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Portrayal of Realism and Rationalism in the Selected Poems of Robert Frost

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ABSTRACT

Robert Frost (1874-1963) is a famous American Poet. As most of his poems are autobiographical in subject, it is evident that he has been mostly influenced by the environment around him in composing his masterpieces. Frost's themes are very simple in the surface meaning endowed with an easily understandable diction and a liberal style of writing. Yet, a careful study of his works vividly reveals his greatness as a 'true' judge of various critical aspects associated with the everyday experiences of the humans. His major characters- the narrators in "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*", "*Mending wall*" and "*The Road not Taken*" are viewed as the real people with real struggles in real life. It is seen that Frost's poetry is highly connotative and the same reader can interpret the poetry of Robert Frost in multiple ways in multiple settings. The present article aims at critically examining Frost's 'realistic' and 'rationalistic' approaches in the elevation of human nature under the broad spectrum of human life. This article also aims at proving that no poem of Frost ends in an absolute imagination because Frost himself seems to believe in realism as the ultimate fate of the individuals though fancy and imagination provides a temporary relief to the disturbed soul.

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1. Introduction

Robert Frost (1874-1963) is a famous American poet of the twentieth century. He is considered one of the most influential authors of the period. The first reading of Robert Frost's poetry leaves an impression on the readers that he is a poet who represents local issues related to his experiences as a New Englander. Yet, thorough reading of his works gives detailed information that his themes are universal. The autobiographical depictions like rural life, everyday activities representing the primary ideal of the New Englanders towards duty and responsibilities are the sources to guess how Frost could get influenced by his own life while composing his poetry. Frost could not get recognition in his country because of his rigorous style of writing. When he moved to England in 1912, he got acquainted with the literary luminaries like Edward Thomas and Ezra Pound and was encouraged by them. Eventually, he could publish his first collection of poems '*A Boy's Will*' (1913). This collection was well-received and for the first time after writing poetry for a long time, he started gaining reputation. '*North of Boston*' (1914), '*Mountain Interval*' (1916), '*New Hampshire*' (1915), '*West Running Brook*' (1928) and '*A Witness Tree*' (1942) are his other major collections of poetry.

Frost's poetry is remarkable for his employing of free verse though most of the lines which are in iambic pentameter. He employed irony and metaphor - which is a pleasure of ulterior interpretations for him - very skillfully in his poetry. He coined the '*sound of sense*' theory as an effective means of his poetic diction. Frost's poems are very popular for their simplicity and straightforwardness in meaning. In spite of this simplicity on surface level, it contains

connotative meanings that a reader can interpret in many ways. As *Richard Wilbur (1974)* points out that Frost's poetry is written in "*a beautifully refined and charged colloquial language*". Frost's personal life is full of depressions and sadness at the death of his dear ones. Despite these oddities, he never swerved from the path of the 'reality' in almost all of his poems. One peculiar quality of his poetry is that he starts his poetry describing the elements from Nature. This technique immediately reminds the reader that Frost is just following the Romantics. However, the clear difference between the Romantics and Frost lies in the progress of the poem. For the Romantics, a poem starts in imagination and ends in imagination. Frost on the other hand, ends his poems in real sense advocating all the rational thinking and depicting the 'truth' and real struggles of real people in the real world unlike the portrayal of mysticism of the Romantics. The pastoral world in his poetry is not only limited to describe beauty but to stress the harsh conflicts of the natural world. It can be understood in Frost's own words "*All poetry is a reproduction of the tones of actual speech*" (*Robert Frost: The Man and His Works (1923)*). In order to examine this 'reality' and 'rationality' aspect in Frost's poetry, some selected poems from the above mentioned popular collections are critically examined in the present article.

