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Acute Isolation in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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The period of the first half of the twentieth century was a critical era for a literary figure. The social, economic, and political circumstances put their hands in every corner of life and led to enormous impacts and changes. Such changes were present in the new perspectives that literary figures wanted to follow on one hand, and in the aggressive realities and atrocities which demanded attention on the other hand. In consequence, there were three avenues to be followed by a literary figure: either to advocate the established norms of the literary scene, or set new ones, or make some amendments; that is, to form kind of hybrid between the old and the new. The last avenue was taken by Frost in which he "rejected the revolutionary poetic principle of his contemporaries, choosing instead 'the old-fashioned way to be new'."¹

Robert Lee Frost (1874-1963) had a troubled life. He had seen ups and downs which were to leave their touches on his life and work. His father died when he was eleven years old and after twenty years, his Scot mother died of cancer. In 1920, Frost put his younger sister Jeanie to a mental hospital to die nine years later. This state of loss and plight was transferred to his children so "his family life was especially painful."² He had six children from his wife Elinor White but only two of them (Lesley and Irma) outlived their father. The wife whom he loved too much was inflected with cancer and died in 1938; he remained a widower until his departure.

One main incident may stand as the most significant one in his whole life. After visiting England and adopting Ezra Pound's advice in 1912, Frost began to find his own techniques and threads which were the reflections of his own preoccupations and concerns. This was to appear his

lifelong approach of poetry. Hence, he employed colloquial phrases, free verse, and monologues just "to root his subject matter and diction in contemporary life"³ He saw in them convenient media for revealing and delivering his messages.

The romantic trend is another aspect of his poetry. The rural elements and themes are amidst the main characteristics of Frost's poetry. These are "largely the self-restricted range of New England rural life."⁴ Yet, while all the romantics ascribe to nature great deal of hope and optimism, Frost deviates in this respect in which his romantic landscape has, to great deal of extend, observing his trend of acute isolation of both man and nature. Like Thomas Hardy, Frost is a distinctive nature poet; one who depicts the countryside with great reality and vivacity. Thus, "the authenticity of this outdoor experience was itself to make him a very different poet from his more 'genteel' contemporaries."⁵

"The Tuft of Flowers" presents an isolated farmer in his typical days. In early morning, the peasant sets forth to look after his plants and land. A part of the work has been done by another peasant whom the peasant poet did not see.

But he had gone his way, the grass all mown,
And I must be, as he had been -alone,⁶

(11-12)

Not only is the poet alone, but his surroundings as well. He introduces a butterfly which comes by him "On noiseless wing a bewildered butterfly,"(12) what it wants and wishes are the main themes of the poem:

Seeking with memories grown dim o'ver night
Some resting flower of yesterday's delight.

(13-14)

This butterfly is a symbol embodies the poet himself. Like the poet, it is alone and wonders around that scene; it stimulates him to think, see, and observe: "I thought of questions that have no reply, / And would have turned to toss the grass to dry;" (19-20). The movements of this butterfly direct the poet's attention "At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook," (22).

At the very end of the poem, the poet highlights the theme of isolation by referring ambiguously to a person. The poet seems in dark about the person's thinking or his frame of mind despite the fact that the two men work together; the poet reveals that he communicated with that person by heart not by physical means: "With one whose thought I had not hoped to reach" (38) He ends the poem with an emphasis on the gap between them and a justification for his isolation.

"Men work together", I told him from the heart,
 "Whether they work together or apart".

(41-42)

It is well known that nature is both appealing and productive, and the rural activities are carried no publicly and chorally, but Frost tackles such occasions individually; "After Apple Picking" demonstrates this. A reader may expect from the title that the poem is crowded with people and displays activities; the plain truth is that there is only one character, however. This lonely figure is complaining "Of apple-picking: I am overtried / Of the great harvest I myself desired." (28-29)

Indeed, the poem is overshadowed by isolation and darkness. At the very beginning, the reader is told that the "Essence of winter sleep is on the night" (7) One can observe that Frost's approach towards nature differs entirely from that of the romantics, "Frost is a nature poet, but not in the naively romantic sense of a poet who celebrates the beauty or pastoral simplicity of nature."⁷ His nature is sordid and stagnant; a remote notion which makes him unique in this trend; over centuries nature has been treated as not only a healing and unspoiled place, but also God's given paradise on earth as well.

