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## ROBERT FROST AS A VISIONARY NATURE POET NOURISHING HUMANISM, REALISM AND MODERNITY IN HIS POETIC REALM: AN APPRAISAL

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### ABSTRACT



Frost is considered as a modern poet in the sense that he lived and worked in the twentieth century. He is a realist trying to make things better in all respects. His poetry is concerned more with man and nature. He has the intention of bringing these two extremes of self and society together until the barriers merged into a whole being. The present paper is an appraisal of Frost as a visionary poet who brings all his imaginative things into reality and modernity.

**Keywords:** Frost, Nature, Reality, Visionary, Modernity.

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Frost is considered as a modern poet in the sense that he lived and worked in the twentieth century. In another sense, he is a contemporary of T.S.Eliot, W.H.Auden, Ezra Pound and W.B.Yeats who are considered to be 'modern poets' in the true sense of the word. Much in his thought, he is similar to the modern transcendentalist Emerson, whose use of pastoral elements in his poetry is not an escape from reality but a method of studying man in relation to Nature and Natural laws. Truly speaking, he is a realist trying to make things better in all respects. He would "like to get away from earth a while" (Birches 48) but then he must return to earth for,

"Earth is the right place for love:  
I don't know where it's likely to go better"  
(52-53)

To Frost, the land remains lonely to those who do not recognise its friendliness. He advises them to

"be glad of water, but don't forget  
the lurking frost in the earth beneath  
That will steal forth after the sun is set  
And show on the water its crystal teeth"  
(Two Tramps in Mud Time 37-40)

His rural world consists not only of the objects, the incidents but also the events and characters. "After Apple Picking" shows an interesting picture of a farmer being tired, going home after the day's labour of picking apples;

"Apples I didn't pick upon some bough  
But I am alone with apple picking now.  
Essence of winter sleep is on the night.  
The scent of apples I am sing off ." (1-8)

'Thrift' is a special trait of the inhabitants of new England. They hardly find time for idle talk since most of the time they are thrifty and hard working. In "Apple Picking", the experience of harvest turns out into "a lovely punishment with the synaptic echoing and rechoing of the experience" (Squires 93) as magnified apples appear and disappear"(18).

The greatness of Frost lies chiefly in his sympathetic understanding of the psychology of the village folk. For example in "Birches", he describes the pastime of a village boy. The village boy being devoid of playing base ball, considers birch swinging

as a relishing game. He climbs the birches over and over again so much so that not a single tree is left out unconquered and unbent. Even when he reaches the top, he is able to maintain perfect balance. From early boyhood down to his ripe old age, Frost himself is a farmer except for a brief period in England. He has a sense of vocation about writing poetry and farming is his vocation. By combining these two, he gets an intimate knowledge of the life of a farmer and thus arises the truthfulness of his depiction of rural life. Frost feels sympathy and admiration for them. Just like a friend, he approaches and understands them on the level of equality. He is not a romantic in the Wordsworthian sense nor is he the realist in the Hardian sense, though he does depict the Utopian dreams as well as the pessimistic and depressing state of village life. It is down to earth realism in his treatment of rural life that brings fame to him. Instead of idealising the rustics and the life lived by the people there, he gives a realistic picture of human nature as a bundle of instincts.

Frost is called a great regional poet for bringing in the locality of New England, but he chooses this particular locality as a means to move to the universal and the general. While emphasizing the joys and sorrows, loves and hatreds of the simple Yankees, he touches upon the fact that these human feelings can be attributed to all. Though he is very much aware of the materialistic concern of the United States, he has a deep respect for the land, the devices and the language and how remarkably they are used. His poems are supposed to be the projection of the mind which is constantly gazing at the natural world and trying to deal with various themes under the disguise of nature. Frost's treatment of nature is "a sort of psychic almanac" (Edwards 108). He observes the world of nature with philosophical abstractions and the outcome of this observation and philosophy does build up an important human psychology. Gradually man becomes "aware of his own position in the inexorable cycles of being" (Gerber 139). Just like a seedling which comes out of the soil in order to give forth fruits, life also springs outwards from youth to old age. All his poems are filled with mutability. Like



William Wordsworth, he feels one with the natural objects as the inmates and like William Cowper, Frost believes that nature has some healing and soothing power. The jubilant note of despair is similar to that of Frost. "The Pasture" is a poem of such a mood, a representative one inviting all and Sunday to share the joys of nature with him; and Sunday to share the joys of nature with him;

"I'm going out to clean the pasture spring,  
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may)  
I shan't be gone long – you come too"  
(1-4)

His poetry is concerned more with man and nature. He has the intention of bringing these two extremes of self and society together until the barriers merged into a whole being. He considers his poems as a means to mark the effect. He is a naturalist accepting everything present and available in nature. Frost lives far away from the city and so has the mentality of having been satisfied with what is at hand. He plays on the birches;

"one by one he subdued his father's trees  
By riding them down over and over again"  
(Birches 28-29)

