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Dignified Portrayal of Common Men's Issues in Frost's Poetry

Md. Amir Hossain*

Senior lecturer, Department of English IBAIS University, Bangladesh

S.M. Abu Nayem Sarker

Assistant Research Officer, Uttara University, Bangladesh

Abstract: Poetry is a literary medium which often resonates with the responder on a personal level, through the subject matter of the poem; the techniques are used to portray this study. Robert Frost utilizes many techniques to convey his respect for nature, which consequently makes much of his poetry relevant to the everyday person. His poetry deals with ordinary people, including farmers and workers of his age. Because of his unfeigned interest in and love for rural people, Frost emerged ultimately as a national bard and a poetic sage of America. On the surface, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" focuses on a seemingly unimportant event of the poet stopping one winter evening, mesmerized by the snow and the wood. However, at a figurative level, the poem goes deeper connecting with the people's everyday life. The poet portrays the universal images that every man thinks about his life what he has done on earth, or through the ordinary situations. A village farmer couple is the protagonist of the poem through whom the psychology of common people are impacted on his writings. The dilemma of a simple stranger shows the psychological conflicts of the contemporary age as reflected in "The Road Not Taken." In the poem, "Mending Wall," the difference of opinion of two neighbors can be interpreted at national or international level. Thus this paper examines very familiar issues of the common people of the poet's age.

Keywords: Robert frosts; Common people; Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening; The road not taken; Mending wall.

1. Introduction

Though Robert Frost is a very familiar figure in the field of modern poetry, he is still greater as a poet of common man. Frost has illuminated things and objects as common, modest, and humble as a wood pile and as uncommon as prehistoric people's culture and manner, as natural as a singing bird in its sleep and mechanistic as the revolt of a factory worker. But, his central subject is humanity. His poetry deals with a particular aliveness because it shows living people. Other poets, like Wordsworth, Robert Burns, and Eliot, have written about the people's lives, style, and common issues of their contemporary age. But Robert Frost's poems focus on the people's every occurrence; they work, walk and gossip, and tell stories about freedom of common speech. People, in Frost's writings are all rural New Englanders. He knows them intimately and his portrayal of his society is realistic, modest, and vivid. His poetry has cropped out of his farmer's world, every part of which he knows, and knows how to render it in words with a brilliant, off-hand ease. Their lonely farms, the cold winters, and all-too-brief summers; the imminence of failure, of the wilderness, of death—all give us regarding the minute sense of loving people perfectly and minutely. The tension comes out in his *oeuvre* and the moments of relaxation by contrast an almost extravagant gaiety. The hard-hood, to repeat, is that of a man's life in New Hampshire, as such, not imposed by the poet, though Frost describes it with a professional mastery:

At the time of his death he was widely considered the most distinguished American poet. His lyrical and meditative poems speak in the same colloquial New England voice as his narratives. Anyone can read the poems with pleasure, but each lyric is a metaphor where the more practical reader finds a deeper satisfaction (Francis, 1992).

Frost's art or characterizations are beyond poetic imagination and fanciful mood, and he shows great artistic self-restraint in staying within a poet's boundary. But working within his range, he achieves great vividness, diversity and subtlety. Frost's seriousness and honesty; the bare sorrow with which common issues are accepted as they are, neither exaggerated nor explained away; many poems in which there are the real people with a real speech and real thought and real emotion—all this, in conjunction with so much subtlety and exactness makes the reader feel that he is not in a poetic emotion, but a real world. When a modern reader concentrates his mind on Frost's poems, it makes his sense conscious what the world seems to a simple man.

2. Frost's Philosophy of Common Men's Issues

A poet and critic, like Randall Jarrell often praised Frost's poetry and wrote the following appraisal of his career: No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men; his wonderful dramatic monologues or dramatic scenes come out of knowledge of people that few poets have had, and they are written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech (Jarrell, 1999).

It is hard to overestimate the effect of the above comment, spaced-out, prosaic movement, whose objects have the tremendous strength of things merely put down and left to speak for them. The grimness and awfulness and untouchable sadness of things, both in the world and in the self, have justice done to them in Frost's writings, but no more justice than is done to the tenderness and love and delight; Marcus Cunliffe also comments as follows:

His reticent, poor, dignified New Englanders are evoked in monologues, a little like those of E.A. Robinson, or of Robert Browning, but with a difference. His people speak cautiously and intervals of silence, making each word count. Valuability would be alien to them (Cunliffe, 1986).

