

Strange Ordinairiness in Robert Frost: A Review

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Abstract: *Robert Lee Frost is very famous and an oft-quoted poet. He is highly appreciated and admired for his realistic portrayal of rural life and his great expertise on American colloquial speech. Most of his astonishing works circle around the rural life settings in New England during early twentieth century. He used his own work to analyze complicated social and philosophical themes. While experimentalist twentieth century poets were falling over themselves to find new modes of expression, Frost reawakened readers to the power of the pastoral, the classic symbols of nature and countryside. This paper is a journey through this strange ordinairiness in the pages of the celebrated poet-Robert Frost.*

Keywords: Ordinairiness; Colloquial speech; New England; Everyday events

1. Introduction

The deceptive simplicity of Frost's verse boosted his popularity among serious and casual readers alike. His poetry is very natural in its wording; using words that most people can understand; that make his poetry seem practical and ordinary; speaking in a natural, easily comprehensible manner. Although, Frost concentrates on ordinary subject matters, his emotional range is deep and wide and his poems often shift dramatically from a tone of humorous banter to the passionate expression of tragic experience.

2. General Discussion

The restrictions of the experimentalists, ironically seeking liberation have amused Frost. With pleasant banter he has teased his contemporaries by jesting about their desperate "Quest for new ways to be new". Behold the fantastic variety of their restrictions in their freedom; he said "poetry, for example, was tried without punctuation. It was tried without capital letters. It was tried without any image but those to the eyeIt was tried without epigram, coherence, logic and consistency. It was tried without ability... It was tried without feeling or sentiment like murder for small pay in the underworld. These many things it was tried without, and what had we left? Still something". To him the mystery, the wonder, the virtue, the magic of poetry is its heterogeneity of elements somehow blended to a single autonomous unit. Refusing to arrange his observations into any kind of systematic theory, Frost has mentioned several specifics and factors which seem to him important. Rejecting the hard and fast boundaries of definition as too dangerous, he has indicated certain elastic principles which seem not only sensible and salutary but also deeply rooted in the experience of poets in any age. "My definition of poetry (if I were forced to give one) would be this: words that have become deeds. A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a homesickness. It is a reaching out towards expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and thought has found the words."

The feature that establishes Frost's greatness as a poet is his realistic depiction of New England rural life and command of American colloquial speech. The voices and visions of

New England country sides are his primary subjects, the many different things to be heard and seen and experienced in his rich, rustic landscape. He depicted the fields and farms of his surroundings, observing the details of rural life, which hide universal meaning. His images- woods, stars, houses, brooks are usually taken from everyday life. He wrote poetry from common speech, direct expression, folksy candor and steadfast adherence to rhyme, meter and other formal issues. He showed strong liking for traditional versification or old fashioned simplicity. He composed his poetry, to use Wordsworth's memorable phrase in "the language really used by men." Due to Frost's down to earth approach to his subjects, readers find it easy to follow him into the deeper truths of life, without being burdened with pedantry. For that reason, his work is as accessible as it is beautiful, as fresh as it is timeless. As a poet he never sought freedom of form, but in his own words "freedom of my material."

Frost's poetry is very natural in its wording, using words that most people can understand and that makes his poetry seem practical and ordinary. There is nothing complicated about the structure of his poems; they seem to be mere translations of everyday events into poetry. Instead of using elaborate phrasings in the lines, his poems speak in a natural, easily comprehensible manner.

In Frost, there are no creations of new worlds: only discoveries of that which has been known but not remarked. Thus, in writing a poem, the poet is remembering what he did not know he knew. He has a homely approach, everyday events find expression in his pages; the charm of Frost's wide appeal seems to reside here. Frost's poetry is the record of life that he himself lived, experienced and realized. He took the events of day to day life as his subjects. He wrote of woods, of birds, of mowing, of mending a wall.

Frost regards the form as something essential to poetry in any age. We may start with the great variety of stanzaic forms and then break any of them down to the rich formal relationships of rhyme to rhyme, of line to line, of sentence to sentence of words which talk back and forth to each other in the poem. Furthermore, form in poetry is modulated by the relation, the balance of emotion and emotion of thought and thought of emotion, and thought of the image and the

metaphor, of the specific and the general; of the trivial and the significant, of the transient and the permanent. All these facts appear to Frost as related aspects of that terse word 'form'.

To give form in poetry is also to employ that intricate method of conveying organization, shapeliness, fitness to the matter or substance of context or meaning of the poem. Before meaning finds its place in a poem it must become subordinated to its proper balance with structure. Frost asserts that another requirement of poetry is that this formal fusion of distinct elements shall achieve the personal idiom of the poet's expression without sacrificing that happy correspondence which must exist between his own experience and the experience of those who come after to read or hear the poem.

His works, however, can be seen as universal interpretations of common situations.