2. Major Themes and Stylistic Features of Robert Frost's Poetry

2.1 Everyday life

Most of Robert Frost's poems deal with the activities of day to day life of the human beings. It shows the interest of Frost in the 'real' aspects of human life associated with 'truth'. Frost employs this aspect as one of the themes of his poetry so as to send his message to his readers very clearly. Any



piece of literature that represents the real situations of the real people has always been well received by the readers because at one moment or the other, the readers feel that the characters that they come across while going through the selected piece of literature are their own models which provoke more interest among them and at times, they can be aware of the ways to challenge their respective struggles while considering the characters as their own models. Though Frost deals with simple themes of everyday activities, his poetry is highly remarkable for its connotative quality. In other words, Frost's poetry is multifaceted in meaning. This connotative quality of Frost's poetry allows his readers to become individual explorers in interpreting and analyzing each of his poems. Literature that mirrors the real life of the individuals never goes a failure.

2.2 American ideals

Frost's poetry is abundant in the depiction of American ideals and traditions. He successfully incorporates these ideals by portraying the rural communities of New England in his poetry. Hard work for survival, interest and dedication to duty and responsibilities are seen as the major ideals in most of his poems. For example, the poem '*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*' (1923) is a rich poem containing the theme of importance of duty and responsibility against the narrator's desire to spend his time in the jocund company of nature. The poems like '*After Apple Picking*' and '*Mowing*' are the best examples to notice how the characters are interested in physical labor.

2.3 Communication

The worldly activities never tend to a successful end unless there is a proper communication among the subjects involved in the communication process. Frost's poetry reflects the need of this communication in some of his poems or how the absence of

communication brings tragedy in some occasions. The theme is more evident in '*The Home Burial*' (1914). In this poem, the failure of effective communication between a wife and husband leads to the destruction of their bond. Lack of empathy of each other's feelings results in the total dismay though both of them individually have bitter feelings towards the sad demise of their beloved child. Frost's isolated characters reveal us that they might have had a bright fate if they had developed healthy relations with their fellow beings all around.

2.4 Autobiographical element

Majority of Frost's poems are considered to be autobiographical or subjective in approach. He draws out many events from his own life and experiences and presents them adding a little more metaphysical color to compose his poetry a bit deeper in meaning. Vidhushi Sharma (2011) comments '*A critical peep into the life and environment of Frost reveals that Frost's poet is born out of his personal tensions and tragic jolts which he had experienced in his personal life*' (p.55-58). As mentioned earlier, Frost's life was not a very blessed one. At first, it took a long time for him to get noticed as a prominent poet of the period. Later, coming to his family side, he experienced the death of many of his own children and the other family members which left him sad and lonely. Many characters in his poetry are seen in a pensive mood because of the poet's choice. In spite of all these heart breaking incidents in his life, he never stopped his composing poems. '*Home Burial*' (1914), '*Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*' (1923) and '*Mending Wall*' (1914) are considered some of his poems which exhibit the theme of autobiographical element.

2.5 Sound of Sense Theory



Frost is said to be the founder of a new literary theory '*Sound of Sense Theory*' (1913). This theory of Frost is like an ingredient that adds as an additional flavor to his poetic diction. The meaning of the theory lies in the phrase itself. According to Frost, the visual appearance of the words, while reading may not be always successful in providing the reader with the exact meaning it tries to convey. To achieve this, the diction must have some additional quality of sounding sense in the mind of the reader through one of the sense organs [*Letter to John Bartlet, (1913)*] In order to remind the responsibilities of the narrator in the poem '*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*', the horse makes his harness bells ring with which the narrator comes back to the reality from his imaginative desires. Frost is a successful poet in engineering the syllables, stress, rhyme and rhythm to reveal his views very clearly to his readers.

2.6 Poetic form

Though Frost's style is highly criticized for his liberalism deviating from the set classical rules, he can still be considered an unauthorized poet Laureate of America. Frost always lays importance to the meaning that he wants to convey to his readers and then chooses a suitable style for the subject. He never employs the same measures for any of his two poems in order to keep his readers more conscious of the theme rather than the form. In Frost's own words "*All poetry is a reproduction of the tunes of actual speech*" (*Robert Frost: The Man and His works (1923)*). That is why Richard Wilbur (1900), while commenting on Frost's language, opines it as "*a beautifully refined and charged colloquial language*". Frost employs multiple forms ranging from long narratives to dramatic lyrics. His poetry is remarkable for ironical and metaphorical meanings and also for aphorisms. Iambic pentameter, with

irregular line lengths, blank verse, with numerous variations on the prevailing iambic foot, enjambment are some of the other features of Frost's poetic style.

