



ROBERT FROST AS AN ADEPT IN ADOPTING REALISM AS THE BASIS OF HIS ART AND SINGING OF HUMANITY AS THE SOUL OF HIS WIT AND WISDOM: A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This paper does neatly explore the poetic and artistic skill of Robert Frost in adopting 'Realism' as the basis of his poetic creed and literary output touching the heart of his countrymen and readers with the strength of his lyricism, impulsive utterance, simple poetic diction, clarity, patriotic spirit, use of symbols, and modernity, attesting to the common fact that Frost's art of singing of humanity is the soul of his wit and wisdom. It examines how Frost's simplicity and regional flavor and tone, his classicism mixed with romanticism and his philosophical idealism are some of the general qualities of his poetic cosmos that made him out and out a liberator of American poetry. It projects rather beautifully Robert Frost as a poetic realist probing beneath the surface for an insight into the springs of human characters and deriving his language and rhythms directly from homely speech, both as a great poet of nature and a poet of humanity.

Key Words: *Lyricism, Impulsive Utterance, Modernity, Poet of Nature and Humanity, Classicism, Romanticism, Simplicity, Common Speech, Regional Flavour, Poetic Realist.*

As an immensely popular and honored poet of America, Robert Frost is said to have touched the heart of his countrymen and his readers because of the strength of his lyricism, his impulsive utterance, his simple poetic diction, his clarity, his patriotism, his art, his symbols, his modernity and the importance he gave to man and nature and received four Pulitzer Prizes, the Lioness Prize, the Mark Twain Medal, the Gold medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Silver Medal of the Poetry Society of America and also occupied several University and College Chairs. He is considered as great a poet of Nature in America as Wordsworth is in England. His simplicity and regional flavor and tone, his classicism mixed with romanticism, his originality and his rich philosophy and his lyricism are some of the general qualities of his poetic cosmos. No doubt, his central themes are men and women, humanity, loneliness, isolation and Nature. He fought against the existing traditions of poetry; he wanted poetry to be as free as love. He illuminated things as common as woodpile and as uncommon as prehistoric pebble, as natural as a bird singing in its leap and as mechanistic as a revolt of factory worker. He is out and out a liberator of American Poetry.

Robert Frost is a great poet of nature but he is even greater as a poet of humanity. His landscapes are all landscapes with human figures. His poetry lives with a particular aliveness because it expresses living people and their human activities like working, walking, conversing and telling their tales with the freedom of common speech. He has given the pictures of men and women without trying to glorify them. Harry R. Warfel rightly observes:

"He is a poetic realist, who probes beneath the surface for an insight into the springs of human characters.... Frost keep his eyes on the subject and looks at it until it takes on significance in relation to life, character or spirit... His language and rhythms derive directly from homely speech; this matching of language and subject, a rare achievement, proves Frost's artistry" (P 1339).

Frost is not only lyrical but also narrative and dramatic. He can tell a story in verse very effectively and can create characters. He can give dramatic surprise, suspense and illumination. The poem "Two Tramps in Mud Time" is in the form of a story in verse, in which a man is found to be engaged in work. The clash and conflict between two opinions, held by the men (wood-cutter) and the two tramps are the main interest of the poem. The central idea of the poem is that one should try to unite avocation and vocation for such a combination is absolutely necessary' to do a work nicely. In spite of being disturbed by the tramps, he does not stop his work. On the other hand, the disturbance makes him love his work more than he loved before:

"The time when most I loved my task
These two must make one love it more
By coming with what they came to ask" (Lines 41-43)

As Son of a farmer, Frost is a close observer of Nature and rural landscape. He regards the world of Nature as impersonal and unfeeling. In the words of Nitchie,



“Frost is ultimately not very much concerned with developing a philosophically consistent concept of nature... What really interest him is not definitions but attitudes, not what nature is in itself but how man responds to it in a world he never made”
(P 218).