3. Testimony from the poems

The poem "Mowing", as the name suggests, is written upon a very common event. The opening takes place in a hushed manner; the mower is working in a field, where there is "never a sound" "but one" and that was the "whispering" of the scythe. The speaker wonders and tries to find out what the scythe could possibly be talking of. He continues his exploration of various possible alternatives. The poet asserts with certainty that the scythe was not muttering anything about its vision of enjoyment in leisure hours nor was it thinking about the wealth from fairy. In the penultimate line, he introduces his philosophy:

"It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
Or, easy gold at the hand of Fay or elf:

The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make"

In "Mending Wall", The narrative represents two opposed attitudes towards tradition, in that the poet imaginatively challenges the literal and therefore meaningless rituals, epitomized in the wall being repaired, when there is actually no need of a wall. Commenting on the poem Untermeyer says:

"In the voices of two men- the younger, whimsical, new fashioned speaker and the old fashioned farmer who replied with his own determined sentences, his inherited maxim- some readers hear the clash of two forces: the spirit of revolt, which insists that convention must be upheld, built up and continually rebuilt as a matter of principle," The poem represents a clash between these two points of view. Frost intends to present a problem and explores the numerous varied and paradoxical issues involved in it. Many critics have read symbolic meaning in "something there is that does not love a wall". The "wall" for them, symbolizes all man- made barriers suggesting the divisions between nations, classes, and economic, racial and religious groups. Here lays the mastery- Frost expresses his philosophy of brotherhood and tolerance, of honest living, against the neighbor's dogmatic assertion "good fences

make good neighbor" through this simple event of mending a wall.

The first thing that strikes a reader of Frost's poetry is its clarity. At a time when poets were inclined to show off their erudition and when poetry was full of esoteric reference, Frost's poetry is clear and specific. Unlike the poem of T.S Eliot and other modern writers Frost's verse does not puzzle the reader with irreducible ambiguity. Clarity and simplicity in Frost is not to be mistaken as triviality, though there are many who accuse Frost of shallowness of thought. But this is a price that a poet who strives for clarity of expression and freedom from the charge of obscurity always has to pay. Tennyson the English poet always suffered in comparison to Browning who is difficult to comprehend. In Frost's poems, one often finds layers of meaning. But even if one fails to grasp the deeper significance, he is still satisfied with the surface meaning. W.G.O Donnell writes about Frost's poetry: his lucidity is such that he who runs may read; there is always an easily grasped meaning or image for the reader- some perception of nature, some comment about birches, blueberry patches, or deep woods filling up with snow. Were there nothing in Frost below this superficial level, he would certainly have to be set down as a "simple bard with a gift of versifying," but there is something below the superficial level.

In "The Road not taken" and "Stopping by woods on a snowy Evening", the poet takes meditative or philosophical delight in the roads and the woods mentioned in the poems- a delight quite new and that is why surprising. But when the poems come to an end, they end with reflection upon wisdom upon the wise choices made by the speakers. The poems in fact, record moments of immediate experience in the poet's life. Frost was a passionate and troubled man, who sought in his poems "a momentary stay against confusion" and his skillfully constructed poems testify to his mastery over that confusion. As he said in an interview:

"Each poem clarifies something Making little poems encourages a man to see that there is shapeliness in the world. A poem is an arrest of disorder."

Both the poems have got layers of meaning: as Louis Untermeyer comments on the poem "Stopping by woods on snowy Evening," "one of the most quietly moving of Frost's lyrics uses its superb craftsmanship to come to a climax of responsibility: the promises to be kept, the obligations to be fulfilled. Few poems have said so much in so little." It is an interesting allegory of life and death too.

Frost's poetry celebrates the countryside of New Hampshire. But he is not a regional poet. He may begin with geography, but he has the ability to take his poetry into an un-mappable country. Though he has used in his poems the familiar landmarks of New Hampshire, he has caught the spirit of all country sides. Hence the universal appeal of Frost's poetry rests on New Hampshire. As a critic has put it, Frost portrays "a variety of rural New England responses to the human predicament not for purposes of recording local color, but rather to evoke universal extensions of meaning."

Frost's love of the New England countryside was coupled with his love of simple rustics. His poems give real Characters, live people. The dedication of "North of Boston" speaks of the volume as "this book of people." The tramps, the farmers, the hired men are all according to Frost fit subjects for poetry. His characters are real. There are a great deal of portraits of abnormal people in "North of Boston"-unbalanced people like the overwrought mother in "Home burial" who is well on the way to becoming a nervous wreck because of the death of her child or the wife in "fear who unconsciously disguises her desires as obsessions." But the majority of the characters are sane and sound like the farmer Warren and his wife Marry of the "The Death of a Hired Man." Through the death of Silas, the hired man who comes to their house to die, Warren and Marry arrive at a greater insight into things. They learn that:

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there
They have to take you in....

