

Treatment of Nature in the Selected Poems of Robert Frost: Quest for Humanism and Symbolic Representation

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Abstract:

The present paper proposes to highlight *Treatment of Nature in the Selected Poems of Robert Frost: Quest for Humanism and Symbolic Representation*. It is an attempt to reveal the human psychology and perception of Robert Frost who endeavored to search a life cycle and human dilemma. The current study also aims at focusing on different perspectives of his poetry; it has keenly observed the surrounding background of the poet who tried to experiment with truth. The poet himself is the narrator of the lyrics and he outburst his feelings towards the social milieu because he has become puzzled man in his life .The poems chosen for study are” *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening,*” *Mending Wall*”, “*The Road Not Taken Departmental*”. These are suggestive of the human tendency and the chaotic situation of the poet who expressed the humanistic values, culture and personal experiences with reminiscence.

1. Introduction:

Robert Frost was a leading American poet who started writing in the Nineteenth century and emerged as one of the most significant poets of the Twentieth century in America. Frost’s appeal is universal despite of the regional flavour in his poetry. His entire career was highly profile in his age; he received reverence for his literary works consequently, he was honoured by a declaration of the United States Senate and the library of congress

selected him their expert in poetry in 1958. He was four times awarded the *Pulitzer Prize* for poetry in 1924, 1931, 1937 and 1943 and also a recipient of esteemed awards.

He was one of the most prominent poets of America and known as the purest classical poet. He was all the time on the move in look for a quest for excellence and riches. He was paying attention on present veteran and remembered experience. His conception of poetry is compared with the noted poets like Eliot, Yeats or Ezra Pound. He used different phrases and thrill in poetry. He was introduced as a modern poet and modern reformer with good attitude. He is an outstanding poet with a reputed scholar and of his period. The most important theme in his poetry is reality as he is a nature poet and a classic American poet. Coles observes:

Frost begins with a discussion of the several aspects of newness in modern poetry, particularly that which suggests that art should embody grievances and in so doing move man to action. A contrast to these moderns is Robinson who “stayed content with the odd fashioned way to be new”, who in other words, discovered truths about human nature while writing within the traditional forms of poetry. He did not write of grievances of the passing vexations, but of grief’s, the fundamental sorrows of the heart. Moreover, he did not write to change society, but merely to reveal the enduring qualities of humanity, for as Frost says, “Grievances are a form of impatience, griefs are a form of patience.” Moreover, both Frost and Robinson did not develop elaborate theories as did many poets for they believed that the poem rather than abstract theories about it was most important.¹

Robert Frost was also known by different roles such as teacher, cobbler, editor and finally farmer in New Hampshire. Concerning his style, the rhyme patterns are skillfully produced and he was even more adroit in matters of meter and rhythm. His poems are precious with lively view of daily life. He, not only acknowledges the presence of the appalling in physical reality but also makes it clear that people cannot offer each other solace to understand other human beings that is always insurmountable. He does not like the pre-modernist, adopt or advocate a life style which included the deliberate withdrawal of the individual from society. Frost was

one of the noted writers in the modern era. Unfortunately, he took the last breath on 29 January 1963.

2. Humanism:

A man devotes his life for the sake of people or society on humanitarian ground, “devotion to the humanities and a doctrine or a way of life centered on human interests or values”² A devotee follows the humanistic values for breeding, the great philosopher explained about humanity on a theoretical concept.

In the sixteenth century the word humanist was coined to signify one who taught or wrote in the “studia humanitatis,” or “humanities”—that is, grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy, as distinguished from fields less concerned with the moral and imaginative aspects and activities of man, such as mathematics, natural philosophy, and theology. At that time, these studies focused on classical, especially Roman, culture; and they put great emphasis on learning to speak and write good Latin. Scholarly humanists recovered, edited, and expounded many ancient texts in Greek and Latin, and so contributed greatly to the store of materials and ideas in the European Renaissance. These humanists also wrote many works concerned with educational, moral, and political themes, based largely on classical writers such as Aristotle, Plato, and above all, Cicero. In the nineteenth century a new word, humanism, came to be applied to the view of human nature, the general values, and the educational ideas common to many Renaissance humanists, as well as to a number of later writers in the same tradition.³

Frost’s poetry particularly brings to attention the social issues relied upon the human way that gives the message of man for mankind. “The term Humanism includes revolutionary qualities of liberal thinking and Athenian democracy. Man was discovery himself.”⁴ Frost underscores the need to have the right perspective on all things including one. In some ways nature can be supportive. At last, Frost specifically advices us to preserve our individual integrity and to link ourselves with society.