Though he is regarded pre-eminently as a poet of nature, man holds a more important place in his poetry than nature. Frost himself was conscious of this fact when he said, “I guess I’m not a nature poet”. In “Mending Wall”, the subject is one of the regular duties of farmer-keeping his stone walls in good order. In this poem, the speaker is a young man, most probably the poet himself, whose attitudes and opinions are expressed in the poem. The other character is the poet’s neighbour, an old farmer, who does not speak a single word, though one comes to know about his views and attitudes, from what the speaker says about him. The poem expresses Frost’s philosophy of brotherhood and tolerance, the twin virtues of honest living against the neighbour’s dogmatic assertion that “good fences make good neighbours”.

Frost’s treatment of man is characterized by realism, for he had drawn the life of common men and women, without in any way, trying to glorify or idealize them and him known humanity without its “company manners”. His treatment of humanity is free from romantic exaggeration and his realism is free from any taint of vulgarity or shoddiness. About his realism, Untermeyer remarks rather significantly: “... Frost is a realist, for no American writer knows his subjects, people and places so thoroughly. But his is a peculiar kind of realism’. It does not insist on a catalogue of mean trifles, on a piling up of bald or brutal details” (P 38). In Frost’s treatment of man, the very first thing that strikes one is his sympathetic portrayed of men and women who do not apparently seem to possess any social importance. Ezra Pound wrote of *North of Boston* as:

“Mr. Frost’s people are distinctly real.
Their speech is real; he has known them.
I don’t want much to meet them, but I know but
I know that they exist and what is more,
That they exist as he has portrayed them” (P 38)

The other characteristic feature that strikes Frost’s readers is the diversity of characters that live in their memory even long after they have read the poems. Untermeyer has rightly said in this connection as:

“Characters as diverse as can be imagined are portrayed in
“The Gum-Gatherer”, “The Investment”
“The Figure in the Doorway” and “To a Young Wretch”.

The method of presenting them is as various as the characters themselves. Sometimes, they walk leisurely into our consciousness like “The Gum-Gatherer” or trip lightly into our hearts like the youngster in “To a Young Wretch” or flash suddenly into our vision like “The Figure in the Doorway” or enter pathetically like the young couple in “The Investment”. These people live with increasing vividness in the poet’s lines and in are portrayed with an unputting sympathy, a tend exactitude. The poem “Acquainted with Night” records the city walker’s coming and going, hearing and seeing at the hours of the night. To the man, the city appears to be wrapped in darkness and evil and he records his movement towards the city of dreadful night. Suddenly he is caught by the cry which he recognises to be the sound of the clock:

“I have stood still and stopped
the sound of feet when far away
an interrupted cry came over houses
from another street, But not to call me
back or say good bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
one luminary clock against the sky
Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor
right. I have been one acquainted
with the night” (Lines 7-14)

The significance of the poem is that it shows the poet himself walking alone and lonely, cut off from other human beings and from the universe as a whole. Commenting on this poem, James L. Potter remarks:



“The speaker is almost entirely self-centred and detached. He does not seem to be impelled by pride, but he certainly denies any contact with other human beings. The “one luminary clock against the clock” suggests because of its ‘unearthly height’, the isolation of the speaker and therefore of man in general in the Universe Night in the poem seems to symbolize the void in which man exists...” (P 115).

The types of men drew by Frost place before us the different pictures of man’s life on earth. It can be safely said that his men and women, diverse as they are, represent the conflicting sides of human life. In the words of Barbettes Deutsch, “Frost has as much to say of happy wooings and mating, of friendly encounters and generous neighborliness, as of the bleaker aspects of farm life ... the people about whom he writes are usually of New England stock, folk who cultivate their rocky acres with stubborn courage and bear, until they break, the drudgery and isolation of their lot” (P 39). One can observe that loneliness is a central spring in Frost’s poetic impulse. Whether it has the cosmic overtones of “An Old Man’s Winter Night”, wherein this big universe, the faceless silence of “All out of doors looked darkly in at him” or the more intimate loneliness of country folk who experience the attendant fear that goes with solitary places, Frost conveys it in many poems. In “An Old Man’s Winter Night”, one can watch the elder protagonist go through the ritual gestures of evening. This poem which is concerned with the problem of an old man posing the eternal question of man’s place in the universe is summed up in the following lines:

“One aged man-one man – can’t keep a house,
A farm, a country side, or if he can,
It’s thus he does it of a winter night” (Lines 26-28)

This poem depicts the loneliness of an old man in a farm house on a winter night, finally going to sleep. But the way in which it is said by Frost is something remarkable. The old man does not feel the necessity to resist the darkness; “All out of door looked darkly in at him”. He does not feel the terror one sees in him. The point, ‘He does not know how helpless he is shows him as a pathetic figure.

Man and woman seem to Frost to represent alternative approaches to life, often in conflict and yet complementary to each other. Man seems to embody rationality and destructiveness and a certain kind of insensitivity, when women seem to embody imaginativeness, creativity and sensitiveness and therefore vulnerability. These differences can be seen in “The Death of the Hired Man”, “West Running Brook” and in “The Snow”. The main problem of Frost in these poems is to resolve the differences and achieve a balance that will render the relationship complementary. According to Thompson, the Central theme of the poem “The Death of the Hired Man” is the transformation of the husband’s stubborn and impatient Prejudice, through the deliberate and gentle persuasiveness of the wife. Of only secondary importance to the poem is the return, and death of the hired man. The psychological implications of the poem become apparent only when one recognizes the gradual ascendancy of the wife’s latent pity and kindness until it dominates the husband’s our spoken in tolerance and anger. Thus, the theme of the poem is the gradual conversion of warren to pity and sympathy for one who has never earned a right to pity. Many and Warren have no responsibility towards Silas except that warranted by humanitarianism, their relationship is enriched by their shared sympathy for Silas. The poem gives a beautiful definition of ‘Home’:

“Home is the place where,
When you have to go there
They have to take you in” (Lines 122-123)

It becomes clear that Frost’s men and women are not so distinct and powerfully drawn as those of Wordsworth. The moment one thinks of Wordsworth, the characters such as The Leech Gatherer, The Old Cumberland Beggar, The Solitary Reaper, Simon Lea, Michael and a host of others come to one’s mind. Frost’s men and women fully represent the aspect and situation which they belong to but there is not so much of life and blood in them as in the rustic people of Wordsworth. Man holds a more important place in Frost’s poetry than Nature. The Central theme of his poetry is nothing but humanity. His poetry lives with a particular aliveness because it expresses living people and their life situations. His stark simplicities are the simplicities a man finds after much experience and a great deal of painful self-questioning. “The Need of Being versed in Country Things” is a poem that can be described as simple to the core but it carries with it a deeper suggestiveness of meaning. Elizabeth Jennings rightly analyses this poem thus:

“The poem is about a derelict barn, but Frost uses the subject and the occasion to write a poem about the alliance between sensitivity and acceptance, the realistic attitude which is essential to the true country man”. (P46)



And of course, the poem is concerned with far more than just this; it reverberates far beyond its immediate subjects. It is profoundly simple and likewise, simply profound:

“The birds that came to it through the air
At broken windows flew out and in,
Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh
From too much on what has been
Yet from the lilac renewed its leaf,
And the aged elm, though touched with fire;
And the dry pump flung upon awkward arm;
And the fence post carried a stand of wire.
From them there was really nothing said
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept
one had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept”

In this poem, Frost has struck a perfect balance between the attitude of the observed and commentator and the complete immersion of his own personality. He is most deeply present in his subject and profoundly moved by it. “The sigh we sigh” includes the poet, the reader and all humanity. In using the language of common people for poetic expression, Frost is said to have followed the example of Wordsworth. Thompson observes rather rightly thus:

“It has been frequently and correctly pointed out that Frost’s poetic concerns are akin to which led Wordsworth to choose incident and situations from common life and then to present them in a language actually used by the common man whose heart-felt passions are not restrained. Like Wordsworth and like many poets before and after Wordsworth, Frost has particularly emphasized his concern for catching within the lines of his poems the rhythms and cadences and tones of human speech. Among modern poets, he has been one of the many who have advocated a capturing of what he has repeatedly referred to as “the sound of sense” or “sound posturing” to provide a complicating enrichment of the underlying metrical rhythm” (P 53).