Having depicted a stranger, in Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," waiting in the wood fascinating by the beauty of nature, means underneath the surface, the universality of common man's thought; man never wants to leave the happiest part, or event of his life, but fate does not allow a man to continue throughout his life. The reader pictures a man in the woods while it is snowing, not sure of where he is. It is apparent to the reader that a man is on his way of journey, because he does not seem to have been before. The journey likely represents an individual's journey of life, which can often confuse him as to where he is. The snow shows that a man has traveled a long way for which he is surrounded by goodness all around his mind, which makes his journey a little easier.

In the second stanza of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", the reader is shown that a man is on a horse, represents a person that helps us through life that we can look for support. The poem shows a clear look at "the darkest evening of the year," (8) which means a specific time of year in the dead of winter. Winter is often described as the harshest and most unforgiving time of the year, for which the subject of the poem is in a tough position of his life or journey, but even in the harshest time, he still finds time to find beauty in the purity of the snow around him. In the third verse, the horse's shake of the harness bells can be interpreted as a man's common sense telling him that it is not the time, or the place to be stopping in the snowy woods, but he seems to be preoccupied with the sounds of the woods that surround him. This situation can be applied to life in many ways, but the most obvious thing would be that in a rough patch of our lives, which seems to be established in the last stanza, that we need a small moment to stop and take in all happening to us, and realize a good and pure thing that surrounds us, symbolized by the snow. To summarize the last sentence, it would be safe to say we all need to count our blessings from time to time.

In the last stanza, Frost gives us a feeling that the stranger takes a closer look at the woods around him, and then, seems to reluctantly realize that he must keep going, for he does have a long journey ahead. He has a promise to keep, which he must leave, and keep pressing forward because he must do something or get somewhere by a certain time. Frost does not tell us where the man is going, so we may assume that his destination is not as important as his journey, which can be related to nearly any time or one's life. The man says that he has miles to go before he sleeps, which means that he has a long way to go before he can rest. We are told that it is evening, dark, and cold, Frost has let us infer that the man is tired enough, but at the end, he shows us that the man will press on, and he will always press on. The poem has a lot to say about people in general, and the simple fact that if a person has a little help, symbolized by the horse, that person could make it through the coldest winter, or most dreaded time of a man's life.

This poem has much to say about human nature and the hardships of life, and how the two interact with each other. Being a hard time in man's life, he still finds peace and beauty in everything that surrounds him when he is to be left to his thoughts. The man could be any person in life, past or present, king or peasant that has had some kind of hard time in their life and has needed to find some way to overcome it. The symbolism in the poetic marvel may not be noticed at first, but can be overwhelmed just after scratching the surface with one's intellectual finger's nail.

This poem can be interpreted in many ways, but no one will ever know for sure what Frost truly means underneath his words in, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The society implied in "Stopping by Woods" is a rural society of the sort that disappears quickly during the time when Frost writes the poem. It is a society in which property rights are important and in which most property is still owned by males. It is a society that values the work ethic and ethical obligations of all sorts, especially "promises" made to others. It is a society in which males are the ones who tend to go off to work in which males are the primary bread-winners. Thus it is a society in which men value themselves for the work they do, the income they earn, and the social obligations they fulfill. It is a society in which there is precious little time for philosophizing or aesthetic contemplation. Rango Bhongle comments as follows:

Most people resembling Frost's speaker were relatively poor (or were certainly lower-middle-class); they had to be concerned with the opinions of others, and they had to be concerned with making a living rather than reflecting, too often or too long, on life's meanings or complexities. (Bhongle, 2002).

The audience for whom Frost writes and who embraces the poet as they embrace no other modern poet is an audience that appreciates plain speech, traditional forms, and the kind of thoughts and feelings a "common man" share and comprehend. In the plain-speaking, clear-thinking, sensitive but unsentimental speaker of Frost's poem, and his subsequent readers see the reflections of their own better selves, and in the realistic society Frost evokes many of his readers to see the reflections of the society they themselves inhabit and the kind of life they themselves live.

