

Depiction of Realism Reflected in Robert Frost's Poems

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Abstract

An attempt has been made to examine Robert Frost's realism in his poems. Autobiographical elements, as well as the environment around him, find eloquence in his poems. His practical experiences of life tend him to choose his subjects in composing poems. Frost's poems seem to be very simple in the surface meaning, but a careful survey of his works vividly reveals his magnanimity as a poet. A critical study of his poetry testimonies him to be a true judge of various critical aspects of the everyday experiences of human beings. Frost employs an easily understandable simple diction and a liberal writing style, but within the encompassment of simplicity, layers of meaning can be unfolded. The characters that throng his poems are viewed as real people with real struggles in real life. It is well-known that Frost's poems are highly condensed with thematic interpretation, and simultaneously, the same reader can interpret his poems in multiple ways. The present paper aims at critically examining Frost's realistic approaches in the elevation of human nature under the broad spectrum of human life. This article also avoids the poems of Frost abounded with absolute imagination because fancy and imagination provide a transitory relief to the disturbed soul, and the ultimate fate of the individuals is to submit the reality. Frost himself individually appears to be a realist. Hence, Frost's poems claim the interpretation concerning realism and, with this end in view, to present article is tried out for.

Keywords: Realism, rationalistic thinking, human life, portray, New England, unlike the Romantics, truth.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Robert Lee Frost (1874-1963) is a renowned American poet belonging to the twentieth century. He is regarded as one of the most influential poets of the period. His poetry has layers of meaning. The first reading leaves an impression on the readers that he is a poet representing the local issues related to his experiences as a New Englander. But a deeper study of his works gives detailed information that he is a local poet and a global one. The themes with which he deals 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. He moved to England in 1912 and got acquainted with literary luminaries like Edward Thomas and Ezra Pound. He was encouraged by these literary elites. Eventually, he could publish his first collection of poems, "A boy's Will" (1913). This collection was well-received and gained the reputation, and gradually he published his other major collections of poetry; "North of Boston" (1914), "Mountain Interval" (1916), "New Hampshire" (1923), "West

Running Brook" (1928), "A Further Range" (1936), "Witness Tree" (1942), "Two Masques (1945); A Masque of Reason, A Masque of Mercy", "Steeple Bush" [1947] and "In the Clearing" (1962). His poems enrich the domain of poetry and color the sky of literature.

Frost's artistic caliber lies in his employing free verse. Considering the theme of the poems, he uses figurative language and chooses poetic diction. A famous modern American poet, Richard Wilbur (1974), points out that Frost's poetry is written in "a beautifully refined and charged colloquial language". He uses befitting language to befit the theme. His poems are very popular for their simplicity and straightforwardness in meaning. Apart from this simplicity on a surface level, it contains connotative meanings underneath that a reader can interpret in multiple ways. Depressions pervade Frost's personal life resulting from the unexpected demise of his near and dear ones. In spite of these misfortunes, he never deviates himself from the path of reality. One special quality of his poetry is that nature finds an eloquent space, and he starts his poetry by describing the elements of nature. But nature in his poems is unlike the

Romantics. His treatment of nature is both destructive and constructive. For the Romantics, a poem starts in imagination and ends in imagination.

On the other hand, Frost employs imagination but ends his poems, in reality, advocating rational thinking. He depicts the truth and real struggles of real people in the real world. He differs from the Romantic poets in case of the portrayal of mysticism and pantheism. The pastoral world in his poetry is limited to describing the beauty and unlocking the harsh reality and conflicts of the natural world. And 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). With a view to examining realism with regard to Frost's Poetry, ten poems are judiciously selected from the above-mentioned popular collections and critically analyzed in this present article.

2 ANALYSIS

This paper aims at examining realism in Frost's poetry. It also explores how often Frost reckons the rationalized thoughts among his characters to justify their respective actions. Frost's realism is obviously not only descriptive but also relevant to life. As a realist, he presents the reality of human life not so much in photographic verisimilitude but in terms of imaginative comprehension. He blends fancy, imagination, and facts. Frost's keen eyes look into the poignant facts of life from common experiences. Frost is widely acclaimed as a poet of man. So, the panorama of man's life occupies the canvas of his poetry. Thus, rural New England depicted his poetry as a study in a miniature of the fundamental human nature, which involves the crystallization of experience. In this respect, the following ten poems are selected from different volumes to scan Frost's realism which is the principal objective of the article.

