

Robert Frost's Major Themes -Study

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The most misleading criticism on Robert Frost is that he is restricted in his handling of major themes. But it should be held true that Frost's confinement to things 'rustic' amply fed this misinterpretation. He does present at times the illusion of happily settling down with his little New England, ignoring completely the rest of the world. Frost's seeming avoidance of topical subject matter is not because of timidity. His reluctance is quite calculated as he never wanted to be characterized by topical labels. In the neat circle he scratched for himself, there is no place for sky scrappers and skid row alleys of sandburg. He blissfully ignores many of the overwhelming subjects of the twentieth century, to be specific the two world wars and the problems of urbanization and mechanization.

Interestingly, when it comes to the basic themes of human life there is shirking on his part, though he evades the universal experiences at the price of triviality. A point worthy to be stressed here is that the work of his contemporary writers who are characterized by topical labels became lusterless and outdated as the year passed. Meanwhile Frost's poems retain their freshness, as they are less reliant on contemporary idioms, events and people.

Frost knows quite well that by exploring one representative corner of humanity he is exploring a sample of the larger crowd. A close scrutiny of his work would expose Frost as a man who had faced life with equanimity both the bitter interludes and the tranquil moments. Themes he investigated are the basic themes of man's life dealing with the individual's relationships to himself, to his fellowmen, to his world and to his God.

Man in Frost's Poetry

Robert Frost while pondering a lot over man as an individual, emphasizes that inspite of the amiable socialization of man, he is basically single and alone with his fate. To him life covers both the possibility of terror and potential of beauty. Man must educate himself to know which it is to be. It becomes the primary task of a man to understand him and his place in this world. This can be achieved by observation and self-analysis.

Frost believes that future is a natural development of the past. Just as a seedling sprouting out from the crust of soil to become a fruit, new life springs out of the last year's waste. Yesterdays lay foundation for the launch of 'new growth'. The seasons throb the very message of 'new' sprouting out of the 'old'. In '*Blue Berries*' he unravels the mystery of rebirth as bery bushes sprout from the slag.

There may not have been the ghost of a sign
Of them any where under the shade of the pine,
But get the pine out of the way, you may burn

The pasture all over until not a fern
 Or grass-blade is left, not to mention a stick,
 And presto, they're up all round you as thick,
 And hard to explain as a conjuror's trick. (15-21)

Repetitive portrayals of harvest and mowing and in particular, poems centered upon abandoned dwellings can be taken as evidence for Frost's belief in man's hapless position in the ever changing world. Within the terribly limited period of existence, he is destined to face the changes that take place in almost everything around him. The natural cycles preach man that he is no inevitable end, which shatters off all his hopes and dreams.

Lingering on the haplessness of man in the hands of Fate, Frost declares, 'As long as life goes on unterribly', there is no need for writing the Russian novel. The thing that can't be altered must be understood and accepted. Frost stresses in 'Acceptance', that man must learn to bow and accept the 'end', "Let what will be, be!" (14).

Among the various themes of Robert Frost, man's relationship to his fellows can be considered as an interestingly significant one as it comprises of both apartness and togetherness. Frost strongly advocates individualism. Man caught within the boundaries laid by nature, strives to achieve with whatever talents he has been granted. Frost thinks that man if isolated can't be achiever. This isolation might lead man to egocentrism or even to lonely madness. Frost always being a moderator tries to achieve an ideal reconciliation between the individual and the group.

Frost's observation regarding man's relationship to man is quite opposing. For instance, *The Tuft of Flowers*, speaks of the bond that lie between the individuals effecting universal brotherhood. "Men work together, I told him from the heart, / whether they work together or apart." (39-40)

In contrary to this comfortable stance, the very next volume *North of Boston* contain *Mending the Wall* in which Frost the deceptive cooperation that lies between two neighbours, who work together with no 'togetherness'. But again, in most of his poems we find Frost's people are quite willing to offer a friendly hand. The cook in *A servant to Servants*, tells the itinerant campers, "I'd rather you not go unless you must" (177) . *A Time to Talk* presents the farmer who responds to the invitation of his neighbour for a friendly talk, without any inhibitions.

When a friend calls to me from the road

I don't stand still

----- I go up to the stone wall

For a friendly visit.