In using the language of the common people, Frost shows himself to be a follower of Wordsworth, but he proves himself not merely a borrower but also an inventor. In the words of W.G.O’ Donnell, “In so far as Frost is a voice of New England, he is a minor figure in contemporary literature, to the extent that he makes his New England Universal in meaning and implication, he is a significant writer” (P 44). By means of his pastoralism, Frost seeks to examine the urban world of today; it is a standard by which he tries to evaluate it. Pastoralism usually takes recourse to romantic treatment; everything is idealized and glorified, and even the common place scenes and aspects appear to be bathed in the glow of imagination. With all his love of Pastoralism, Frost is said to have adopted realism as the basis of his art and viewed humanity as the soul of his wit and wisdom. The poem “A Servant to Servant” is a dramatic monologue and it is remarkable for the psychological self-revelation of a single person, after the manner of Browning. There is a couple in the poem; the husband is an ambitious farmer while his wife is a simple house-wife. She has been completely broken by cooking meals and house-keeping for her husband’s hired men and ultimately she becomes a servant to the servants of their own. Remembering the insane doom of her father’s brother, she moves dangerously on the brother between sanity and insanity. And her words contain a foreshadowing of the dreadful end she fears she cannot escape. Since her husband does not understand her, she is caught by the endless drudgery of doing endless works:

“.....I has said it out –
From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them – from doing
Things over and over that just won’t stay done” (Lines 49-52)

What is more frightening is her inability to be sure whether she is happy or sorrowful or anything. “It’s got so I don’t even know for sure/ whether I am glad, sorrow or anything”. In the poems “Home Burial”, “The Fear”, “The Hill Wife” and “A Servant to Servants”, Women play a more important role than men. All the women pictured have the abnormal state of mind. Regarding the abnormal nature of these women, in W.G. O’Donnell observes:

“Abnormal people abound in “North of Boston” – Unbalanced - people like the overwrought mother in “Home Burial”, or the common-law wife in “The Fear”. Most objects of all are the ghostly lunatic in “A servant to servants”. Frost saw that these morbid disorders cropped up somewhat too frequently in the remote rural districts and he suggested that something in the land and the way of life seemed to breed such diseased minds” (P 51).



In the poem, “A Hundred Collars”, one finds the poet sketching the characters of two people – a city-bred Professor and a newspaper man who goes from place to place collecting subscriptions. In the beginning it appears that the newspaper man is no match to the learned Professor; but soon the opening stance gets reversed. The simple countryman turns out to be imaginative, wise, dashing and courageous that is, in every way superior to the urban-bred Professor. The simple country salesmen have a quickness of mind and sensitivity that are absorbing:

“I like to find folks getting out in spring,
Raking the dooryard, working near the house,
Later they get out further in the fields” (Lines 139-141)

One can easily observe that Frost’s view of men is consistent throughout his works. Each man is, in a sense, a stranger on this earth, and so he remains. It is not using his asking why he is alone and why the world seems to be against him. As he grows, he understands himself more, and he understands more of his fellows. With understanding comes love which makes him respect the chaos of the world with which he is in conflict, the material with which he works. The same love makes him respect and accept differences between men also. And he knows that those differences are not to be overcome by “the tendered – than – thou

“Collectivistic regimenting love
With which the modern world is being swept”
(A Considerable speck 24-26)

By reading and analyzing Frost’s poetry, one can realize that harmonious relationship between man and wife is a basic requirement for leading a happy life. This world is made up of men, women and other living beings. No civilization or humanity can thrive men and women. Frost’s concern for a happy world has induced him to explore problems of human relationship and that is why his central subject is ‘humanity’, and his poems do suggest that intelligent handling of human problems can make life on this planet tolerably good and agreeable. Thus, Robert Frost is a great humanist using the medium of poetry for the betterment of human society.

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