2.1 Home Burial (1914)

The poem, published in the volume "North of Boston," is regarded as the most intense of dramatic dialogue written by Robert Frost. It is a poem that deals with conflicts between a husband and a wife due to the tragic death of their first-born child. The conflict is piteous and terrible because neither of them is at fault. The wife blames her husband for the burial of her child with his own hands. Here the reality of man's life can be identified in its surface theme—the failure of understanding results from the lack of proper communication and empathy between the couple. Effective communication is necessary to understand more clearly the emotional side of the individuals. But the failure of maintaining this communication skill between the wife and husband regarding their dead child leads them to the total collapse of their relation. The husband's sorrow is expressed through his way of the realistic and worldly policy while the wife declares that the world is evil. Both the wife and the husband are

grieving the death of their child. But there is a difference in the intensity of grieving on emotional levels. The husband completely fails to express his grief in a way that his wife can understand. The problem is that the husband uses irony where his wife needs clarity. The ironical impulse of the husband echoes thus:

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

The ironical indication further intensifies in the following lines:

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

The husband is rational and realistic, but the wife is emotional. So his ironic grief couldn't pacify the emotional outburst of his wife. Here, it is reasonable to mention one thing that a modern man lacks true love. As a modern poet, a poet of Man, Robert Frost says that true love is unconditional. Conditional arrangement of love does not last long, and it is an inconvenience to the lovers because it shatters sooner or later:

- Anything special you're a-mind to name.
- Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
- 'Two that don't love can't live together with them.
- But two that do can't live together with them. (L.55-58)

However, the husband fails to mitigate his wife's misery. Consequently, his wife leaves him. He consoles himself with some rational and realistic solace: 'A man must partly give up being a man With women-folk' (L.52-53)

Here Thompson's remark can be cited, "The conflict develops between wife and husband over the woman's way and the man's way of bearing the painful sorrow caused by the death of their firstborn. Each has been hurt seriously while the man tries to cover grief with daily tasks and commonplace remarks about the weather, the woman cry her sorrow openly as if she held the unburied child in her arms...."

The husband is realistic, and the wife is emotional beyond reality. Two are in the opposite poles.

2.2 Mending Wall (1914)

The poem belongs to the volume "North of Boston". This fine dramatic lyric presents a conflict between two neighbors representing two generations—the young generation and the old generation. The poem's reality is to show how to develop amicable relations with the neighbors without having any conflicts, especially regarding the boundary wall. In,

this poem happens once a year as the damage is caused at a regular interval in springtime, and the old neighbor attempts to mend the wall. But the young one with a broader mind opines that there is no need of repairing the wall:

- "There where is we do not need the wall;
- He is all pine, and I am apple orchard.
- My apple tree will never get across
- And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him." (L.23-26)

On the other hand, the rigid neighbor insists on mending the wall by saying, "Good fences make good neighbors" (L.27).

The young one raises questions regarding the need for a wall between them:

- "Before I built a wall, I'd ask to know
- What I was walling in or walling out,
- And to whom I was like to give offense,
- Something, there is that does not love a wall." (L.32-35)

The young neighbor is vicious and energetic with a flexible mold of mind, but his neighbor, a New England farmer, seems to have a deep-seated blind faith in the value of walls and fences. He does not consider the pulse of his young neighbor, and instead, he vehemently asserts his father's saying, "Good fences make good neighbors" (L.45).

The rationalistic view of the poem can be examined in the arguments of both neighbors. Both are realistic in their own sense. One realistic touch in the poem is that it symbolically hints at internationalism concerning the relationship among the nations whether boundaries will be erected for protection or the world will be a global country.

The old neighbor is more rational with his long vision, and he wants to fix the boundary not for their generation but for all generations to come. Here Wolfgang Mieder's (2004) opinion is relevant who says, "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). Thus, Frost handles the realistic approach in the poem through two opposed mentalities bearing neighbors who represent real conflicts among surrounding people, or in other words, the conflicts among the nations of the world globally.

2.3 The Death of the Hired Man (1914)

The poem, published in "North of Boston," is one of the most powerful dramatic lyrical poems demonstrating Frost's poetic capacity to build up a complete plot where Silas, the hired man, is the central character, and his death in the house of Warren and Mary is the central event. This poem is scanned with a

view to understanding the real-time experiences of the landowners and their assistant, Silas works on a contract basis, but sometimes he is indifferent in attitude. Silas often fails to fulfill his duty as per the contract with his owner, Warren. He remains away mysteriously at hay time, and Warren grew angry with him at this. In the last stage of his life, Silas approaches his old owner to keep him stay at home. 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 because he is always good at him. The other might be the feeling of being attached to the beloved profession before his death. This can be seen in real-life situations that some individuals want to take their last breath in the association of the near and dear ones at home because home is the place where every individual has to submit in the end:

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in." (L.120-121)

A remarkable realistic factor is seen in this poem when Mary, Warren's wife, tries her best to convince her husband to accept their servant and let him stay in their house and work again. Warren as a realistic modern man, denies Mary's plea. Because of his wife's repeated coaxing, Warren is finally convinced, and he accepts Mary's proposal. But it is an irony of fate that this Silas has come not to stay:

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

The same idea about Silas echoes in Lynen's remark, "His self-respect has been the essence of his life, and know that this self-respect can exist only as a charitable fiction, his life is, in the truest sense, ended."

