in further understanding his writings to see something of his personality. Just how did Frost feel about life and about the people around him? What kind of person was he? This information can only be garnered from what others thought of him.

There seems to be a myth about Robert Frost in the United States. A sampling of descriptions supplied impromptu by a college poetry class some time after the poet's death is representative of the basic features included in the mental picture that most people have. According to these young people, Robert Frost was variously...

"a kindly old rural farmer"

"a sensitive person who sees what others don't notice,
but when he puts it down, then they see"

"a New Englander who shows what that part of the country
is like, the quality of the people."¹¹

In short, to his great "public" Frost was the epitome of the benevolent farmer-sage, a type of ideal regional figure whose communion with nature purified him and raised him to the status of a seer, but whose total humanity rendered him approachable to all.¹²

Frost came to represent in many important respects the ideal

¹¹ Gerber, op. cit., p. 39.

¹² Ibid., p. 39.

American leader, combining sharpness of mind with the indispensable common touch, regional identity with national appeal. Reginald Cook, who knew Frost well, has depicted the features that helped give Frost this image:

Physically, Frost has the solidity of the close-sodded native soil. He stands about five feet nine, and you are aware at once of his strong-armed, full-chested, rugged build. In his old clothes he looks bigger than he actually is. When approached in the garden, he appears to loom; but when dressed up, he shrinks to medium height. Close up you notice the full, thick, muscular, workmanlike hands, the backs of them rough, the thumb large, the fingers long, the tips blunt, the nails wide and thick--firm fingers to grasp an ax, strong shoulders to start the swing, muscular forearms to follow through. His practical truths are the tougher, you think, recalling Thoreau, for the calluses on the broad, well-lined palms. His blue eyes, which are rarely measuring, nevertheless take you in. He looks, listens, appraises. And he sizes up memorably, saying, "I see what I see." His nose is strong and aggressive. His lips are full but not equal; the chin is firm.¹³

Cook's description goes along well with Frost's popular image. However, there was another side of Frost, or perhaps just more depth to the one side of him. Louis Untermeyer, a close friend of Frost's, has added to the knowledge of what Frost was really like underneath the image.

Untermeyer once commented: "People thought of Frost as 'benevolent, sweet, and serene.' Instead he was proud, troubled, and jealous. Robert did not converse, he spoke."¹⁴

¹³Reginald L. Cook, The Dimensions of Robert Frost (New York: 1958), p. 11.

¹⁴"Ever Yours, Robert," Time LXXXII (September 20, 1963), 102.

Also, Frost had an overwhelming intolerance of anyone who dared to disagree with him. "Sometimes I can think of no blissfuller state," Frost wrote, "than being treated as if I was always right."¹⁵ Along with this, went an insatiable appetite for praise.

There is a hint that Frost's relentless self-preoccupation lay at the heart of the tragedies that beset most of the people close to him. His sister and one of his children went insane; another daughter died from tuberculosis. After failing at farming and writing, Frost's only son Carol shot himself. Frost had spent the previous night assuring the boy that he was not a failure. Supposedly Carol's last words to his father have a ring of true horror as he said, "You always get the last word, don't you?"¹⁶

Although Frost had many personal tragedies in his life, he stoically refused to make literary capital of his losses. "You shouldn't wax literary about what you've been through," he wrote in 1933. "It must be kept way down under the surface where the great griefs belong."¹⁷

For Frost life was hard and disciplined. But there was

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 104.

never anything easy about Frost. He had a saying that perhaps reflected his general philosophy of life: "Courage is the human virtue that counts most---courage to act on limited knowledge and insufficient evidence..."¹⁸

After having briefly viewed some of the biographical facts of Frost's life and some of his personality traits, perhaps his poetry can be understood with more insight. From early in life, Frost had a desire to convey his thoughts to others. And, when Frost died in 1963, "he had said what he wanted to say to Americans, first in his poetry, then in television interviews, and finally in conversations taken down by friends, students, people who knew wisdom when they heard it."¹⁹

¹⁸"Frost: 'Courage Is the Virtue That Counts Most,'" op. cit., p. 90.

¹⁹"The Fearless Wisdom of Robert Frost," Vogue, CXLI (March 15, 1963), p. 119.

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