

Man and Humanity in Frost's Poetry

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Article History: Submitted-02/10/2020, Revised-22/10/2020, Accepted-26/10/2020, Published-31/10/2020.

Abstract:

Like Wordsworth, Frost is a lover and poet of Nature, though not as predominantly as he, and like Wordsworth, and more predominantly so, Frost is also a poet of man and humanity. Natural objects and scenes and occurrences form an important and recurrent theme in Frost's poetry, but man and his activities and his destiny form a more important theme. While dealing with man, he does not deal with some particular man or woman, but man as a whole, and points out the human trails observed by him. As Louis Untermeyer points out, "Robert Frost has written on almost every subject. He has illuminated things as common as a wood-pile and as rare as an ancient nugget, as usual as a bird lyrics in its sleep and as 'mechanistic' as the revolt of a factory worker. But his central subject is humankind. His poetry lives with a particular likeness because it expresses living people. Other poets have written about people. But Robert Frost's poems are the people; they work, and walk about, and natter, and tell their tales with the freedom of common speech."

Keywords: Frost, Poetry, Rustic, portrayal, men.

Portrayal of Rustic People

Frost passed a major portion of his life in the pastoral surroundings of Vermont and New Hampshire in the New England region of America. He was acquainted with the rural world of New England. He was not so much interested in depicting the urbanised and industrialised America as in presenting its rural areas and the life of the people dwelling there in. He has also depicted the farming activities of this region such as mowing, apple-picking, gum-gathering, etc. In fact, he is a poet of rural life and pastoral world. A major portion of his poetry may be regarded as a new kind of pastoral. He was versed in country things, and his senses were alert to the objects existing

around him. He observed these objects closely, and then described them, often attaching a symbolical meaning to them. For example, in his poem 'Birches', he starts with a depiction of a lovely boy's diversion, and later tells of the charm of escapism and the need of a return to the earth. In 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', he sets the absorption in the beautiful scenes of nature in contrast with the sense of one's obligations and the promises one has to keep. In 'Mowing', Frost depicts his sense-impressions of the scene around him; but then he proceeds to give a symbolical meaning to the sound of the scythe which seems to be laying emphasis on the importance and dignity of labour.

Frost is a poet of the rural area. "The city-that invigorating theme for the writer of his time, has no place in his work. He is the countryman, with the countryman's noticeable conservatives; for rustic life, with its profound migratory rhythm of enlargement and decompose, imposes its own connection on those who live amid it" black face. Frost's depiction of the rural life is authentic and life like. As Dr. K. R. S. Iyengar remarks, "He is the most Wordsworthian of modern American poets, and while no doubt America is not the Lake District, and the American rustic is no more reprint of Michael or the Cumberland beggar. Frost by employing a disarmingly simple diction makes real and alive his pictures of the countryside, and at the same time he amuses himself with the foxiness of a shrewd rustic and laughs at the vagaries of the sophisticated".

Frost had lived among, and known, rustic people of New England intimately, and was familiar with their beliefs, manners, activities and speech. In most of his poems he has presented and portrayed these people As Marcus Cunliffe remarks, "His poetry cropped out of this farmer's world, every part of which he knew, and knew how to render in words with a brilliant, off hand ease. His restrained, deprived, noble New Englanders are evoked in monologues a little like those of E. A. Robinson, or of Robert Browning, but with a distinction. His individuals speak carefully in the middle of intervals of stillness, make each word add up. Volubility would be extraterrestrial to them. Their exquisite farms, the cold winters and all-too-brief summers; the proximity of malfunction, of the rough country, of death-all give one the sagacity of people existing nervously, The anxiety comes out in the poetry, and the moments of repose have by disparity an almost profligate high spirits". In this respect, Frost resembles Wordsworth who deals with rustic people too, and depicts them with all their joys and sufferings. According to Babette Deusche, "The people

about whom he writes are naturally of New England stock, folk who cultivate their acres with stubborn courage and hear, until they break, the drudgery and isolation of this lot".

Realism in Frost's Portrayal of Man

Since Frost portrays people whom he knew so well, and among whom he had passed a major portion of his touch of realism, his descriptions of them have a touch of realism. He presents the language and speech they used, the customs and beliefs they actually followed, and the difficulties and miseries they had to face, as is seen in the case of the old man in 'An Old Man's Winter Night' and 'Silas in The Death of the Hired Man' or the woman in 'The Black Cottage'. Frost's portrayal of his rustic characters is marked by what George Nitchie calls "a sympathetic identification with officially unimportant people, by absorption in locale, by the ability to bear and ration and reconstruct the sound of speech and by fidelity to a partial notion of understanding." In the words of Ezra Pound, "Mr. Frost's individuals are noticeably real, their speech is real; he has known them. I don't want much to meet them, but I know that they exist, and what is more, that they exist as he has portrayed them." Frost has depicted the humour of his rustic people as in "Brown's Descent", their eccentricity as in 'The Witch of Coos', their self-respect as in 'The Code', their feelings of neighbourliness as in 'The Death of the Hired Man', and so on. "Here are living people rooted in New England, but realized so deeply that their lives have meaning for the world. Their language is not dialect; Frost aimed at recording tones of voice, the translation of living speech into poetry". Frost faithfully recaptures the manners and the speech that his people actually use. "No other living poet has," remarks Randall Jarrell, "written so well about the actions of ordinary men: his wonderful dramatic monologues or dramatic scenes come out of knowledge of people that few people have had, and they are written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech."

