



## COGENT ELEMENTS IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

**\*Dr. Pavan Barelia**

Assistant Professor of English, Vijayarage Govt. Girls P.G.College, Morar, Gwalior, M.P., India

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### ABSTRACT

The writer, Robert Lee Frost, was a nature poet, a poet who spoke with rhyme and meter of all things natural, and in so doing plumbed the depths of emotion of people in all walks of life. In describing a simple act of nature, the mundane, or the heartfelt grief of people, Robert Frost elucidates an insight into the sometimes-simple instances in our lives that when brought together constitute our very lives. Some of Frost's most beautiful work displays this unadorned reality of life. In all of Frost's works, the reader sees captured in verse a depth and level of human emotion that is not easily discerned by the eye, but rather felt and nurtured in the heart, Robert Frost uses nature at its most beautiful to explain life at its harshest.

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### INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost was important to American poetry during the first half of the twentieth century because he maintained traditional meter, structure, and themes during a time when modernism was the dominant poetic mode. He was a popular poet, but he never sacrificed his art for that popularity. His style was plain, but his poetic structures were complex. Monroe observes this where Frost displays 'character, as well as a penetrating, humorous and sympathetic quality of genius. They face the half-glance of the world, and the huge laughter of destiny, with pride and grit, and without egotism.' (Harriet Monroe 62) One aspect of life that touches everyone is death, whether it is the loss of a friend, neighbour, or loved one. Robert Frost who preferred to be rooted in the American culture, unlike expatriates like Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, created a universal art with a high "locative" predisposition, and singularities of place. Lawrence's statement that "all creative art must rise out of a specific soil and flicker with a spirit of place" becomes highly relevant when we underscore Frost's necessity on New England for evolving the subject-matter of his poems like in Home Burial which reveals his love for his countryside

There are three stones of slate and one of marble,  
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight  
On the sidehill. We haven't to mind *those*.  
But I understand: it is not the stones,  
But the child's mound—'

In Robert Frost's poem, "After Apple-picking," the reader comes to know an old man who worked harvesting apples his entire life. In the smell of the apple blossoms and the beauty of the russet color of the apple, the reader realizes the old man's love of his apple orchard. His death is coming slowly and peacefully to him, allowing him time to see and hear his life once again, but much more acutely. He hears the rumbling of apples in the cider bin and feels the rung of the ladder on the arch of his foot. The harvester's senses have become heightened to ordinary, daily activities. Robert Frost, unlike these two stalwarts of modern poetry, preferred to be rooted to the American soil, and his poems published in England smelt strongly of it as Richard Church points out that if his philosophy is to understand 'In order to see it more roundly, and to locate it in its place in the chain of endless eventuality. So though his work is so quiet, it is not static. He pretends to step aside, as observer, from the universal mobility. But he also makes poetry out of that pretence. Indeed, it is the source of his laughter. (Richard Church 39) American bias of Frost's poems was obvious, rooted as they were in the peculiarities of

**\*Corresponding author: Dr. Pavan Barelia**

Assistant Professor of English, Vijayarage Govt. Girls P.G.College,  
Morar, Gwalior, M.P., India

scenes in New England, his aspect of Frost's life must, first of all, be well contained in our mind before we start searching the "roots" of his pastoral poetry which emerged from a closer Thoreauvian understanding of the fairly "uninterrupted scene of pleasure" of the wilderness-the original home of man where one can discover, given the willing suspension of disbelief, man's "aboriginal self" with all its primal innocence and beauty. The reader can feel the bone tired pain of tiredness and the quiet reception of endless sleep. By letting the reader feel the old man being lulled into death through the use of the senses, the poet subtly interweaves into the reader's consciousness the hold that the land has had on this farmer; "Essence of winter sleep is on the night/ The scent of apples: I am drowsing off" (7-8). In the final four lines of the poem, the old man knows that if the woodchuck were still around it could define the nature of the sleep. By using the senses of smell, touch, and even sight, Frost lets nature ease the old man into rest.

