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A Study of Robert Frost

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A STUDY ON ROBERT FROST

Submitted to Mrs. Betty McCommas

BY Lauren Lindsey
Fall 1973

Forster, Norman. Poetry and Prose. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1957, pages 1304-306.

Frost's Poetry

Frost is America's best loved poet of the 20th century. In its main aspect, the poetry of Frost is personal and universal. While rooted in his region, it comes to flower and fruit in his art, the registration of his personal quality and outlook upon the human lot.

Philosophy

He faced, in its modern form, the endless conflict between skepticism and faith, and was too honest for a one sided choice. He could see the worst in life without making it worse still and see the best without wishing for something better. He would insist upon winning his truths by discovery instead of tradition, yet he freely recognized that there are "truths we keep coming back and back to". This ambivalent attitude he sustains through kindness of spirit, through a shrewd common sense, and through sly humor, the elements in which his work as a whole is bathed.

Form

Like Edwin Arlington Robinson, Frost accepted the long established metrical forms, but to them he gave a subtly informal turn as close to conversation as to regular verse.

"THE DEATH OF THE TIRED MAN"

The center of interest isn't dramatic suspense, since the title foretells the conclusion. Is it dramatic irony—our awareness of the incongruity between the words of husband and wife and the death of Silas? Or is it the character of Silas? the differing character of Mary and Warrne? or, behind the characters, differing attitudes toward life?

Mending Wall

A familiar feature of farms in the stony New England landscape is the loose stone wall used as a fence. After hunters and the frosts of winter have disordered the wall, neighbors may "walk the line" to make the boundary clear again by restoring fallen stones. Taking an instance of this custom as a theme, the poem contrasts two attitudes: that of the neighbor, who has a blind faith in fences, and the "I" of the poem, who wants them only when they serve a clear purpose and yet teasingly humors his neighbor. The reader, too, is humored: not told what general conclusion is to be drawn, but left free to decide this for himself. Many years later, Frost observed, "I played exactly fair in this poem. Twice I say "good fences make good neighbors" and twice "something there is that doesn't love a wall". These sayings represent opposed thoughts, in many forms, keep recurring in Frost's poems.

Lowell, Amy. Tendencies in Modern American Poetry. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York, 1917. Page 135.

Frost's Life

At one time, he worked in a mill, and yet there is not a single mill throughout his poems, while every wild flower picked in his wandering was photographed on his heart with the accuracy born of passion.

Realism

Mr. Frost is realism touched to fire by idealization, but in the final count, and in spite of its great beauty, it remains realism. Mr. Frost writes down exactly what he sees. But, being a true poet, he sees it vividly with a charm which translates itself into a beautiful simplicity of expression.

McGill, Arthur. The Celebration of Flesh: Poetry in Christian Life. Association Press, New York, 1964. Pages 92-125.

City Poetry Vs. Nature Poetry

Robert Frost stands in sharp contrast to T.S.Eliot. He deliberately turns away from the urban world in favor of the rural country. He uses a slow, quiet language. Frost is not interested in relating poetry to city experience and city speech. For his ear, on the contrary, the city has a tendency to empty language of its poetic substance, to transform speech into talk and talk into noise. Frost's rural verse stands opposed to the standardized mass language of the nation in a number of ways. Of particular importance is its reserve, its habit of not stating crucial matters directly in so many words.

Pastoral Poet

Frost is enjoyed as a modern pastoral poet, who portrays the New England countryside as an idyllic scene. His Yankee manner is thought to give a nostalgic quaintness to everything. His characters have an ennobling simplicity, surrounded by nature and sustained by companionship. It is a tranquil world of apple-picking, tree-swing, and wall-mending, of encounters with deer and flowers and birds, of neighborly visits and family solidity. If this is idyllic, various others have called his style much less than idyllic. This criticism was especially strong in the 1930's, when the "new" poetry of city speech was beginning to establish itself. Then he was attacked as the representative of old-fashioned attitudes and diction. He was accused of escapism, of refusing to enter into the sufferings and quandaries of modern man, of still clinging to remnants of the 19th century world.