The Triple Bronze classifies the walls that wall men in or wall them out into three types; three being, their hides, their homes and their nations. Anything could become a brick; it might be the death of a child, which instead of bonding

the grieving couple walls them out. Many reasons can be cited for the rise of 'alienation'. In *A Hundred Collars* fear serves as the reason, while in *The Code*, slightest breach of respect stands as the reason. Lack of discernment to see the need of the fellow humans or respond to it, may also end up in alienation as it is the case of Estelle's elopement in *The House Keeper*.

In spite of the barriers between man and man, there is a possibility communication. Fellowship between the individuals is quite an easily possible task. *An Encounter* speaks of telegraph or telephone as mechanical devices causing up the link between men. "--- yellow strands/ Of wire with something in it from men to men." (17-18). In the *The Line Gang* laughing and shouting workmen string the dead trees" ---- together with a living thread", which would link with man, by carrying words" (4) as hushed as when they were a thought" (7).

Frost speaks out in *Snow* that intolerance of others' foibles remain the root cause for isolation of man from man. He emphasizes if life is to be lived, the worry, the inconvenience should all be borne up rather smilingly. This theme of Frost is well pinpointed with clarity in *The Figure in The Doorway*. The grim sense of separation between the train passengers and the man who lives besides the track just gets evaporated by the single gesture; the passengers see the man "-----uncurl a hand in greeting" (22) as the train passes his cabin. This small gesture, many a times tell whether the men are walled in or walled out.

Whether men live together or apart, the stark reality remains that he has to exist only as an individual. Isolation and the awareness that he is, "no more than grass for the mower" (Gerber 147), lay the seed for the fear of loneliness deep in the heart. It gradually grows up into a parasitical creeper and ultimately engulfs the peace in the man.

The girl in *The Fear of Man*, who walks breathlessly at midnight to her home, symbolizes man's thronging for warmth and reassurance. In Frost's dramatic narrative particularly in *North of Boston*, this theme gets strongly advocated. The fear of Old Silas in *The Death of the Hired Man*, his wish to die by a familiar hearth: the timid professor in *A Hundred Collars* his unwarranted suspicion resulting up in isolation, dramatize a familiar human conflict. The struggle between the need for companionship and the innate fear of the unfamiliar becomes quite prominent.

As a conclusion to this struggle of togetherness and apartness, Frost seems to be advocating that anything is better than being wholly isolated. To him complete isolation from society is the greatest catastrophe that mankind can bear.

Man's Relation to God

In the later years of his life, Frost has spoken more freely about his views of God. An indication for Frost's inclination to the question of man's relation to God, appeared in *A Further Range* published in 1936, and finally he devoted two of his latest works *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947) for the same purpose.

In *A Masque of Reason*, Frost justifies the ways of God to Man. *The Masque*, many a readers believe, convicts God for His cruel injustice to man. The reviewers in *Poetry* and the *New York Times* observe that the masque is an indication of Frost's cynicism and his rejection of the Christian God. If this view is held true, if man has been compelled to live in hopeless and unjust world, then Frost's apparent view of individuality of man, ability to overcome evil, his restoration of dignity through courage, would all stand oddly arising paradox.

We could very well understand that Frost is not at all paradoxical, if we rightly grasp the underlying meaning of *A Masque of Reason*. The masque doesn't picture the injustice of God, instead it portrays man's stubbornness and his lack of understanding. The shrewd reason of man could do nothing to bridge the wall between man and God. But as it is explicit in the story of Job, man's predicament would stand up as a bridge connecting man and the Supreme. Faith plays a vital role in understanding or even accepting the mystery which could not be completely explained.

Frost advocates the presence of a barrier between the creator and the created. God he believes will never allow man to see completely into the life of things. Proper understanding of human limitations would aid man to achieve acceptance. Also through faith in God, man could learn to accept, the things that can't be altered.

In Frost's poems, two types of people could be encountered: the one who accepts the inevitable and other who resists it. The little girl in *Wild Grapes* suffers as she refuses "to release her benevolent attachment to transitory things" (142). In "*Out, Out---*" Frost recommends that by gathered witness we can master the difficult art of permitting what will be to be.