Diversity of Human Beings

Besides the realism in Frost's portrayal of men, we also find a diversity of human beings presented by him. He chiefly presents rustic characters, but within that range he shows great diversity so that it might be said of his descriptions of men in his poems that 'Here's God's Plenty'. There are cheerful and gloomy figures, farmers, mowers domestic servant's apple pickers, and so on and all of these have been presented vividly. According to Louis Untermeyer, "Characters as varied as can be imaginary are portrayed in 'The Gum-Gatherer', 'The Investment', 'The Figure in

the Doorway' and 'To a Young Wretch'. The mode of presenting them is as a variety of characters themselves. From time to time they walk leisurely into our consciousness like 'The Gum-Gatherer' or trip lightly into our hearts like the young couple in "The Investment" or flash suddenly into our vision like 'The Figure in the Doorway' glimpsed by the poet from the window of a dining car while the train sped through the Ozarks. These people live with increased vividness, in the poet's lines and in the reader's memory". Frost's rustic figures are more remarkable than Wordsworth's and they had all portrayed more powerfully.

Sympathetic Portrayal

Frost's men and women are portrayed sympathetically. His treatment of them reveals his understanding of their destiny, their life and activities their joys and sorrows, and their feeling of intimate relationship and brotherhood among them. He can appreciate the psychological condition of the woman whose child has died, and of the old man who lives all alone in a house, with the fear of death constantly haunting him, the pitiable lot of the woman servant who has to serve her master and her master's other servants, or of the boy who has no other diversion or sport except the swinging of birches, Frost's heart seems to be full of the milk of human kindness for such characters, and it seems to melt with grief over their miserable condition.

Man and Nature in Frost's Poetry

Being a poet dealing with the rural and pastoral world, Frost may naturally be said to be a poet of nature. Like the British poet William Wordsworth, this American is also a poet of nature and simple rustic life. Like Wordsworth, he is interested in observing and depicting the common scenes, objects and phenomena of nature, including hills, brooks, pastures, trees and flowers. However, unlike Wordsworth, he does not find a divine presence or spiritual significance in nature. He is chiefly concerned with the external manifestations and charms of nature, and paints them with reference to man's relation with, and response to it. Nature for him is not necessarily beneficial and benevolent, and can often be cruel and fierce. Man may find it difficult to live in close touch with nature because of the various barriers like vast stretches of deserted places or void in air and water-that prevent him from enjoying her beauty. Whereas Wordsworth finds the same spirit running through God, Nature and Man. Frost does not promise to this concept. For him, Man is isolated from Nature, and a sense of otherness or distinction exists between the two, as we find in the case of the man and woman on one hand, and the buck and doe on the other, in the poem 'Two

Look at Two'. Man, in Frost's poems, is often seen to be a lovely figure set against the vast wilderness of nature, trying to understand what to make out of its various manifestations. Human life and its obligations are often shown to be poles apart from the joys offered by the natural phenomena and Man has to resist the temptations of the beauty of nature, in order to attend to his duties and obligations, as Frost points out in his poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'.

Frost has been an ardent lover of nature, and has frequently presented various natural objects on the basis of his close observation of them. He says: 'Lord, I have loved your sky'. However, he does not develop a consistent and thorough philosophical attitude towards, or theory of, nature. There are, of course, some under tones of philosophical thinking in some of his poems like 'Stopping by Woods', 'West-Running Brook', 'The Sound of Trees', and others. But Frost does not form a philosophy of nature as Wordsworth does. In the ultimate analysis he is "not very much concerned with developing a philosophically consistent concept of nature..... What really interests him is not definitions but attitudes, not what nature is in itself but how man responds to it in a world he never made".

Frost loved and depicted nature, and also seemed to derive joy from it. But he did not depict only its joyful aspects. He also pointed the fiercer moods and aspects of nature that proved dangerous to man. He was not a nature-mystic like Wordsworth, but only a delineator of its external features, and of the separation that existed between Man and Nature. About his approach to nature, Willard Thorp remarks: "Before the desire to escape into pure thought overcome him Frost was above all a poet of nature. But..... for all that nature meant to him he was never a nature mystic. In his early verse one feels the joy in the sensuous pleasure which has given most modern poets; but Frost always knew where to find the line which separates nature from man. When tired of trees he sought again mankind; but if by noon he had too much of men, he could turn on his arm and smelt the earth and look into the crater of the ant..... This is nature's way: moving at a slower pace than man, destroying man's puny work for her own ends-to provide the manure for new growth. Man has need of nature, though he should never make the mistake of crossing the wall into her pasture. The woods are lovely, dark and deep against the snowfall, a place to linger and forget duty; but to linger only, and not to stay."