3. Symbolism:

Symbolic representations in Frost's poetry express the ideas and thoughts, "the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities."⁵ Robert Frost apparently used symbol in his poetry in which he expressed his inner thought, thereby symbol becomes a central means of his poetry which indicates the human object of poetry where the poetry suggests the intact situation and indicates the symbol of poetry. M.Abrams opines in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

In the broadest sense a symbol is anything which signifies something else; in this sense all words are symbols. In discussing literature, however, the term "symbol" is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself. Some symbols are "conventional" or "public": thus "the Cross," "the Red, White, and Blue," and "the Good Shepherd" are terms that refer to symbolic objects of which the further significance is determinate within a particular culture. Poets, like all of us, use such conventional symbols; many poets, however, also use "private" or "personal symbols." Often they do so by exploiting widely shared associations between an object or event or action and a particular concept; for example, the general association of a peacock with pride and of an eagle with heroic endeavor, or the rising sun with birth and the setting sun with death, or climbing with effort or progress and descent with surrender or failure. Some poets, however, repeatedly use symbols whose significance they largely generate themselves, and these pose a more difficult problem in interpretation.⁶

Symbolic representation used in the poetry of Robert Frost expresses the idea of the poet exclusively. *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening* is one of the best poems by Robert Frost. This poem was published in 1923 at New Hampshire. Sometimes the poet gets emotional response to a particular situation. So, he expresses his desire for breeding. Frost himself is a speaker in natural way, in natural rhythm and speech. It is the depiction of the scene of the woods and under the circumstances on which the speaker has stopped. The poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is an expression of joy which the poet feels as he stands watching a familiar sight on a winter evening. A common place where the scene of snowfall is showering, Frost is

inspired by wonderful scenery and to write some memorable lines in poetry such as “Before I sleep” may be understood in a twofold saner before I go to sleep in the night or before I die; death is very often referred to as eternal sleep. At the beginning of the poem there is one character, speaker the man talking: “Whose woods these are I think I know”⁷

There poet pauses one evening to watch the snowfall in the woods. As he sits in his horse driven carriage looking at gorgeous woods, he is tempted to stay there as long as he could. He knows that the woods belong to a person whose house is in the village. Even his horse is baffled, for the reason that there is not any farmhouse nearby to take halt between the woods and the not frozen lake. Thus in the winter evening the poet is fascinated by the beauty of nature. But the next moment he thinks of the promises he has to keep and does not wish to die. He says:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.⁸

At the opening of the second stanza there comes a third character “My little horse.” It is a vital character in the poem. The poet has promises to keep and miles to go before the final sleep. This gives him eternal relief from all responsibilities and burdens of his life. The personal occurrence of the poet merges with the universal experience. It is a universal plead. The theme of the poem is simple. It is the account of the scene of the woods and the circumstances under which the narrator has stopped. The rhyme, rhythm, rhyming and memo syllabic words have used. “The speaker’s delight in contemplating the woods filling up with snow seems to him to be an abandonment of his responsibility when he realizes that he has an appointment to keep with death”⁹ The dramatic conflict is between the narrator and the horse and not the speaker and the unseen someone.

There is a force of dramatic expression though the poem is written in the tradition of the romantic nature lyric. The Speaker’s voice is mysterious and somehow terrifying: “The woods are lovely dark and deep.” In the darkest evening of the year amid the winter snows, stopping by the woods alone even for a moment, must be terrifying indeed, it is like a nightmare.