.....
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."
There are the Lorens of "Blubberies", the father and his brood of young Lorens, who in spite of their poverty are determined not to be poverty stricken and not to ask anything of anyone, and to live just taking what nature is willing to give. The two neighbors discuss the Lorens thus:
"He seems to be thrifty; and hasn't he need,
With the mouths of all those young Lorens to feed?
He has brought them all up on wild berries, they say,
"Like birds.....
.....It's a nice way to live,
Just taking what Nature is willing to give,
Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow."

About Frost's depiction of these rustic characters George W. Niche writes: "Frost is important because he has demonstrated, by his performance in "North of Boston" and in a substantial scattering of poems since then, how much a poem can accomplish by a sympathetic identification with officially unimportant people, by the ability to hear and retain and reconstruct the sound of speech and by fidelity to a limited concept of experience."

A very important feature of Frost's poetry is its dramatic quality. Poems like "Home Burial", "Blue Berries", "The Witch of Coos" and the "The Death of the Hired Man" afford the best examples of Frost's genius of writing dramatic poems. In **Home Burial**, We have got a man and wife facing a crisis. The wife is almost cracking up under the strain of the grief caused by the death of their child. The feeling of horror that she experiences on seeing the graveyard "so small the window frames the whole of it", and the quickly piled burial mound with the gravel "leaping" in the air, and the stains of mud on the man's shoes is vividly conveyed. Depth of anguish that verses on hysteria is deftly depicted in the words of the woman answering her husband's query:

"Can't a speak of his own child he's lost?"
"Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh! I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air._
I don't know rightly whether any man can."

In "The Witch of Coos" and Paul's wife Frost makes dramatic uses of suggestion and understatement, to build up a total effect, which the mere telling of the story could never have achieved.

"The Death of the Hired Man" is the finest example of Frost's use of the dramatic. Like Browning's dramatic monologues, this poem suggests gestures. The scene assumes reality and vividness because of the clever strokes that the poet makes use of. Mary describes the abject figure that Silas cut on his return to the farm from which he has gone thus:

"He's worn out. He's asleep beside the stove,
When I came up from Rowe's I found him here,
Huddled against the barn door fast asleep,
A miserable sight, and frightening, too_
You need not smile, I didn't recognize him_
I wasn't looking for him_ and he's changed
Wait till you see."

"Home Burial" and "The Death of a Hired Man" are two poems that show Frost's philosophizing over every day events. In "Home Burial", says Louis Untermeyer, "The strange and the familiar are strikingly blended. The talk is the talk of everyday, the accents of man and wife facing some sort of crisis. But the situation is strange -common in words, uncommon in experience.

"Birches" is another one poem that relates a common incident when, he, as a boy was jumping from one branch to another of birches, but as the poem progresses, the poet quietly introduces a deep philosophy that love of earth is essential for climbing heavenward. Birches are a common sight in New England. The poet has observed their habit minutely, and in this admirable lyric, he describes them precisely and accurately. The poem begins in the tone of easy conversation: "When I see Birches bend to left and right". Then without warning or change comes a whimsical and arresting image, and the face turns into a fancy: "I like to think some boy's been swinging them."The language is usually simple and clear but pregnant with symbolic significance.

"I'd like to get away from earth a while
And then come back to it and begin over
May not fate willfully misunderstand me away
Not to return, Earth's the right place for love
I don't know where it's likely to go better."

4. Conclusion

Frost is the poet of common people, he is a poet of the minor theme, the casual approach and the discreetly eccentric attitude. He expresses living people and his poetry lives with particular aliveness. Most of his poems are of New England setting; and they are faithful records of the habits, actions, sufferings, trials and tribulations of the common mass living there. Frost has a down to earth approach; very common, everyday events he celebrates. He embraces simplicity and through his simple diction, he conveys a deeper philosophy of life-there lies the mastery of Frost. Another reason for his abiding appeal is his country background. When the Georgians wrote nature poetry as

country week-enders, he was a poet who belonged to the soil. W.H Auden, after claiming him as the only representative in verse of the small farmer ,goes on to state that his “ qualities of irony and understatement, his mistrust of fine writing, are those of practical man. His poems on natural objects...are always concerned with them not a fossil for mystical meditation or starting points of fantasy, but as things with which and on which man acts in the course of the daily work of gaining a livelihood.” And C. Day Lewis made a similar point with equal vigor, and said, “ Like Virgil, he has been a famer , and this ensured that his nature poetry should not degenerate into false romanticism, whimsicality, heartiness, or mere botanizing.” Randall Jarrell puts it: “Frost’s virtues are extraordinary. No other poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men; his wonderful dramatic monologues come out of a knowledge of people that few poets have had.”

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