"MENDING WALL"

It must be emphasized, however, that this idyllic Frost is a complete illusion. There is no secure peace or untroubled contentment in the world of his poetry. "Mending Wall", for instance, may show the quaint rural way of repairing stone walls each spring, but it also exhibits the profound and rather terrifying

chasm that can exist between neighbors.

"STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING"

One of Frost's most popular and interesting poems is this one. The poem describes how someone riding at night is gripped by the spectacle of the dark and snowy woods. The spell of the moment causes him to stop, and it holds him so strongly that only the claim of waiting obligations draws him away. But what precisely is this particular spell? We are given a narrative of different incidents accompanying the experience, but no direct account of the content of the experience. The pleasure and validity of the poem lies in the way in which it indicates this content, but does not state it. In the first three stanzas, there is a rhythmic movement of attention away from some detail in the ordinary, social, workaday world—a house in the village, a farmhouse, the harness bells—and toward the dark and solitary scene. This movement is not normal. Through the horse, it is twice characterized as something strange. With each new stanza the movement becomes more complete in its withdrawal from the ordinary world. Note how the opening lines consider the woods in terms of private property and refer us to a house in the village. In the next quatrain, we aren't carried to such a thoroughly social region. "A farmhouse" involved people, but it also evokes a sense of isolation. With the third stanza, human society has completely vanished and only the immediate presence of the horse still reminds us of the everyday world. At this point, however, the movement of imaginative withdrawal almost completed, the positive attraction of the woods comes into focus. The "sweep" of "easy wind" and "downy flake" discloses the scene to be, not just cold and isolated, but filled with a wonderfully gentle quietness. This is the blessing that draws the man away from all human society.

The last stanza stands out, not only because it brings the two poles of the movement of withdrawal, but also because it brings the two poles of the movement into full clarity. Its opening line is the final expression of the surrounding peace—"The woods are lovely, dark and deep". Then, by contrast with this, the man thinks of the familiar world that awaits him, the promises to be kept, and the miles to be traveled. But there is nothing warm or reassuring here. By repeating the last line, Frost conveys a sense that this world is a place of sterile and painful monotony, without fruition. He thus explains the attractiveness of the isolated woods and the difficulty in turning from them. It is not their scenic beauty, but their peace that attracts him.

The last lines do something more, however. By referring to "sleep", they indicate that another experience of dark and quiet peace awaits the man after he has finished his work. They extend the situation before us. But they do so only in the most restrained way, without indication of precisely the limits of that extension. Do the miles of journey and the sleep refer simply to what the man will do on that particular night? Or do they embrace his whole life of work and the endless sleep that will follow it? Does the emotion aroused by

the deep woods extend even to a desire for death? Frost refuses to elaborate.

Every sentence remains primarily focused on the actual, concrete situation. It would be wrong, therefore, to say that the final lines, with their reference to miles of journey and sleep, make it "obvious" that the poem has some wider meaning. That obviousness is precisely what these lines are designed not to give. They only tease the reader. They alert him that the spell of the woods may be something that works elsewhere, but they say no more. They open a door, which his imagination is invited to pass through, but they themselves don't show the way.

His Restraint

The "Oven Bird", "Armful", and "For Once, Then Something", and "The Cow in Apple Time" are teasing poems. The concrete subject matter is just on the edge of turning into metaphor. But the poet holds back. These poems tease the reader, like something he glimpses out of the corner of his eyes. The minute he tries to seize them and make them direct objects of his attention, they disappear.

Frost never lets his poetry overshadow the individual people and objects he's using as subjects. When some object appears in one of his poems, it does not dissolve in a metaphoric change. It doesn't lose its own identity, or disappear completely before another thing or general idea.

Thoughts on Individuality

Individuals, he believed, should always keep a certain kind of distance from each other and should not intrude into each other's lives. He criticized the modern school curriculum for what he called its "laid-on education" since it subjects all students to the same standardized program without reference to their individuality.