Frost often uses rural settings and images as symbols for the most consequential human activity. While this poem is about picking apples, it is also about how life is governed and it wonders what death is like. The ladder stretching toward heaven provides an early suggestion that the ladder is symbolic, and it seems reasonable to read apples as the fruit of experience. The speaker is old; winter is approaching, and along with it, drowsiness and sleep—all suggestive mortality. As death approaches, the speaker considers his life of apple-picking; he has missed some apples and has left some barrels unfilled—he has, in short, not grasped every possible experience. But, he has cherished many experiences, lived them carefully, and saved those apples from the cider-apple heap. And, in retrospect he perceives, in a day-dream, the distorted face of the world like a pane of ice. He assumes that the approaching sleep will bring him clear images about the experiences which he lives through and the labor underlying them. At its conclusion, the poem raises some problems. His sleep will be troubled. Earlier he asserts that he knows what form his dreaming will take; it will recapitulate his experiences. Here those dreams will trouble his sleep, and he wonders whether sleep is like the wood-chuck's hibernation, or some human sleep. The woodchuck, being nonhuman, is without dreams, and its sleep is a kind of oblivion—presumably untroubled. On the other hand, the woodchuck is a hibernator and will re-awaken to a new life during the spring season.

"The Road Not Taken" is a poem which is interpreted by the readers. The poet speaks of a common scenario in life. A traveler has come to a crossroad and is forced to make a choice on which road, or path of life, he wants to choose. Both paths are inspected equally, and the traveler makes a choice and continues down the road. The common interpretation is that the man is happy with his choice. He decides to choose the road less traveled, and for that reason, he is able to express "with a sigh" in his old age that he has chosen the correct road, which has changed his life for a better way. The decision he has made has paid off, he is not just a regular Joe, and he has lived an adventure by choosing the less traveled road. Upon closer reading, it appears the author doesn't know what the best road is, and is merely trying to convince others that the road he chose is better.

This first stanza of "The Road Not Taken" is generally interpreted as a person coming to an important event in his life, a changing moment requires deep thought. From the lines "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood" (line 1), it springs to mind an event of magnitude. However, the author does not point out that an event is of any great significance in man's life. Every day we are faced with a simple diverging of roads in our lives and we make a choice, whether it is road to take to work or what to wear. Most of us make a choice for which we can and move on. In this poem, the traveler is seemingly unable to make these simple choices and becomes stuck looking at every decision with fear: "And sorry I could not travel both/and be one traveler, long I stood." Things that most people would decide with ease he obsesses over. Being unable to make a decision, he stands frozen at the split in the road.

The second stanza of "The Road Not Taken" reinforces the ideas brought forth in the first stanza. The traveler decides to take one of the roads "because it was grassy and wanted wear" (8). The common interpretation is that he has chosen the road less traveled. After careful inspection into his life changing event, he has come to the conclusion that he wants his life to be different, and so has chosen the road not many have traveled down. If it were the only line in the stanza, it would be easily interpreted. The problem with this interpretation lies in the very next lines: "Though as for that the passing there/Had worn them really about the same" (9-10). The traveler realizes that upon a second look, the two paths were really not all that different. He was just tricking himself in believing they were different, but apart from minor differences, they were about the same. The reason he is having a trouble making the decision is not because it is life changing, that he cannot seem to believe in his choice.

In the third stanza of Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken", we see that he continues to have doubt in his decision and says "Oh! I kept the first for another day" (13). The irony Frost intends for the reader to see is that he has no way to retreat. He has already taken the road, and "...knowing how way leads on to way,/[he] doubted if [he] should ever come back"(14-15). He knows that the first path will lead to another path, which will lead to another path, which he has no way to find his way back to that first split in the road. Not only has been he frozen at the beginning of the road, now he is on the road of his choice and he is still preoccupied with "the road not taken." Once again, in the first line of the third stanza, he has admitted again that "... both that morning equally lay"(11), but the situation still does not seem quite in the realm of his understanding.

The common interpretation of the fourth stanza is that the man in the story is looking into the future and looking back on how happy he is that he took the road less traveled. The first clue to the true meaning of the stanza is the "sigh." Some view it as a sigh of relief, or a sigh of happiness. Frost wants the reader to know that the upcoming lines, the bit about the road less traveled, will be nothing more than an inflated story used by himself as an old man. Just as many others do, he will look back and tell others that he took the road less traveled, and his life is that much better for it. But it will be nothing more than a bogus story, because both roads were almost the same. This poem is, totally, metaphorical as well as humanistic. The dilemma of choices of human life is clearly portrayed in the poem, "The Road Not Taken."