“*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*” is a poem of deep philosophical connotation, where the poet reminds himself of his obligations to himself and to his fellow beings. “And a miles to go before I sleep” is a symbol for life’s journey which ends in eternal sleep that is death. Here the “sleep” becomes a deserved honor . The “*woods*” is a complex symbol. It symbolizes deep gratification as well as the dark inner self of man.

In “*Mending Wall*,” the poet is the speaker of the poem. He and his neighbor get together every spring to renovate the stone wall between their individual properties. “Mending Wall” is one of the most widely quoted poems. It was published in 1915. In this poem, the regular duty of the farmer is to keep his stone wall in good order. Two characters in the poem a young man and his neighbor. The young narrator is the poet himself. His manner and opinions are expressed in the poem. The other character is the poet’s neighbor, an old farmer, who does not speak a single word though we come to know about his observation and attitudes from what the speaker says about him.

The “*wall*” between Frost’s apple orchard and his neighbor’s pine wood suffers damage during a winter. During the next spring the poet and his neighbor meet to repair it and walking along each on his side of the wall they replace the fallen stones. The Poet feels that repairing the wall is meaningless. But his neighbor replies that good fences make good neighbors. Frost always suggests to his neighbor that the *wall* is superfluous. But the neighbor insisted that good fences make good neighbors.

The central situation of the poem has given scope to a social or symbolic interpretation and cultural problems have been analyzed as well. Robert Frost tries to search human tendency and the social aspects. He overtly observed the human psychology. Frost tries to find out the factual situation of the human tendency in critical moment, so that the poet wants to suggest that the man has become a wayward. He search himself in the whimsical world .He reveals the realistic picture of the society. He described the social confrontation before the readers and also expressed his idea and suggestion through the lyrics. He shows the right path and way of life where man is thoroughly invisible in day to day life. Frost suggests that

human being should get an internal relief in chaotic situation. It is a human exploration by Frost.

Spring is the period when the reimbursements caused by wintry weather have to be repaired. The neighbors meet and march along the two sides of the wall repairing the damage as they move. The poet writes of inanimate objects as if they are alive and therefore he talks to the boulders and says: "Stay where you are until our backs are turned."¹⁰

Similarly of apple trees, he comments, the neighbor says that good fences make good neighbors. But the poet feels that there is some natural urge in man and nature to break wall. When the neighbor walks along the wall with stones in his hands, he looks like a savage of the Stone Age. The poet describes his neighbor as:

... I see him there

Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old some savage armed.¹¹

It is a dramatic monologue in which the narrator asks questions and then he answers them. The speaker has created the casual and informal effect of conversation. The speaker is young and has new bent of mind but the neighbor is an old thinker. The poet felt like arguing further, but the neighbor stuck to his sight which was his father's before him, he thus, constantly utters: "Good fences make good neighbours."¹² But the poet is of the opposite opinion, as he points out:

There where it is we do not need the wall

He is all pine and I am apple orchard".¹³

The speaker in *Mending Wall* is saying just the opposite at work to break down barriers between human beings. Each person must discover for himself pride, companionship, self respect with love or the mystical unity of men who work. "The suggestion that "wall" may have ramification beyond the denotative 'form wall' is implicit in the situation. In his customary manner the poet uses a common enough situation to probe the mysterious depths of human nature and motivation."¹⁴ The poem does show the obscurity of making an exact account about any of the poet's ideas. The speaker does not agree with his neighbor in theory but in the fact of his labour, he is doing the same thing his neighbor is doing.

The “*Wall*” symbolizes all kinds of manmade barriers ; It suggests the divisions between nations, classes, racial and religious groups. The Mending Wall is a symbolic explanation of the modern situation. The “Fence” or “Wall” here has a symbolic significance .It also symbolizes national, political and economic barriers which divide man from man and come in the way of mutual understanding and universal brotherhood.

The poem *The Road Not Taken* was published in 1916 in the volume of poems “*Mountain Interval*”. It is a personal lyric which reports the poet’s experience. The poet’s understanding becomes symbol of human experience in all times. Once, traveling alone in the woods, the poet stood at a point where two roads diverged. He felt confused in selecting the path. He could not journey both roads at the same time. So, he chose the path that was less travelled and this choice made all the differences as the poet writes:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood and I,
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the differences. ¹⁵

The current poem is simple and straightforward in which the poet bewildered about the career that he has chosen. In this manner, the poet says that while marching on the road of life he noticed that the road is diverged in two sides. The poet did not know whether he would ever reach his destination as he had to choose.