Miller, Perry. Major Writers of America. Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc. New York, 1966. Pages 925-946.

Early Life

Frost's popularity in his 70's and 80's succeeded that of many of his contemporaries. He presented a number of paradoxes. For most of his life his reputation came to be based on the figure he presented to his audience; that of a New England poet who lived close to the land, and whose principal interests, apart from writing and teaching, were rural ones. Yet he spent his early years (b. in 1874-1963) and early manhood in industrial New England towns and cities—chiefly Lawrence, Massachusetts. His mother was a schoolteacher in Edinburgh and it's apparent that many of the poet's characteristics—his intuition and imagination, as well as his belief in the importance of positive aims and values—were derived from her. Frost's own temperament was that of the farmer who owns and works his land. He was extremely close to his mother and one term at Dartmouth he left without notice to help her at home. It was at this time that he sold his first poem—"My Butterfly" to the Independent, a leading weekly, and attracted the attention not only of its

editor, but of the editor's sister-who later corresponded with Frost.

Marriage

He married Elinor White in 1895, a school chum, with whom he had tied for valedictorian when he was a senior in High School. They moved to England and here they were poor and indifferent to the conditions of poverty.

Personality

Frost had always taken life as it came where he found it- whatever he did he made worth doing--his manner was friendly and undemonstrative. He looked at you directly; his talk was shrewd and speculative, withholding nothing and derived from nobody but himself. He was unhurried in all that he said and did. The Frosts did not live by the clock. Meals were taken at odd hours. And when there were visitors, talk and the reading of poetry went on far into the night, by candlelight. When war broke out in 1914, they moved back to America.

Criticism

Frost's work wasn't critically examined until the last decade-some felt the reason being that it didn't encourage "close" reading or fine-drawn explication.

"THE PASTURE"

A lyric which serves as an epigraph to North of Boston written with a controlled and distilled simplicity-a love song.

The Depression

During the depression, for the first time nature appeared in his poems as a refuge to which men must retreat, rather than as a natural environment which men may freely choose as his own. He begins to repeat such warnings as stand fast, ward off, dig in, take care...Books of poetry appearing at this time were A Further Range, A Witness Tree, and Steeplbush. Poems in these books were: Desert Places, The Gift Outright, Directive.

Frost, Yeats, and T.S.Eliot

In Frost's late career, his works showed that there would be no shocking confrontations, as in Yeats, and no profound spiritual insights, as in the case of T.S.Eliot.

Nature Poet

The picture of Frost as a genial, white-haired patriarch who loved nature and people and whose poetry is popular because it is inoffensive is as partial and as misleading as the portrait of Whitman as "The good gray poet". Frost may be viewed as a Janus of modern poetry-one face turned toward the New England past of "nature poetry", rural life, self-reliance, and village eccentrics and the other turned toward the fragmentation of values incident to our own century that has resulted in almost universal feelings of alienation, loneliness, and skepticism

Thornton, Richard. Recognition of Robert Frost. Henry Holt and Company, 1937, pages 167-168.

His Poetry

He is a middle of the road poet". He appeals to all levels. Just as his untrained readers have enjoyed hearing the voice of his verse because it is a human voice, so they have enjoyed the deeper layers of meaning which underlie his apparently simple pieces. It isn't that nothing is clear. The surface is as clear as daybreak. It is that the things which are unclear are the things which elsewhere in the world are unclear-in all our life, no less.

A Character Sketch of Frost

He is romantic, granted; but he knows the world and knows therefore whereof he speaks-why he doesn't like most of it and why he likes the parts he does like.

One need not have lived in New England to understand him. He has, in fact, induced a nostalgia for New England in persons who never saw the place.