2.7 Nature

Nature, in Frost's poetry, is seen not only as a back ground tool to add beauty and charm but also a more inspiring element both in constructive and destructive ways. The pastoral scenes, which he depicts in his poetry, are his experiences during his life time in New England. The noteworthy thing in his pastoral poetry is that he never limits his poetry to the pastoral themes like sheep and shepherd but concentrates more on the changing scenario of the natural world in the real sense. For instance, the poem '*After Apple Picking*' (1914) depicts the conflict of the changing seasons. Thus, nature in Frost's poetry is unlike the one in the poetry of the Romantics. Frost's view is to face the music in the real world instead of taking a temporary shelter in an imaginary world. Jarrell (1980) rightly points out '*the recognition of the essential limitations of man is usual in Frost's best poetry*' (p. 39)

Though Frost often goes for descriptions of nature in the beginning of some of his poems, the ultimate theme of the poems ends in reality. This realistic approach of Robert Frost towards life brought him name and fame as the four time winner of the Pulitzer Prize.

3. Rationalistic Realism in Frost's Poetry

This paper, primarily, aims at examining the realistic aspects of Frost's poetry. It also explores how often Frost reckons the rationalized thoughts among his characters to justify their respective actions. In this respect, the following sections discuss this theme in relation to some selected poems of Robert Frost which are chosen due



to their linguistic and artistic richness and represent Frost's typical poetic style.

3.1 Out and Out (1916)

One of the many reasonable interpretations of this poem reveals the timely reality of the world. Frost returned to America from England due to the World War-I. The personification of the tool-buzz saw refers to the powerful weapons used in the war.

'The saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled'
(L.7).

To understand the realism in the poem, this poem can be read as critique of the world events. The damage caused by the war with weapons results in the total destruction of and causes a severe threat to all walks of life. Consequently, as one of the many crippling events, the young boys, who are to attend school for learning, are forced to attend hard work for their survival and struggle for existence. This is the same situation of the young boy who is depicted in the poem in

'Doing the man's work, though a child at heart' (L. 24)

Another true factor, which is seen in this poem, is the general desire of the young boys and girls to have a good physical form. The boy here asks his sister to request the doctor not to amputate his hand as a part of the surgery-

'Don't let him cut my hand off.

The Doctor, when he comes, Don't let him, Sister!
(L.25-26)

It is a common practice among the human beings to follow a dead body to a burial ground feeling that it is the ultimate fate of every living being. But, when they return, again they are filled with buzz of the routine. This aspect of life is another truth presented in this poem.

*'No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs'* (L.33-34)

Considering the rationalistic thinking factor of the poem lies in-

*'Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work'*
(L.10-12).

The poet's suggestion here is that the elders should guide the younger generation in the matter of dealing with different routine situations with proper care. For instance, if the boy in the poem had been informed of the emotional reactions, which lead to the cutting off of his hand, he might have survived. Thus, the poem reflects the need of rational thinking among the elders to guide the younger generation in a right way.

3.2 Birches (1916)

Through study into this poem reveals the carefree life style of childhood and responsible life of adults which is the glaring 'reality' in human nature.

'I like to think some boy's been swinging them.'(L.3)

In other words, childhood is the age where the children can find more scope to be free whereas the adults have a rare opportunity. Even for children, the poet mentions limitations claiming that

'Ice storms do that' (L.5)

It means all the children are not equally gifted to enjoy their lives. Another true factor of life that is identified in this poem is about the desire of a disturbed individual. The gloomy soul tries to escape the odd realities of the earth accommodating itself with imaginary thoughts.

*'It is when I'm weary of considerations
And life is too much like a pathless wood.'*(L.44-45)

Yet, Frost never misses the truth of the life and applying his rationalistic thinking, he says-

*'I would like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.'*(L.49-50)

And also says that

'Earth is the right place for love.'(L.53)

Coming to the bitter reality of the human life, Frost says fancy can accommodate with a temporary relief and every individual has to come back to the



reality to bear with every pain and gain on the earth itself. The poet's view about the earth is also interpreted here as the place for real love by sharing his feelings with others around.