In "Home Burial," we experience the aftermath of death of a beloved child and quite possibly the death of the marriage. The poem's setting is only a small portion of a house containing the staircase and the area leading to the front door. At the top of the staircase, there is a window that looks out upon a small family cemetery. We meet the wife and mother at the top of this stairway and the husband/father at the bottom. She is quite clearly upset and the husband asks why. When he reaches the top of the stairs and looks out, he finally understands. He grew up here, and like everyone else, tends to not see details that he has always known. His wife sees this as coldness because he buried their child in this cemetery. The story progresses and he pleads with her to talk to him, to not seek consolation from others, but to turn to him. Likewise, in "After Apple-Picking," the world of work and labour is represented in the harvest of the apple-picking. Note what the speaker says about this work:

For I have had too much  
Of apple-picking: I am overtired  
Of the great harvest I myself desired.

Success, as defined in the quantity of apples, has exhausted the speaker, and thus this poem symbolically comments on work and success. However, perhaps in his most famous poem, the haunting necessity of taking decisions is summarised in "The Road not Taken," where the speaker is forced to make a decision between two paths that would lead him to different destinations. These paths and the choice of course symbolise the decisions that we all have to make in life but which we are never able to undo or go back and select another "path."

Knowing that men and women deal with every emotion differently, it would seem that dealing with grief differently would not come as a surprise, but it does. I think the biggest difference comes from the very physical fact that the woman carries the child in her womb and bonds with that child even before he is born. She knows that child and very child, of course, is different. Peter Viereck observes that 'he is one of the most original writers of our time. It is the self-conscious avant-garde rebels who follow the really rigid and tiresome conventions.' (Peter Viereck 68) When my son, Stephen, was stillborn, I was inconsolable as was my husband. Life goes on, however, and my husband was back at work while I was still home recuperating from birth. Death is such a heavy load and to lose a child is the worst burden of all. I could still feel my child squirm and kick and jump in surprise. I would wake in

the night anticipating movement. I would start to talk to him before I remembered, and meanwhile life went on. There is an incredible difference in the sensibilities of men and women. My affinity with the poem "Home Burial" stems from not only the death of a child, but also from looking for solace in the land. I love gardening. Feeling the soil sift through my fingers and smelling the pungent odour of the earth is balm for the spirit. Seeing the buds of spring and feeling the hot sun of summer on my skin aided the healing process. Over the years, tears and rain have watered my garden while shovelling and anger have tilled the soil. Knowing that earth returns to earth is somehow a comfort and affords anyone the opportunity to listen to nature. When I listen closely, I hear the soft sigh of the wind, the buzzing of bees, the rustling of grasses, and the slow healing of my soul.

In the poem "In Hardwood Groves," the poet invites the reader to the realization that all living thing must return to dust in order to dust in order to "mount again" (line 5). People resist change especially during tribulation. However, Frost's work paints a picture of nature at its most beautiful to ease the shock of suffering. Every minute of every day, the earth is continuously changing. Whether or not that change is accepted does not signify. Frost demonstrates how nature has been given to humanity as a respite for the soul. His poems express not only the rejection of that solace by some, but also the quiet rejoicing of others in the comfort of all that nature has to offer. In "After Apple Picking" 'the dream will relieve the world of effort, even to the ache of the instep arch where the ladder rung was pressed. But is this a cause for regret or for self-congratulation? Is it a good dream or a bad dream?' (Robert Penn Warren 130)

This poet has done that and more. He has used mature at its softest and most sweet smelling to its harshest extreme to provide verbiage for emotions that at times can hardly be endured much less spoken about. Frost's songs of nature can typify the joy one feels at witnessing a bubbling brook, the smooth silkiness of the sun on one's skin, the delight in someone's eyes to the desolation of grief. Nature in all its glory has given wings to Frost's pen. Frost has been defined as a realist. Louis Untermeyer recalls that "Frost once said, "There are two types of realist. There is the one who offers 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 second kind. To me, the thing that art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form"" (18). Nature will certainly strip everything down to form.

Often enough, that meaning is arch, pedantic, and intrusive, redolent of the cracker barrel and the symposium in the country store. In "The Kitchen Chimney," Frost pleads with his house-builder to build the chimney "clear from the ground" rather than from a shelf:

A shelves for a clock or vase or picture,  
But I don't see why it should have to bear  
A chimney that only would serve to remind me  
Of castles I used to build in air.  
In "Evil Tendencies Cancel," he asks:  
Will the blight end the chestnut?  
The farmers rather guess not.  
It keeps smoldering at the roots  
And sending up new shoots  
Till another parasite  
Shall come to end the blight.

