

Study on themes of Robert Frost poetry on “the oven bird”, “birches”, “dust of snow”, “tree at my window”

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ABSTRACT

Robert Frost, however, did not come in its fold, and remained a traditionalist. He did not opt for Verse libre and stuck fast to metrical poetry. He did not join the movement, and went on singing about pastoral subjects and folklore as “a lone striker”. Having settled down at a farmhouse in New Hampshire he liked to be the poet of common man - the cause of his immense popularity. He was not the poet of the select few.

1. Introduction

Robert Frost strove hard towards pastoral poetry, in which “Woods are lovely, dark and deep”, in which farms and brooks shine with extraordinary glamour, and in which natural scenes and sights abound so much, he has been regarded as a poet who stands between the old order and the new.

James M. Cox observes in this connection: The discrepancy in age between Frost the man and Frost the poet, his emergence during the interlude, between the collapse of the old order and the beginning of the new, and his own poetic strategy of returning to 67 the wilderness of abandoned experience - all serve to indicate Frost's ambiguous position in relation to what we call modern literature.

Though his career fully spans the modern period and it is impossible to speak of him as anything other than a modern poet, it is difficult to place him in the main current of modern poetry.

This difficulty may seem to be a problem of recent origin; actually it existed from the moment Frost achieved fame.¹ But what Cox states above is only inconclusive, and the fact remains that Robert Frost is a great modern poet, giving reflection to the real life and language of the common man in the corpus of his poetry. Frost is primarily a lyrical poet because he held impulse above intellect, unreason above reason. To put it in the words of Laurance Thompson: He (Frost) is primarily a subjective lyric poet, at his best in his apparently contradictory moods of response to experience and in his figurative ways of defining difference.

And L. Untermeyer investigates the variety in Frost's lyrical art: Frost's lyrics range from the facetious to the philosophic; often the two extremes are combined. Mostly, however, they begin with a simple idea and hoax the reader, almost without his awareness, to extend the implication of the idea far beyond its plain presentation.

Norman Douglas had found in Frost's first book “an image of things really heard and seen”.⁴ He did little to identify himself with either the Boston or the Chicago Branch of the movement. Always a lone striker, Frost still had need of being versed in

country things. He found for himself a farmhouse near Franconia in New Hampshire, where “he continued to meditate on the mysteries of birches and wild grapes, the sound of trees, and the dust of snow.”

2. Review of literatures

Frost is not a religious poet, nor even a Nature mystic in spite of all that Nature meant to him. Frost is a metaphysical poet in the tradition of Emerson and Emily Dickinson. Most of the poems fix on the mysterious moment 69 when the two planes cross. As in all great metaphysical poetry, the tension increases between the simple fact and the mystery which surrounds it, until the total meaning flashes in the final words, Frost confessed that poetry to him was essentially dramatic. Whatever his theme may be, he works to dramatize it for the reader, be it the tragedy of the hired man or the relation of the boy too far from town to learn baseball.

The most dramatic moment in a Frost poem is the kind of anagnorisis or denouncement when the mundane fact achieves its full metaphysical significance. Frost's verse is in the great tradition of pastoral poetry from Theocritus to Wordsworth, though his pastoralism is never, like Virgil's or Milton's, decorative or political. Frost is a learned poet, but, as in Housman's poetry, his learning is muted to “an echoic beauty”. He was not partisan of his plowmen, mowers, hired men, gatherers of huckleberries and tree gum, for all his sympathy with them and his gift of psychological penetration into their lives.

He looked on them with a detachment which was ironic, humorous, or ruthless. He made of their toil and defeat what they would never have 70 imagined for themselves. Frost was, above all, a Nature poet. But, again, he was not a Nature - mystic, as Wordsworth was. In his early verse one feels the joy in sensuous pleasure which Nature has given most modern poets. Though Frost was in favour of impulse rather than reason in his poems, he selected the revelation of Truth in his art. Frost's poetry is overall an attempt at seeking the truth and at representing it in precise detail and poetic stature.

But, Truth, for Frost, is not a philosophical concept; it is rather a rational observation of facts. There is little of

philosophy or abstractions in him, yet so much of wit and 'racy turns'? Truth is to be sought, in an impersonal, detached fashion. So Frost employs the dramatic technique in his poetry. In the dramatic method the experience ceases to be personal, for then everything is conveyed through the dramatic character's reactions to a situation. In this technique, Frost is very close to Robert Browning. Frost never wanted to intervene in the experience of the speaker 71 concerned; he allowed him full freedom of utterance.

For this reason, he withdraw himself into the back-ground when his character spoke, he used to put on a mark, a symbolic coat to hide his personality. So much so that even in his lyrics, which are the most personal utterances; Frost spoke through a character. He tries his best to realize his experience as of the character's and not the poet's. In this way, the total effect of the poem is not moral or philosophical; it is dramatic.

3. Frost's Poems: "The Oven Bird", "Birches", "Dust Of Snow", "Tree At My Window"

"The Oven Bird"

First published: 1916 (collected in *Mountain Interval*, 1916)

Type of work: Poem

In the call of a forest bird, the listener discerns the theme of diminishment.