3.3 Home Burial (1914)

The traces of realism in this poem can be identified in its surface theme itself. The point here is the failure of understanding each other due to lack of proper communication and empathy. In fact, everybody does communicate in his or her routine. Yet, at times, effective communication is necessary to understand more clearly about the emotional side of the individuals engaged in the task. The failure of maintaining this skill between a wife and husband about their dead child results in the total collapse of their relation. The husband's grief is expressed through his *way of the world* policy while she declares that the *world is evil*. Both the wife and husband are grieving at the death of their child. But, there is a difference in the intensity of grieving on emotional levels. The husband's grieving is seen in

'Can't a man speak of his own child he lost? (L.37)

Yet, the husband successfully fails to express his grief in a way that can be understood by his wife. The problem is that he uses *irony* where his wife needs *clarity*.

*'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I am cursed. God, if I don't believe I am
cursed.' (L.93-94)*

And

*'Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build.' (L.96-97)*

The husband's ironical grief couldn't pacify his wife as hers is highly emotional. There is one touching context in this poem relating to the true love. Frost says that true love never needs a conditional arrangement. In fact, it would be an inconvenience to the lovers.

'Two that don't love can't live together with them.

But two that do can't live together with them.' (L.57-58)

However, the husband comes to know the cause of his wife's misery but it is too late and he could not stop his wife leaving him. He comforts himself with some rationalism *'A man must partly give up being a man
With women-folk' (L.52-53)*

This indicates that women are naturally more emotional when compared to men. The ultimate 'truth' of this poem is understood as empathy is a necessary skill one has to cultivate to build up healthy human relations.

3.4 Mending Wall (1914)

Mending Wall is a poem that suggests how people can develop amicable relations with their neighbors without having any sort of conflicts especially regarding the boundary walls. It is a common every day experience to many of witnessing such disputes. The first constructive suggestion of the poet is to check the boundaries on a regular basis and to act accordingly when attention is needed. In this poem it happens once a year as the damage is caused at a regular interval at the spring time.

'But at spring mending time we find them there.

*I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us again' (L.11-14).*

Then the rationalistic theme of the poem is examined in the words of the narrator. He says that there is no need of a wall between them because there is no confusion about the owner of the fruits in whichever compound they fall.

'There where it is, we do not need the wall:

*He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will not get across
And eat the cones under his pines.' (L.23-26)*

The narrator also says that he is never going to be a bad neighbor as there is no threat to be a good neighbor.

*'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no
cows.' (L.30-31)*



The neighbor is more rational with his long vision and he wants to fix the boundary not for their generation but for all generations of his descendents. Wolfgang Mieder (2004) opines *'people everywhere and at all times have seen the pros and cons of a fence marking property lines and keeping people from infringing on each other's personal space (p. 70)*. His rationalistic foresight is highly appreciable. He says

'Good fences make good neighbors.' (L.27)

Thus, the poem *Mending Wall* exhibits the theme of rationalistic realism in a convincing manner.

3.5 The Death of the Hired Man (1914)

This poem is studied with a view to understanding the real time experiences of the land owners and their assistants on contract who love their work but somewhat indifferent in attitude. In this poem the farmhand 'Silas' might be a failure to fulfill his duty as per the contract he had with his owner 'Warren'. But, in the last stage of his life, Silas approaches the same old owner after being away for some time. This particular incident indicates a twofold reality. One is the servant's deep remorse and ardent desire to keep him in the good books of his owner as he is always good at him. The other might be the feeling of being attached to the beloved profession while in the face of death. This can be seen in real life situations that some individuals want to take their last breath in the association of the dear ones. Here, this is Silas. The second realistic factor is seen in this poem when Mary, Warren's wife, tries to convince her husband to accept their servant back into the work. Initially, Warren is seen adamant. After getting convinced by his wife, he accepts her proposal.

'Warren', she said, 'he has come home to die: You need not be afraid he will leave you this time.' (L.114-115)

Warren too has his own rationalistic views towards Silas. He is not happy with Silas just because of his betrayal. Hence, this poem reflects the truth that it is always possible to convince a person who has an ear to hear.