Home Burial, portrays in detail the pains of a woman who is unable to face and the stark truths of life and death. She not only remains loyal to her grief, by clutching to it grimly but also totally resistant to consoling arms. Her husband, on the other hand, though equally feels the loss of his son succeeds in releasing the past to it, as he accepts that life is for living. This acceptance, the wife finds incomprehensible. The failure on her part leads to loss of equilibrium and plunges her into madness.

Frost thinks that man if isolated can't be an achiever. This isolation might lead man to egocentrism. The mad man's niece shockingly discloses that she herself 'has been away once' at the state asylum. But her apparent reconciliation with the world makes her life intolerable. Frost can't find much sympathy for those who are unable to comprehend the notion of 'acceptance'. The glaring truth is that man is forced to face his imperfection. In spite of him being imperfect, man aims at perfection. Loaded with dreams he strives hard to reach impossible goals. Frost after a close examination of man's plight offers twin keys to open the door of salvation, in the words of Gerber, "first comes recognition of man's plight, next acceptance" (146).

Nature in Frost's Poetry

It should be admitted without a second thought, the overwhelming presence of nature in Frost's poetry. The nature casts up her presence on people, even if they shut the doors against her. The omnipresence of nature in Frost's poetry can very well be felt in the mountains that rear high above man's head; in the curve of valleys; in the leaf-strewn roads; in the crowding of trees, singly or in dense dark woods, in the blooming of tuft flowers; in the brooks that race downhill; in the happy description of seasonal changes, taking care not to leave to minute detail concerning the changes the earth wears as the seasons change.

Look down the long valley and there stands a mountain
 That someone has said is the end of the world.
 Then what of this river that having arisen
 Must find where to pour itself into and empty?
 I never saw so much swift water run cloudless.

(Too Anxious For Rivers 1-5)

The cycle of growth, the light giving way for darkness, the parade of stars firing man's aspiration all go hand in hand to frame Frost's memorable world, where he touches man's life at all points. In his vision on man and society, the human relationship to this planet, Frost acts as an honest moderator between the extremes of attitude. The nature can at once be a destroyer, causing frustration and disappointment. Frost driving a middle path seems to declare, that nature is at once harsh and mild. Just as we find togetherness and apartness in man to man relationships, man's relation to nature is also both together and apart.

In nature Frost discloses the presence of both the friend and foe:

There is much in nature against us. But we forget:
 Take nature altogether since time began,
 Including human nature, in peace and war,
 And it must be a little more in favour of man
 Say a fraction of one percent at the very least.
 Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,
 Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased (12-18)

In these lines of *Our Hold on the Planet*, we behold nature as a predominant benefactor of man. The same poem brings out malevolence in nature when man asks for rain, the world answers with a vengeance, sending "a flood and bid us be damned and drown" (6). A sympathetic blending of man and nature, a close understanding of the two so as to fit them together like the hemispheres can be noted in *Tree at My Window*.

After picturing nature both as a benefactor and a destructor, Frost is not content with man doing his duties promptly as 'tenant farmer'. Things don't end with it. He expects man to play of the preserver of nature. He emphasizes in *Going For Water*, man's dependence on running water. Not only nature be preserved for material benefits, but also for fact: 'It si from this in nature we are from'.

In his attitude towards nature, Frost takes a great care to dissociate him from the pantheistic tradition. In *New Hampshire* he frowns at the statement to say the grooves were God's first temples because it shifts the central light from man.

Throughout Frost's poetry, we find the existence of darkness. Primary reason behind it is to establish the significance of light. He picture 'darkness' as a threatening force, from the clutches of which the people of Frost try to run away. The dark woods symbolize knowledge unknown and untouched by humans. Man with the mortal fear fails in his attempts to unravel the mystery behind the dark woods. Throughout the fifty years of Frost's poetic carrier, we find the same theme repeating itself again and again. In the very first verse of his first book Frost reflects his wish to enter the woods.

Frost never denied the presence of dark woods nor did he ignore its appeal. He stresses that the dark woods will always remain a mystery, which no man alive could solve. In 1963, he tried to resolve it, to put in the words of Gerber "he did enter the woods; bound away 'for the outer black' promising whimsically to return if dissatisfied with what the forest had to offer" (170).

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