A single young boy and his death is compared with the scenes of World War I in the poem, "Out! Out!" Frost's emphasis on the boy's passivity and innocence in a situation is particularly significant in the context of the time period. After moving to England with his family, Frost was forced to return to America because of the onset of World War I in 1915, an event that would destroy the lives of many innocent young boys. With a heavy heart in mind, this poem can be read as a critique of the world events that forced boys to leave their childhood periods behind and ultimately be destroyed by circumstances beyond their control.

After the boy's hand is nearly severed, he is still enough of an adult to realize that he has lost much blood to survive. He attempts to "keep the life from spilling" (21) from his hand, but even that is only an attempt, since

nothing can be done. Above all, the boy hopes to maintain his physical dignity in his death, rather than die with a missing hand. Frost channels the horrors already occurring on the battlefields in Europe, where death from enemy shells was automatically devoid of dignity.

In the last line of the poem, the narrator enters a state of complete detachment, almost as if indifference is the only way to cope with the boy's death. Just as soldiers in the battlefield must ignore the bodies around them and continue to fight, the people of New England town have nothing to do, but move on with their lives. The presence of metaphor is clearly visible in this poem, "Out! Out!" Through metaphor the poem can be interpreted in the universal level.

A village farmer couple is made the protagonist of the poem through whom the psychology of a man and a woman is differentiated. The setting of the poem is a staircase with a door at the bottom and a window at the top – automatically sets up the relationship among the characters. The wife stands at the top of the stairs, directly in front of the window overlooking the graveyard, while the husband stands at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at her. While the couple shares the tragedy of their child's death, they are in conflicting positions in terms of dealing with their grief.

Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
I do think, though, you overdo it a little. (61-65)

With the position closest to the window, the wife is clearly still struggling with her grief over the loss of her baby. Being incapable of moving on at this point in her life, the wife defines her identity in terms of the loss and would rather grieve for the rest of her life than grieve as a sort of pretense. The husband has dealt with his sorrow more successfully, as evidenced by his position at the bottom of the staircase, close to the door and the outside world. As a farmer, the husband is more acceptable of the natural cycle of life and death in general, but also he chooses to grieve in a more physical manner: by digging the grave for his child. Ironically, the husband's expression of his grief is completely misunderstood by the wife; she views his behavior as a sign of his callous apathy.

The speaker in "Mending Wall" meets with his neighbor every spring to repair the wall that separates the speaker's apple orchard from his neighbor's pine trees. The speaker, though, does not see meaning in the mending of the wall: "There where it is we do not need the wall" (23). This wall can be seen as a metaphor. The wall represents a barrier between two people. The barrier can be many things that sprouted from one small problem. The speaker's neighbor is not a well-educated man: "He moves in darkness as it seems to me" (41). The neighbor cannot see the light, or rather, the possibility of a better life if the wall were taken down. The neighbor simply does what his father had done before to him: "He will not go behind his father's saying" (43). The neighbor continues to restate his father's legacy; He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors" (45). The statement contradicts itself to an intelligent person. Neighbors can be good friends, but if there is a "fence" between them the neighbors can never create a true friendship. There will constantly be a barrier between them.

The stark simplicity in the poem "The Death of the Hired Man" gives a dignity to the old man, Silas, who has nothing material to show for his life. He does, however, have the love and affection of a couple, Warren and Mary. Silas was an unreliable hired hand who passed in and out of their lives throughout the years. Silas could build a load of hay and could find water with a divining rod.

As if she played unheard the tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.
"Warren," she said, "he has come home to die:
You needn't be afraid he'll leave you this time. (161-165)

He has come "home" to die. He talks of clearing the pasture and ditching the meadow for the couple. In the act of working the land and doing it well, the land gives Silas value to his life. He dies alone with thoughts of working the land in his head. The entire poem is spoken softly so as not to disturb Silas' rest; "The story unfolds itself in undertones. Heard or overheard—in whispers" (Untermeyer, 1971).

3. Conclusion

At the end of this paper, it is worth mentioning that Robert Frost in each of his poem presents nature, scenic beauty, art of characterization, and common people of his contemporary society based on meaning and significance. Though characters are localized on the surface, they are provided with higher sense, sensibility, and flavor of philosophy, and air of humanism. In this way, from the philological point of view, his characters are simple and common as dignified in portraiture.

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