Ultimately his choice results in a successful end. The poet succeeded in his aim and feels that he was right in choosing the way that he has become the supreme poet of his period. This choice was for the poet as a challenge and accepting ultimately leads him to succeed in achieving the aim of life.

The “*Road*” has a symbolic meaning. It indicates the way of life which suggests the moral path. Most of the people have love and materialistic life but very few people have love and pious life. The poet took less travelled road and that has made all the difference. The title of the poem is suggestive and symbolic. The personal experience of the poet acquires universal proportions. It is not constrained to the personal level. The poem records a personal experience of the poet in his life. But his experience becomes symbolic for human beings in all ages and all countries. The “road”

indicated the way of life. “The theme is the choice that we often have to make between two courses of action and the consequences of our choice.”¹⁶ The poet suggests that even minor decisions have lifelong consequences. The road or the choice determines one’s destiny or future. Hence the poem is symbolic referring to the option one has to make in one’s own life and the consequences that follow it. Frost finds himself in a dilemma as to which one he should take.

Thus, Robert Frost is saying that faced with a choice between two roads, the narrator chose the less used, the less admired more audacious one. The choice has framed his whole future. The diverging roads became a simple and explicit metaphor for the fact that each of us is what we are as a result of having chosen either a conventional or unconventional way throughout life. In doing so, he must choose his direction towards his bright awaited future. Perhaps this poem reflects the same frustrating conflict on which Frost explores through the poem man’s relation to nature and reflects that man is completely isolated in an alien world.

Departmental is a witty and satirical poem that comments on the mechanization and departmental organization of modern life. In this poem, Frost has mocked at some of the usages of modern life. At the surface level, the poem tells us about an Ant fable, but in reality it is on the whims and follies of the human society. An Ant ran into a dormant moth on the table cloth and it was far larger than the ant. But it did not take any notice of it. However, the ant reported to other Ants and they, in turn, reputed the matter to the superior authority, the queen Ant.

The officer in charge appeared on the landscape. He tried to be as serious as he could. He seized the dead body and heaving it in the air which carried it out of that place. The other Ants were not there because they were under the impression that it was not of their affairs. They did not feel anything for the death of a fellow Ant because of the departmental organization. The poet wants to point out the fact through this Ant fable that men also have become hard hearted at the suffering of their fellow beings, for they have grown-up quite mechanical.

An Ant ran into a dead moth which was far bigger in size. The other ant did not do the same simple because “His business wasn’t with such.”

Perhaps he must have an idea that it was not his business. This act of the Ant shows the lack of empathy for his fellow being.

But he no doubt reports to any
With whom he crosses antennae,
And they no doubt report
To the higher-up at court.¹⁷

Robert Frost, in this poem, has pointed out the coldness of the human beings towards the sufferings of their fellow beings. An Ant once ran into a dead moth on the tablecloth but did not take any notice of it. It ran off to his way. The only action that has been taken is reporting the matter to superiors. The queen issued orders for the stately funeral of the dead Ant. The officer, who was in charge of the funeral rites, was directed to lay the dead body on a sepal and wrap in petals, Ant was the food collect the queen issued order for the grand funeral.

The officer in charge of funeral rites appeared on the scene, he tried to keep his face as serious as he could. Then he seized the dead body by the middle, heaved it in the air, and carried it out from there. The other Ants were not present there to see the funeral. They were busy with their own affairs. By this incident the poet wants to point out that the fact is not only concerned with nature but also concerned with the human activities that go on in nature e.g. moving apple picking birch shingling.

It proves that the uniqueness of each poem is an exceptionality which results from the fact that in each work there is or should be a perfect blend between the subject matter and the manner of appearance. So Frost believes that poetry should have a wildness by which he means bloom and rituality of sense for invention and exhibition. He sketches the picture from any past experience rather he retrospectively, naturally and spontaneously draws out from the past memories of emotions and experience as well as linguistic emotions which naturally relate to the poems represent the often melancholy musings of a lonely narrator.