Frost has, in his poetry, dealt with both Man and Nature, and also like Wordsworth, man in Nature or man against the background of Nature. He presents man trying to subdue the forces

of nature to make it useful for him. He shows man all alone, isolated in and alienated from, a hostile universe. Since Man and Nature are found in closer proximity in rural areas, than in the cities, Frost delineates men belonging to the countryside and engaged in rural activities. "He is", as Matheson points out, "the poet of the country of man in nature, as Eliot is the poet of the city, of man in the metropolitan desert. Frost is also the poet of individualism, in the Emersonian tradition whereas Eliot, in the darker vein of Hawthorne, has been more aware of the weakness of individualism, of the need of the individual to find completion in something larger than himself".

Frost frequently shows the struggle of the individual man against the forces of nature and against the society to which he belongs. For him, on the whole, Man is more important than Nature, and nature serves only as a background for Man's actions, reactions and emotional responses. Man lives a lonely life in this world, but he gradually develops understanding of the world and of the other people inhabiting it. According to Marion Montgomery, "Frost's view of man's nature is consistent through his poetry. Each man is, in a sense, a stranger in this world, and so remains. His is not to question why he is alone or why the world seems to be against him. His is to begin the breathless opening and closing of the mind, the hand, the heart, the eye upon the world, growing as he does so. As he grows he understands himself more, and as he understands himself he understands more of the world and of his fellows."

No Romanticising or Stark Realism in his Portrayal

Frost does not romanticize the rustic characters portrayed by him, as Wordsworth often does not do, nor does he present starkly realistic portraits of men as Hardy does. He employs realism in the portrayal of his characters but this realism is different from that found in Hardy. Frost avoids presenting a utopian or idealistic picture of these people's lives, or bringing out only their gloomy and depressing aspects. Even while presenting the dark and evil aspects of this life and career, he does not present an utterly dark picture. He tries to depict his characters and their life after purging them of the ills that beset them. His realism is of a refined sort. He himself tells: "There are two types of practical person; there is one who offers a good pact of filth with his potato to illustrate that it is genuine potato. And there is the one who is content with the potato brushed spotless. I am tending to be the second sort. To me the fixation that skill does for life is to dirt-free it, to shred it to appearance. Frost shows a rare psychological insight and sympathetic

understanding in the portrayal of his rustic characters. He presents their essential features without letting their rough exterior to conceal what lies inside.

Depiction of Fundamental Traits of Humanity

Frost is a regional poet, and deals chiefly with the people, natural scenes and social atmosphere of New England. He depicts the beliefs, customs, manners and speech of the rustic people of this region. However, his vision is not confined to these people alone. Through the depiction of these people, he seeks to bring out the common features of all human beings. Its portrayal of New England is a step towards the portrayal of humanity as a whole or human being in general. The old man in 'An Old Man's Winter Night', for example, is not merely an individual, but a representative figure of all the old men living an isolated life in this world. His portrayal of the nature and character of the people of New England marks only a stage in the portrayal of human nature and character in general. His regionalism is only a mask concealing his humanism or his Concern with humanity and human life as a whole.

Common Human Nature of his Characters

While portraying the rustic people of a particular region (New England), Frost does not make them different from common human beings. Even his abnormal characters like the mother in 'Home- Burial' or the common-law wife in 'The Fear' do not become sub-human ones. The people belonging to his favourite region, called Yankees, are representatives of the human race. "His rural Yankees," remark C.A. Brown and J.T. Flanagan, "face various problems of the farmers everywhere: adverse weather, shifting prices loveliness, isolation. They may wear American-made overalls and speak with a down East accent, but they are fundamentally ordinary men and women confronted with the need to make a living and to adjust to conditions which sometimes seem intolerable. Frost captures their peculiar idioms, their folklore; on occasion he also dramatizes his characters. But primarily he keeps them human."

Conclusion

Thus, it is seen that Frost's treatment of man, especially rural man, amounts to the treatment of human beings in general, and that his regionalism does not blur his vision of humanity or restrict

his portrayal of human life. He shows Man as isolated from Nature and society, and standing alienated in a hostile universe, but holding his head high amid all vicissitudes of life and revolting against the evil forces of nature and of the world. According to him, Man is the chief creation in this universe, and it is around man that all thoughts and actions revolve. Man is justifiably the central theme of Frost's poetry.

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