Isolation becomes gradually obvious and clear in his poems. His characters are lonely figures who encounter a strange world where connections, relations, and happiness are too few to be enjoyed. He declares this in "The Road not Taken" in which the road is a symbol for secluded life. Masterly the poet brings readers to the heart of his thinking and preoccupations:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood

(1-3)

Here the connotations of "a yellow wood", and "long I stood" indicate that the poet views life as a dilemma and the poet's task is to face and solve it. Not only is the wood "yellow" and he lonely, but the "morning" (time of the poem) is very quiet and silent. Thus, spiritually and physically the poem emulate the poet's own state and conditions: "And both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black" (11-12). The sense of isolation is increased by the poet who confesses that his life has one line journey without a back line: "I doubted if I should ever come back." (15)

At the end of the poem, the poet tells readers that he has deliberately chosen one of the two roads. He gives one reason for his choice, "I took the one less traveled by" (19) This revelation sustains the notion that his

isolation is a central trend rather than a casual element. And it is this trend that makes him different and leads to his unique perspectives and achievements: "And that has made all the difference." (20)

Isolation exerts a heavy impact and leads to a lack of communication; to this fact the treatment of monologues in Frost's poems is odd and strange. One expects that a monologue reveals much of descriptions, statements, and details about the speaker, but this does not occur in Frost's monologues. He changes the tradition of a monologue into new one which is filled of seclusion and silence. That is why most of his poems deal and have single, secluded and lonely figures who speak via monologues. "Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening" reveals this; it depicts an isolated poet who sees no one in the wood. The atmosphere of the poem is the other side of the picture in which it contributes to portraying isolation. Hence, there are two kinds of isolation: physical isolation caused by winter and night (time of the poem), and spiritual one caused by the poet who finds himself "Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year." (7-8)

Readers may observe the poet's willingness to break his silence and says something, to communicate, to hold relationships; yet he feels an obligation to seek refuge through isolation, and in this sense, he chooses to end his poem:

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.

(13-16)

Indeed, snow and night are permanent elements in Frost's poetry. They embody stagnancy, stillness and mystery. In consequence, they serve as an appropriate arena for isolation. That is to say, the poet is stimulated physically and spiritually to hold the state of isolation. "Desert Places" confirms this where "Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast" (1). The natural result of these two elements is the poet's declaration: "I am too absent-spirited to count; / The loneliness includes me unawares." (7-8)

The elaboration of the gloomy and lonely state, which is that one void of light and happiness, is what the poet reveals. It is a sterile condition that is void of light and happiness:

A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

(11-12)

Even the whiteness of the snow is darkened by the night and this is a very gloomy picture indeed. But the poet is used to dealing with it; this is the poem's message.

I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.
(15-16)

Frost goes on writing monologues poems that express his isolation and despair. What is felt is a lonely and derelict voice that runs through the poems. This gives unity and coherence; readers do not get lost or can forget Frost's main preoccupations. "To Earthward" begins with the theme of love, but this kind of love is an isolated one. The lover enjoys the state of this.

Love at the lips was touch
As sweet as I could bear;
I lived on air

(1-3)

The poet speaks about incidents that were in the past. He employs flashback technique in depicting them. Yet the present seems to be worst than the past: "Now no joy but lacks salt" (17). Here "lack" refers to the world or nature that looks indifferent to human sufferings.

The poem is ended with a kind of protest about the sense of indifference that he greatly agitating from and wants to show. His last stanza provides a sense of isolation and indifference:

The hurt is not enough;
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.

(24-28)

One of the outcomes of this isolation is the state of mystery and this is what "Bereft" reveals. The poem is haunted by a mysterious sound of the wind that the poet is uncertain: "Where had I heard this wind before / Change like this to a deeper roar?" (1-2) the poet goes on giving questions about what his conditions during the passing summer and days were. He comes to a conclusion that "Something sinister in the tone / Told me my secret must be known" (11-12)

Indeed, the "secret" that the poet is felt obliged to release is his acute isolation. This is vivid and evident at the very end of the poem.

Word I was in the house alone
Somehow must have gotten abroad,
Word I was in my life alone,
Word I had no one left but God.