Frost, the man, gives an impression of great force, combined with a sort of tentativeness. Perhaps this is because thoughts are so vital to him. He thinks slowly. He acts slowly. Sensitive, upright, dignified, Mr. Frost is a good man moving in a world of wickedness. His New England consciousness of the wicked, he has tried to lay over with a gloss of tolerance. His extreme gentleness of spirit has resulted. He has determined to preserve this gentleness, this freshness of view point in the face of all disillusionment. Consequently he has few prejudices. His ambition is the development of his art, not the successful understanding of writing as a possible business. His home is important to him. So is his family. So is his poetry which, in its essence, is a simple feeling and facing of the facts of life.

Frost's body, which is sturdy and square, makes little impression on one who meets him for the first time. It is the eyes: bright blue, steady, gentle yet canny, two vivid lights in a face that is otherwise gray. His hair is loose, coarse-almost white. Loose clothes become the poet. Frost works late into the night and sleeps far into the morning. He likes to walk. He likes to sit watching a fountain and letting his mind play along its rising and falling waters.

A Character Sketch

Robert Frost is one of the most companionable of men. He's the sort that will not go to bed as long as he has anyone to talk to, anyone to talk to him.

A Character Sketch

Frost has been called the "Original Ordinary Man". He believes that "A poet must learn to lean hard on facts, so hard, sometimes, that they hurt." And it is because he has that belief that after reading one of his poems, the reader feels that he had had an actual experience. The segments of life in

the poems of Frost all existed first as experiences; none were conceived at the desk.

Untermeyer, Louis. Robert Frost's Poems. Pocket Books, Inc. New York, 1946, pages 2-16.

His Life has Many Contradictions

Long before he became known as the greatest American poet of his time, Frost worked as a farmer, a bobbin boy in a Massachusetts mill, a shoemaker, and a teacher in country schools. His life has many contradictions. He has never entered a competition and does not believe in prize contests, yet the Pulitzer Prize for the best poetry of the year has been awarded to him four times. His blank verse monologues are supposed to be written in "the rough, conversational tones of speech", yet his lyrics are remarkable for their delicate and precise music. He has chosen one part of the country for his special province--the very titles of his books seem local: North of Boston, Mountain Interval, New Hampshire, A Further Range--yet no poetry so regional has ever been so universal.

His Name

His father was a Southern sympathizer during the Civil War and when his son was born in 1875, the child was named after the great southern soldier--Robert Lee. Hence the name Robert Lee Frost.

Success

Frost had to wait more than 20 years from the time of his first poem in a high school magazine to the time of his first books. When the volume appeared, the poet was 38 years old.

His Poems are People Talking

Mark Van Doren said of him, in an essay "The Permanence of Robert Frost" that Frost's singularity, his "strangeness", consisted in the conversational tone he builds into his verse. Whether in dialogue or in lyric, his poems are people talking.. The man who talks under the name of Robert Frost knows how to say a great deal in a short space, just as the many men and women whom he has listened to in New England and elsewhere have known how to express in a few words they use more truth than volumes of ordinary rhetoric can express."

The truth has been Frost's central passion. When he is most serious, he is most casual. He accepts the world's contradictions without being crushed by them.

Philosophy

"I had a lover's quarrel with the world" is an accurate summary of the poet's spirit; a contemplation of the world which is free to question, even to criticize, but always with understanding, always with earnest love.

Subjects

Robert Frost has written on almost every subject. But his central subject is humanity. His poetry lives with a particular aliveness because it expresses living people. But Robert Frost's poems are the people; they work, they walk about, and converse, and tell their stories with the freedom of common speech. This is a poetry that never pretends. It's the poetry of good conversation; it is a language of things as well as thoughts.

"SITTING BY A BUSH IN BROAD SUNLIGHT"

This poem is a matching poem to "Stopping by Woods .." Title are similar, descriptive verses, homely pictures, simple terms, common words. Both are deeply meditative. "Sitting by..." ends on a note of persistent faith.

Realist

"There are two types of realist", Frost once said. "There is the one who offer a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real potato. And there is the one who is satisfied with the potato brushed clean. I am inclined to be the 2nd kind. To me, the thing that art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form"

Method

Frost's method: "A part for the whole " without telling all, he suggests all. Frost rarely insists or explains; he never says too much.