“Everything is really all right,” murmurs the vindicated shade of Doctor Pangloss. And in “Something for Hope,” we are advised that we need only let our abandoned pasture develop a good crop of trees and then timber it off in order to have the pasture again as good as new:

A cycle we'll say of a hundred years.  
Thus foresight does it and laissez faire,  
A virtue in which we all may share  
Unless a government interferes.

The clincher stanza of “The Kitchen Chimney” contains sufficient mildly embarrassed self-deprecation to make it, if somewhat arch, at least legitimately amusing. “Something for Hope” becomes two-edged in its closing lines:

Hope may not nourish a cow or horse,  
But spes alit agricolam “tis said.

The whimsy may be mossy, but the irony is directed, not only against worriers, but also against complacently timely platitudes. And if “The Bear” presents man’s intellectual history as an endless and futile pendulum swing that “may be thought, but only so to speak,” still the speaker includes himself in his indictment.

Thus Frost’s moralized metaphors are characteristically marked by a kind of defensively ironic whimsy, the gesture of what I have called in chapter I prudential man, the man who is primarily concerned with getting by and who co-operates with nature because such co-operation enables him to get by. Insofar as they are whimsical, they warn one off from trying to construct metaphysics from them; insofar as they are moralized, they provide a set of practical hints alone. The only moderately developed figure in Frost’s poems who tries – Loren, in “Blueberries” – is, as I have said, an object of at least partial contempt. Loren has no apparent sense of that “limitless trait in the hearts of men” that blesses, or curses, contemplative man, leaving him chronically dissatisfied with mere getting by, with a world that is not broadly and deeply meaningful.

In Robert Frost’s two Masques we also find a somewhat similar approach in the depiction of the character of God. God is denuded of the closed aura of myth and is presented as a humanised figure pondering over deeper meta-physical problems humanely. Moreover, the Adamic poet’s venture in this context takes him to work contra the tradition of appropriating mere myth as poetic form. He rather works under the assumption that the essential and “inherent form of experience,” and even of language is, in fact, “the author of the myth, past and present manifestations, and it is this form poetry seeks to release from historical language.” Thus, the Adamic poet tends to sing the everlasting glory of the “single self” of man which, in its uniqueness, gathers qualities of harmony and proportion in being unitary and self-sufficient in the face of all that smacks of the mass and its generic culture. Optimistic American poets like Walt Whitman may, of course, imagine that the single self and the democratic mass might produce an electrifying force if they perfected each other fruitfully and suitably. This apart, the Adamic poet’s “sovereign self” may contain in itself a deeper level of self-assertion which in its very condition of isolation and separateness may develop an elementary and realistic sense of honour just as we find, for example, in Thoreau’s self-chosen

retirement from the community to carry on a kind of experiment with life beside Walden Pond.

With these ideas in mind a consideration of Frost’s poetry with a knowledge of his critical rules will bear testimony, as it shall be shown in the succeeding lines, that Frost is consistently pre-occupied with “the Adamic Mode” in American Poetry. A knowledge of what he has to say on poetry vis-à-vis his own experimentation in that field will be helpful as a starting point for our enquiry.

Frost talked of “enthusiasm” in poetry but was also one who sincerely meant to force it through the “prism” of metaphor. For that matter, as he wrote to Sidney Cox, “a subject must be an object” as the poet holds it clearly outside of himself. This way Frost may seem to be reiterating the mythic poet’s emphasis on poetry as “an escape from emotion.” Though there is always a necessity for this, as Frost’s approach to themes in his poetry would show, Frost is, perhaps, a little too uncomfortable when a poet makes a cause of it. A judicious reference to Frost’s self-definition through his creative imagination would mean, first of all, and particularly from about 1925 on, a growing interest in establishing a certain kind of correspondence between poetry and life. While talking of belief in God, Frost is also interested in fixing confidence in the self-belief, the belief of love and literary belief. This again shows his Academic freedom of choice in entertaining an abstruse attitude towards the problem of existence because such an attitude is the only thing possible in a mysterious universe.

However, Frost’s “poetic impulse” that enabled him to define himself as an individual cannot be generalized. Lawrance Thompson notes its ambiguity and emphasizes its operational interaction of opposites. Sometimes, his emotional reaction to an experience is worked out into a provoking thought via a telling Snowy Evening.” At other times, he begins with a sudden through analogy, he reaches an emotionally vibrating afterglow. Something.” Though Frost never wanted to “worry a poem into existence,” he never forgot the value of “working out a poem” which he would have been delighted to name as the “facility of performance in an act of clarification.

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