"The Oven Bird" is an irregular sonnet that explores in various ways the problem of "what to make of a diminished thing." The poet does not refer to the bird directly by its other common name of "teacher bird" (based on the resemblance of its reiterated call to the word "teacher") but attributes to the bird an instructive discourse about diminishment, the downward thrust of things. In the middle of summer, this bird reminds one of the fall (specifically the petal fall) that is already past and of the fall to come.

Like many of Frost's poems, this one is built on paradox. This bird can be said to sing, but it is not particularly tuneful. Its repeated call in a trochaic, or falling, rhythm does not have the upward lilt that humans generally consider cheerful or merry. The bird is a twentieth century teacher—not the old-fashioned lecturer but the modern one who contrives to induce the students to teach themselves. Like the teacher, the bird "knows," and in knowing frames the kind of question that is intended to provoke thought, although without any guarantee of easy resolution. Paradoxically, the process of learning becomes one of discovering that some questions must be struggled with unendingly. Like the teacher bird, the poem supplies no answers.

Literally, the "diminished thing" of the poem is the weather and the natural year. The sonnet is full of words and phrases such as "old," "early petal-fall," "down in showers," "dust is over all," and "the bird would cease," that suggest decline in the natural order. Knowing that people persist in interpreting nature in human terms, the poet can safely assume that the poem will be read as referring to the diminishment of human hopes, of life

itself. Frost reinforces his theme by using a proportion of diminishment: "for flowers/ Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten." As expectations turn into past events and remaining possibilities steadily diminish, any thoughtful person must ponder "what to make" of that which is left.

Frost also enforces his theme rhythmically. He crosses the usual iambic rising rhythm with trochaic words, those with first-syllable accents. "Singer," "flowers," "summer," "petal"—in fact, all the two-syllable words of the poem—carry this accent. These words, nevertheless, are all placed in positions that contribute to an iambic movement which might be taken as suggesting that, despite the declines and falls, both the cycle of seasons and human hopes endure.

The typical English sonnet ends in a rhymed couplet which often sums up or tops off the poem and gives a feeling of finality. This poem does have two couplets, but neither is at the end. It seems to be part of Frost's strategy to avoid any sense of completeness or finality. Whatever continues continues to diminish, but while the process continues, something always remains. The only regular quatrain (the sort of rhyming unit one expects to find in a sonnet three times before the couplet) is the four lines that fall at the end. What to make of this feature is one of the persisting questions about this haunting poem.

"Birches"

First published: 1916 (collected in *Mountain Interval*, 1916)

Type of work: Poem

The tension between earthly satisfactions and higher aspirations emerges from the recollection of a childhood game.

In "Birches," the speaker's attention is first caught by a cluster of bent birch trees that he knows were bowed by ice storms. The sight reminds him of his boyhood sport of swinging on birch trees, although such an activity does not permanently bow them. Swinging on birches is a form of play that can be done alone, the competition strictly between child and tree. It is a sport requiring poise and good judgment; for a safe and satisfactory ride, one must climb to the very top of the tree and "launch out at just the right moment. A country boy might expect to master all the birches on his father's land."

The speaker dreams of swinging on birches again. From the perspective of adulthood, he envies his childhood capacity for launching out anew, making a new beginning on a new tree. In his mind, the game has become a way of escaping from earth, where life sometimes seems to be a "pathless wood"—but he knows that such a game is not a permanent escape from earth and that part of the fun is "coming back," for life is not always a pathless wood, and the earth from which he contemplates escaping is "the right place for love." The mature man thus recognizes a symbolic value that he could not have consciously realized when he was young enough to be a swinger of birches.

The poem consists of fifty-nine easily flowing blank verse lines. Though "Birches" has no formal divisions, it can be separated into three, almost equal parts: the observation and description of trees bent by winter storms, the recollection of the techniques of birch-swinging, and the grown man's dream, energized by his awareness of the claims of both "earth" and "heaven." Each part leads casually to the next: "But I was going to say" to the second part, "It's when I'm weary of considerations" to the third.

The poem is marvelously vivid and concrete in its descriptions of both ice storms and child's play. The stir of the trees after acquiring their load of ice "cracks and crazes their enamel"; casting their load off, they leave "heaps of broken glass." The reader is made to see the boy "kicking his way down through the air" and the man "weeping/ From a twig's having lashed it [his eye] open." Black and white are used suggestively and, as often in Frost, somewhat ambiguously. The white birches are first seen against the background of "straighter darker trees." The sun shining on the ice coating of the tree trunks turns them prismatic. The boy climbs "black branches up a snow-white trunk/ *Toward* heaven" ("*toward*" being significantly italicized, for heaven is not attainable), the white intimating the pure and heavenly aspiration, the black, the necessary physical, earthly steps, the "going and coming back."

Far from being the simple reminiscence of a sentimental adult, the poem not only acknowledges that returning to the birch-swinging of childhood is a "dream" but also assesses the significance of the game from a mature viewpoint. Part of maturity is coming to understand and articulate the profundity of early experience.