3.6 The Road Not Taken (1916)

The realistic interpretation of this poem is as follows. The 'road' is nothing but the life of an individual and the 'diverge' (L-1) indicates a particular stage in life where one has to choose one of the two choices. An individual always chooses one of the two choices and goes ahead as life can't be a static entity. At this time of initial selection of the fresh choice, one may not be aware of the other end or the ultimate consequences of the choice. As long things go well in the chosen choice, the individuals never get irritated. The real problem comes to scene only when they fail to meet their goals. Eventually, they regret not taking care of the other path. If it is the literal meaning of the road, nothing to worry as a road leads to another. But, when considered through the aspect of a particular stage in life, the lost second never returns. In the other words, this poem can be summed up as an individual who opts for one among many preferences by chance will be willing to accept any outcome of the decision. The same when happens by choice makes all the difference.

3.7 Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (1923)

The surface theme of the poem *'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'* presents a sole traveler stopping by the beautiful woods getting attracted by the beauty. He has been reminded by the harness bells of his horse of his distant journey and he leaves. The hidden meaning of the poem is a naked truth that is universally accepted. A disturbed individual may seek shelter in the jocund company of



nature. At the same time, he can't be cut off from the real world. Herald Bloom (1986) rightly comments "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*' teases us with a near nihilism, and then reaccepts the world of continuities and obligations" (p.10). One has to fulfill his life time responsibilities to obtain perfection to one's life. This is possible only in the true world. The same idea is reflected in the last two lines of the poem which adds more flavor to the hidden meaning of the poem.

And miles to go before I sleep

And miles to go before I sleep (L.15-16)

3.8 The Sound of the Trees (1916)

In "*The Sound of the Trees*"; Frost depicts nature as a temporary healing element. The trees in this poem deliver a message of going away by swaying but never go.

'They are that that talks of going

But never gets away.'(L.10-11)

The man in troubles is forced to receive the message and get inspired to leave. Here, the trees are unable to leave because of their roots and the man because of his duty and responsibilities. To some extent, man gets relieved of his burdens through imagination under the influence of the trees. Yet, he cannot. Another interpretation of realism is examined in this poem in general terms of '*talking*' and '*acting*.' It is generally believed by the people everywhere that those talk big act little and those who talk less act big. The trees in this poem talk big giving a message of leaving but never leave. Hence, it is interpreted from the poem that a balanced individual who is often quiet in nature goes ahead by performing his duty.

'I shall have less to say,

But I shall be gone.'(L.24-25)

3.9 The Tuft of Flowers (1915)

This poem is interpreted as a poem that addresses the feeling of psychological nearness among the people of common interests. Quite often, we come across the

people who say that they are good friends and in fact, they have never seen each other. The roots of their relation are not physical but psychological. It happens as a result of their common interests.

'Men work together, I told him from my heart,

Whether they work together or apart' (L.41-42)

This kind of psychological relation goes stronger and stronger and reaches that stage where the absence of the other person doesn't make any difference as they never feel apart from each other.

4. Conclusion

A quick glance at the themes of Frost's selected poems discussed above reveals that Frost is mostly a realist. He is also seen as a rationalist and his rational views are easily comprehensible from some of the poems studied above. Frost's success as a poet lies in the selection of his subjects which are mostly the real struggles of the real people. A literary art which mirrors the facts in the society has always been received with open arms as it shows the image of each and every individual at some point or the other. Connotative nature of his poetry results in multiple interpretations of the themes in a reasonable sense. He gives an enormous scope to his readers for an endless exploration all through high poetry. The autobiographical element of his poetry successfully depicts the basic ideals and traditions of the New England country side. Frost's main focus never swerves from the path of 'truth' and he concentrates on the subjects like every day activities, duty, hard work and responsibilities of the individuals in pursuit of the portrayal of the universally accepted realism in his poetry. John F. Kennedy (1963) in his speech at Amherst College mentioned, "The death of Robert Frost leaves a vacancy in the American spirit...His death impoverishes us all; but he



has bequeathed his Nation a body of imperishable verse from which Americans will forever gain joy and understanding." (Merriman C.D, 2006)

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