From Emerson, he is said to have learnt the importance of communicating with the environment. His definition of poetry is similar to that of Emerson to some extent. Under the influence of Emerson, Frost could identify himself with his country and could recognize his complete American temperament. His treatment of nature is clear and natural as those of the Georgians. A compromising spirit which unites all things under one head is ever present in his poetry. This is the trait which he is said to have developed under the influence of Georgians. Most the Georgian poets depicted nature and village folk in a superficial manner because they did not have personal contact or personal experience with them. On the other hand, Robert Frost is very accurate in his observations and in his study of the rural people and their problems. Unlike his contemporaries, Frost was a lover of nature and humanity. There is a strong rural background in his poetry. One Soviet critic A.Zuerev observes:

"One can often see a poet of eternal themes,  
a poet of the land, of nature in Robert Frost.  
But he was not cut off from the anxieties  
of his America, from her spiritual needs or  
from the artistic striving of the 20<sup>th</sup> century"  
(P 243).

Poets like Keats and W.H.Davies merely observed and recorded the beauties of Nature: for Keats, a thing of beauty was a joy for ever, and for Davies, Nature was a fountain of Beauty. Some others like Shelley and Whitman stood on a height to observe the panorama of Nature and society together. Still some others like Wordsworth and Hardy spiritualized or personified Nature; to them, Nature spoke a signified language and stirred within them profound philosophical reflections. But Frost's approach to Nature was a fusion of all these. Sometimes, he simply observed and recorded beauties of Nature; at times, he found spiritual echoes in it, still at some other times, he found Nature as a mirror of man's soul. But he never saw Nature away from Nature. That is why he said,

"I am no nature poet!  
All but a few poems have a person in them"  
(Gould 215)

It is true that Frost is not fully a nature poet; yet his poems might be called "nature poems" because as Louis Untermeyer rightly puts it;

"Although Robert Frost is not to be classified as 'a Nature poet', he knows more about nature than most of his living contemporaries,  
more even than most of the poets of the past,  
with the possible exception of Vergil and Wordsworth" (P 195)

What interests him really is not definitions but attitudes, not what nature is in itself but how man responds to it in a world he never made. Frost never sees in the natural world, the pervading spirit that Wordsworth saw. But Frost has Wordsworthian simplicity of style in his descriptions of Nature. Being a pastoral poet, Frost writes about natural scenes



and sounds. He deals with nature and nature always provides the background to his poems. Though nature provides only a background to his poems, his descriptive power is remarkable – a snowfall, a spring thaw; a bending tree, a valley, the mist and a brook are not mere descriptions but expressions of personal registration in terms of the subject matter of the poem. In poems like “Birches” and “Blueberries”, one can see not only the ability of Frost in describing nature, but also in conveying his different experiences. “Birches” is one of the most widely quoted nature-lyrics of Robert Frost. It is remarkable for its skilful blending of fact and fancy, observation and imagination. The subject of the poem “Birches” is not nature but man’s attitude towards life in Nature and Nature in life. The way in which he describes the wild fruits, “Blue-berries” as big as the end... thumb”, “Real sky-blue and heavy” and “ebony skinned” presents readers with a vivid picture of blue-berries and excites their visual imagination. The description reaches the peach at the closing lines:

“You ought to have seen how it looked in  
the rain,  
The fruit mixed with water in layers of  
leaves,  
Like two kinds of jewels, a vision for thieves”  
(Lines 103-105)

The metaphor in the last line is an example of Frost’s descriptive power. Reading this kind of description of Frost about nature is really a different experience for the reader. Another remarkable thing in his use of nature is that his nature poems are actually concerned with man and tells us not so much of rare exalted chosen moment or of feelings but of man’s daily common experience. In poems like “True at my window”, “A Considerable Speck”, “Departmental” and “The Bear”, one finds Frost speaking to Nature. At the same time, it is to be remembered that Frost does not feel the kind of brotherhood for natural objects as felt by Wordsworth. Another characteristic feature of Frost’s Nature poetry in his comparison of man with nature. In the poem, “Tree at My Window”, Frost establishes a relationship between man and

nature by speaking to the tree at the window by saying as:

“But let there never be curtain drawn  
Between you and me”

Three seems to fascinate him. This is so because the poet has discovered close affinity between himself and the tree. The tree is torn and tossed by the “outer weather” while the man is torn and agitated by the “inner weather”. The man is tormented and plagued by the inner conflicts, fears, spiritual anguish and doubts while the tree is insensitive and unfeeling. To feel and suffer spiritually is a peculiarly human prerogative. In this respect, Frost asserts the superiority of man over nature, of mind over matter. In the poems, “A Considerable Speck” and “Departmental”, Frost reflects on humanity. Like the man who desires to live in the world, the speck expresses its desire to live by struggling to fly away. Since it does not have feet, it is completely exhausted. The man does not harm the speck since it is not such an evil creature for him. He says:

“I have a mind myself and recognize  
mind when I meet with it in any guise.  
No one can know how glad I am to find  
on any sheet the least display of mind”  
(Lines 30-33)

Now he realises that the speck has an intelligence of high order, as he claims to have the same, and he can recognize its presence in others in whatever guise it may take. Now he is extremely happy that he has found it out in the speck. Thus, Frost establishes a healthy kinship between the man and the animal as he says that both the man and the speck have an intelligence of high order. Poems like “Our Hold on the Planet” and “A Minor Bird” discuss the relationship between man and nature. In “our Hold on the Planet,” Nature’s benignity is understood by man with gratitude. Frost says that there will not be a flash or roar in the sky when we ask for rain. After sometime, there will be heavy rainfall which may flood away the city and drown it, just because we ask for a rain:

“We asked for rain. It didn’t flash and roar.  
It didn’t lose its temper at our demand



And blow a gale. It didn't misunderstand  
 And give us more than our spokesman  
 bargained for,  
 And just because we owned to a wish for rain.  
 Send us a flood and bid us be damned and  
 drown." (Lines 1-6)

If one takes nature including human nature, one can see that nature is in favour of man. Thus, there exists a relationship between man and nature.

No doubt, Frost is a classicist in his understanding and self-restraint, conveying his ideas in a clear crisp manner with an elegant style which surpasses all and stands alone. It is modern in the sense that it is neither Victorian nor Georgian. He got introduced to the world of poetry at a period when the old political order was about to break and when poetry was at its growing stage. He is a poet standing between old and new. Most of his poems reveal his mode of expression as a symbolic and an indirect one. This is a mark of modern poetry. Frost is accepted as a wise poet-philosopher because he advocates life not with a rejection of life but with an acceptance of it with all its limitations. Even though he often finds fault with the people, with the world and quarrels with it, he loves the world and life in it. His quarrel with the world is in the manner of lovers that they used to quarrel with each other only to arrive at a compromise soon.

Frost's enthusiasm for nature comes to him in the nature of the talk of his characters. Those characters are mostly country bred and who cannot dissociate themselves from the background of their living. The swinging of the birches in fierce winter storm is a common sight in England. This has been immortalised in "Birches":

"... often you must have seen them  
 Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning  
 After a rain they click upon themselves  
 As the breeze rises and turn many-colored  
 As they stir cracks and crazes their enamel."  
 (Lines 5-9)

In the nineteenth century, Thoreau and Emerson were considered to be the principal champions of nature and interpreter of things. Traditionally, both

have remarkable influence upon Frost. The snow-pilled deep lake and woods, forests of birch trees had their origin from Thoreau. They were Frost's "intellectual and spiritual godfathers" (Adams 2). His love and sense of kinship with nature matured his mind into religious consciousness. The poetic vision coupled with courage and vitality attempting for a trial in a new surrounding is the living spirit which redeems "himself from the inevitable flux" (Harris 45). Frost considers his poetry as a fine medium not only to picturize human nature but also to express the laws of God and therefore, he believes that man should place himself in harmony with nature. Commenting on Frost's portrayal of rural scenes of New England, Amy Lowell points out:

"Mr. Frost writes down exactly what he sees.  
 But being a true poet, he sees it vividly and with a charm which translates itself, into a beautiful simplicity of expression" (P 136).

No doubt, he enjoyed nature's special qualities like its beauty, peace, wonder, excitement, and enchantment but there are such moments when he remains indifferent to its call. This note is evident in stopping by "Woods on a Snowy Evening":

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep  
 But I have promises to keep  
 And miles to go before I sleep"  
 (Lines 13-15)

In the words of Dubey, "the acceptance of tradition and giving it a new turn and skillfully creating the happy combination of outward frugality with an inner prodigality gives strength to Frost" (P 27). His rural characters are always shown as busy people with some solid work whether it is apple-picking, mowing or mending walls. The man who falls asleep after picking apples, dreams of nothing but apples in "After Apple-Picking". His dream is expressive of his pre-occupation with the concern of real life:

"And I could tell  
 What form my dreaming was about to take  
 Magnified apples appear and disappear"  
 (Lines 16-18)



In the poem, "Mowing" when the scythe whispers,  
the poet's own realism comes as,

"The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows"  
(13).

By working hard, by doing one's own duty, by keeping one's own promises, one will find real happiness. Momentarily he might have given room for dreams for the lovely woods may enchant him. The charm is broken when he remembers his promises to keep up. Being a supporter of humanism, he emphasizes the worth and nobility of an individual. This humanism is a part of the natural order and so both are intertwined in his poetic realm. Humanism is inseparable from the natural order of the world and it is not something outside of it. "Squires rightly says: "Frost is a poet not because he is affected by nature or because he has lived on a farm but because he speaks to man about men" (P 68). He considers himself as a singer of humanity rather than as a member of any literary group.

To conclude, Frost is a visionary poet who brings all his imaginative things into reality and modernity. His world is one which everyone knows and lives in.

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