"Dust of Snow"

First published: 1921 (collected in *New Hampshire*, 1923)

Type of work: Poem

A small event on a winter walk unexpectedly changes a person's day for the better.

Frost was proud of his small, compact poems that say much more than they seem to say; his 1923 volume *New Hampshire* gathers several of these, including "Fire and Ice," "Nothing Gold Can Stay," and one of the shortest of all, "Dust of Snow." One sentence long, it occupies eight short lines and contains only thirty-four words, all but two of them monosyllabic, and all of them part of even a young child's vocabulary.

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree
Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

Much of the effect of this poem derives from its paradoxes or seeming contradictions, the first of which is in the title. Although the phrase "a dusting of snow" is common in weather reports, dust usually calls forth notions of something dirty and unpleasant, quite unlike the dust of snow.

It is also paradoxical that the speaker's mood is initially so negative on a presumably fine winter day after a fresh snowfall, that he has so far rued this day. Even more paradoxically, the agent responsible for provoking a change for the better is a bird normally contemned: the large, black, raucous crow. Even its important function as a devourer of carrion does not summon forth a favorable image. In medieval times the crow often symbolized the devil, and its larger cousin, the raven, was employed by Edgar Allan Poe and other writers to create a sinister or melancholy mood. This crow, however, rescues the speaker from his previously rueful mood.

One paradox that Frost did not intend occurred to a woman who heard him read "Dust of Snow" and responded, "Very sinister poem!" When the puzzled author asked her why, she replied, "Hemlock—Socrates, you know," alluding to the poison that the Greek philosopher was required to drink after his trial. Frost had intended no such suggestion, and it contradicts the effect of the poem as a whole. Socrates' hemlock was quite a different thing from the tree inhabited by Frost's crow, and the woman's misinterpretation exemplifies an important point: Not all the possible suggestions of a word or image are necessarily applicable in a given context. Frost depends on his reader to use imagination responsibly and to exclude meaning that will not make sense in a poem.

The rhyme and meter of this short poem contribute much to its effect. The firm iambic beat is established in the first three lines, but Frost knew exactly when to vary the rhythm to avoid a sing-song effect; thus there is an extra syllable (in a different place) in each of the next two lines, and after two more regular lines, the last line consists of two anapests. Furthermore, the rhyming words are important ones, and the most surprising one, "rued," is reserved until the end. The reader is left with a memorable impression of an unexpected boon from an unlikely source. To be "saved" by a crow, because of its unexpectedness, is more delightful than being saved by a song sparrow.

"Tree at My Window"

First published: 1928 (collected in *West-Running Brook*, 1928)

Type of work: Poem

A person who has known trouble recognizes a kindred spirit in the tree outside his window.

"Tree at My Window" differs from most of Frost's nature poems in its locale. Instead of being out in the fields or woods, the speaker is looking out his bedroom window at a nearby tree. He closes his window at night, but out of love for the tree he does not draw the curtain. This is an unmistakably modern nature poem. Whereas the transcendentalists of the nineteenth century had regarded nature as profound, the speaker here specifically denies the possibility of the tree speaking wisdom. Instead, he compares the conditions of human and tree. He has seen the tree "taken and tossed" by storm, and if the tree can be imagined as having looked in at him asleep, it has seen him "taken and swept/ and all but lost." That which brought

them together is styled “fate”—but an imaginative fate, because of their respective concerns with “outer” and “inner weather.”

He sees the tree not as an instructor but as a comrade, a fellow sufferer. Between Frost and the transcendentalist faith in nature as a teacher lies a scientific revolution that denies the possibility of “sermons in stones,” and it is clear that the tree is physically, the person only metaphorically, storm-tossed. This metaphor, an old contrivance of poets, remains a potent one when used as freshly as it is here. The speaker’s storm is only a dream, but dreams can be deeply disturbing; psychologists insist that they may be very significant.

“Inner weather” reflects a recurring theme in Frost, who in his personal life had to grapple with the maintenance of psychic balance. Inner doubt and conflict dominate a number of poems from Frost’s middle years including, in his 1928 book *West-Running Brook*, “Bereft” and “Acquainted with the Night”; “Desert Places,” in his next book, *A Further Range*, describes personal fear. In “Tree at My Window,” the kinship with nature is even more therapeutic and steadying than it was in the

earlier “Birches.” Both tree and man have been “tossed” but survive. Frost would reassert nature’s steadying influence in later poems such as “One Step Backward Taken” and “Take Something Like a Star,” both in the 1947 *Steeple Bush*.

4. Conclusion

“Tree at My Window” has a distinctive form. First glance reveals it to be a neat, compact poem which uses the *abba* rhyme scheme made famous by Alfred, Lord Tennyson in his long poem *In Memoriam* (1850). The first three lines of each quatrain are tetrameter lines, while the last line has either two or three strong beats. The rhythmical variations, however, are quite unusual. Frost once observed that there are only two meters in English, strict iambic and loose iambic. This poem is definitely the latter. Out of the sixteen lines, only two—both short ones—are indisputably regular. Frost worked extra unstressed syllables into most of the lines. Again, Frost found a way to be rhythmically innovative without losing the sense of a traditional poetic structure.

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