(13-16)

Deeply believing that he is living in isolation and loneliness, Frost considers his state as that one which only God Knows about. This can be taken as Frost's pessimistic point of view. He pays no attention to the world in which he lives; nature and the world are part of his problems; and he is considering the roles of men in this world "the role and status of human order as it confronts a nature perhaps indifferent, perhaps hostile."⁸ That is why he prefers to be alone. In other words, his isolation is self-imposed. One can infer that there is a sense of confusion that runs in the poems:

This 'confusion' is often very close to the surface of a Frost poem, and is examined in poems which explore the human relationship to nature, and definitions of home, marriage, community, and even sanity, often illustrating a quite desperation in the attempt to impose order upon a finally alien world capable of sudden and unpredictable actions.⁹

The last poem to be viewed here is a poem that Frost recited at John Kennedy's inauguration (it has no title). The opening lines establish a mood that reveals much of the poet's concern.

In winter in the woods alone
Against the trees I go.¹⁰

"winter" is symbolic here and "woods" as well. Seasons play a decisive role in Frost's poetry. Winter is traditionally connected with stagnancy, inactivity and sterility; hence, it symbolizes the poet's inner state and the atmosphere that surrounds him; while woods stand for nature that does not have affinities with the poet's dreams and hopes.

The time of the poem adds another dimension to its significance. Darkness dims the poem and increases the isolation that the poet implicitly revealed. It also prevents him from communicating with the outer world. One tends to agree with Lionel Trilling in saying that "the universe that he [Frost] conceives is a terrifying universe."¹¹ In consequence, the poem resembles a dream whereby there is a speech, but it is inaudible; the poet speaks with himself without being heard by anybody.

At four o'clock I shoulder ax,
And in the afterglow
I link a line of shadowy tracks
Across the tinted snow.

(5-8)

The impacts of darkness, winter, and snow inflect man while nature remains intact. It does not affect by such things due to all its merits. In other words, it is indifferent whether there will be good or bad consequences. It lacks harmony which should be existed between it and man and this is a major theme. Therefore, here "Frost's questioning Romantic assumptions about the relation of nature to the human, and the possible special status of humankind."¹² This is what the poet perpetually hints at and almost most of his poems demonstrate. Hence, he infers that:

I see for Nature no defeat
In one tree's overthrow

(9-10)

Moreover, the underlying point here is that nature can always compensate for the absence of its elements, or the changes that its elements encounter; while man cannot because he is always under the shadow of many influences: "Or for myself in my retreat / For yet another blow" (11-12) A word here needs some emphasis. The word "retreat" is a clue to Frost's philosophy. It could be a procedure for his life. But could it have some applications to the president elect? This is an open question.

A quick glance at the themes and the titles of the poems examined reveals that all of them deal with people who "are usually isolated, often fearful or misguided figures, . . . sometimes achieving a kind of triumph over their oppression or oppressors."¹³ Furthermore, the plainness of the poems obvious in their short, clear and simple diction on one hand, and direct observations on the other hand, hide much preoccupations, plights, and deep concerns that a common man has to face and cope with in a world whose real opportunities are quite far reaching. Frost's poetry "for all its apparent simplicity, often probes mysteries of darkness and irrationality in the bleak and chaotic landscape of an indifferent universe where men and women stand alone, bereft, unaided and perplexed."¹⁴ Therefore isolation becomes more and more an acute one because man faces all this with both empty and handicapped hands; knowing for sure that he is being isolated from his ambitions, dreams and society.

Notes

¹George McMichael, ed., etal., *Concise Anthology of American Literature* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), 1513.

²Michael Meyer, *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature* (New York: Bedford, 2003), 773.

³Christopher Macgowan, *Blackwell Guides to Literature: Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (United Kingdom: MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin, Cornwall, 2004), 36.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14.

⁶F. O. Matthiessen, ed., *The Oxford Book of American Verse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 542. All the subsequent references are taken from this book, except the last poem.

⁷Beach, *American Poetry*, 19.

⁸Macgowan, *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, 173.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰McMichael, etal., *American Literature*, 1531-32.

¹¹Cited in Meyer, *Introduction to Literature*, 798.

¹²Macgowan, *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, 173.

¹³Ibid., 170.

¹⁴McMichael, etal., *American Literature*, 1514.

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