Frost is here showing that poetry is not merely something which describes life. He states that the writing of it parallels the processes of living. Let us examine the statement in some detail . On notice first that he is concerned with poetry written regular that is poetry which has a disciplined formal meter and structure. He is not concerned with free verse which to his mind is

far less challenging. in life, there will must confront challenges and commit itself to meeting and resolving them .Similarly, the poet must struggle to interrelate his subject matter and his poetic form in such a way that the finished work will be a meaningful picture of or statement about reality. Success is not sure but without the commitment of the will and the braving of the challenge, it can never be achieved. Frost sums up his theory: “Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements.” As we shall see in examining his poetry, human life is important when people try to give it meaning and structure, poetry is one of the ways of doing this.¹⁸

By and large, the life of Robert Frost was independent, lonely and sensitive and he often yearns for companionship. He was also passionate to nature and intensely conscious of change in the seasons. In fact, all these poems are grouped around the cyclic cycles and often changes in nature that reflects the human emotions.

4. Conclusion

The selected poems in view present a realistic description of the rural and urban life which usually goes on in the countryside. Thus, Frost’s regional art is creative and symbolic and his concept of humanism has given the moral message to the universe through his meaningful poems. He deals with a particular region but through careful selection of the material. The uniqueness of the region he describes in his poems revealed the similarities that exist between the life in that region and human life as a whole. The prominence of his regionalism lies in the fact that he makes it universal in its appeal. That’s why even those who are not familiar with New England love and get pleasure from his poetry. Frost’s poems have these sorts of qualities and the bulk of his poetry deals with rustic life of countryside.

Usually Frost’s poems on countryside life are highly suggestive and symbolic for example, *Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening* suggests the idea that man must sacrifice his desire for pleasure and rest to his duty and work in life. *Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening* has equally rich symbols. On the surface, it is just a simple story telling how the poet pauses one evening along a country road to watch the snowfall in the woods. He

thinks that the woods are lovely dark and deep. As he gazes into the soft, silent whiteness, he is tempted to stay on and on suddenly.

Thus, symbolically the poem expresses the conflict which everyone has felt between the demands of practical life and the strong desire to escape into a land of reverie. His symbols are simple because they are drawn from the simplest sources. Another example *Mending Wall* is also rich in symbols. In this poem, the poet has narrated a story of two men. One man wants to build a boundary wall between their respective fields, because he thinks that good fences make good neighbors. The fence here has symbolic significance. In a similar way the farmer in *Mending Wall* is not being silly but he is merely trying to make himself secure on his land. He has acquired that land and has planted the garden on it through hard work that's why he decides to fence the land from the others. *Mending Wall* tells an event from rural life, but in truth it is highly suggestive of humanistic values. The "wall" in the poem symbolizes all kinds of barriers which divides man from man.

Frost uses *symbols* and *images* in almost all poems. Symbols are the indispensable elements of poetry, through symbols a writer can state much more than by the use of ordinary words. Symbols make the language rich and expressive. Frost's poetry is rich in symbolism. It is by the use of symbols that Frost enriches the texture of his poems. He reveals the deeper meaning of a particular situation or an event. *The Road Not Taken* is a personal experience of the poet who is confused at the last moment of his decision. The poet faced the difficulty of choosing one of the two roads in the wood, at the last moment of choice; the poet was of the view that choice was so important from where his life of journey will go ahead with ambition. In the future he would reflect his decision and the choice he made. Then Frost wants to point out the fact in *Departmental* through an ant fable that men also have become hard-hearted at the suffering of their fellow beings; for they have grown-up quite mechanical. Frost also was a great lover of birds, insects and animals. Birds appear at a large number in his poems. "His deceptively simple style often hides the complexity of his thought. The experiences communicated by the poems provide a momentary stay against confusion."¹⁹ Thus the great American poet, Robert Frost, has used humanism and symbols in his poetry which have made his poems quite a lot complex as well as equally famous and universal

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