Warren's negative view of Silas is, no doubt, realistic. Simultaneously, his acceptance of Silas due to the convincing plea of Mary claims rational and realistic go of life because Warren is a human being with head and heart, and thus, this poem reflects the rationalistic realism of Frost.

2.4 The Tuft of Flowers (1915)

The poem is a nice meditative one published in "A Boy's Will," which expounds on the feeling of psychological nearness among the people who have common interests. The phrase, tuft of flowers, is symbolic in meaning. Quite often, people come across other people who say that they are good friends, but they have never seen each other. The roots of their relationships are not physical but psychological. The chirping of 'wakening birds' [L.31] and 'long scythe whispering to the ground' [L.32] harmonize the poet's feeling:

- And feel a spirit kindred to my own;
- So that henceforth I worked no more alone; [L.33-34]

It happens as a result of their common interests, which they share. This oneness is strengthened in the concluding two lines:

- 'Men work together,' I told him from the heart,
- 'Whether they work together or apart (L.41-42)

Here, Frost's realistic approach is that this kind of psychological relationship goes strong to stronger, and reaches that stage where the absence of the other person doesn't make any difference because they never feel apart or separated from each other. Here, a metaphysical relation is implied, which really happens in man's life in the real world.

2.5 Out, out (1916)

"Out, Out," published in "New Hampshire," is a wonderful poem depicting the hard reality of modern American society where a boy is bound to undergo child labor. This poem reveals the timely reality of the world. Frost's return to America from England due to World War-1 and his experiences of hard reality influenced him to write the poem. The tool saws is personified to refer to the powerful weapons used in the World War:

- "The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
- And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood". [L.1-2]

The same tone echoes again:

- "And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled." [L.7]

To find out Frost's realism, this poem can be read as a critique of world events. The damage caused by the World War with weapons results in total destruction and causes a severe threat to all walks of Life. As a result, as one of the many crippling events, the young boys, who are supposed to attend school for learning, are forced to attend hard work for their survival and struggle for existence. Though he is a young boy, he has to do a grownup man's work:

- "Since he was old enough to know, a big boy
- I am doing the man's work, though a child at heart—" (L.23-24).

Another true factor in this poem is the general desire of the young boys and girls who long for a good physical form. This is expressed in the boy's voice when he asks his sister to request the Doctor not to cut his hand off:

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

The poem is superb in realistic thinking. The boy is sincere. He wants to save time and he thinks he will benefit. This factor lies in society. It is revealed in the following lines:

- "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 wants to suggest here that the elders should guide the younger generation in dealing with different routine situations with proper care and sympathy. The elders should be more realistic and empathetic to the younger ones. Thus, the poem is an appeal of rational thinking with reality.

2.6 Birches (1916)

The poem, published in the volume "Mountain Interval," is strikingly remarkable for its perfect blending of subtle fact and fancy, observation and imagination. C. Day Lewis rightly says that this is a poem in which observation and reminiscence, realism and fancy, the light tone and the serious are perfectly blended. This poem also reveals the carefree lifestyle of children and the responsible life of adults, which is the glaring 'reality' in human life. Childhood is the age where the children can find more scope to be free, whereas the adults have a rare opportunity. Another true factor of life identified in this poem is the desire of a disturbed individual. The gloomy soul tries to escape the hard realities of the earth by flying on the viewless wings of imagination. When the individual is tired of oddities of life, he defines life as pathless wood:

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

But Frost does not want to miss the truth of the Life, rather he applies his rationale and comes to the reality:

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

Coming to the bitter reality of human life, he consoles himself thus:

- "..... Earth is the right place for love,
- I don't know where it's like to go better." (L.53-54)

Here, Frost goes on to say that fancy can accommodate with temporary relief, and every individual has to come back to reality sooner or later to bear with every pain and gain on the earth itself. Louis Untermeyer brings out almost all the qualities of the poem and mentions that Fact and fancy play together throughout the poem. The crystal ice becomes heaps of broken glass. Frost's realism further strengthens in the voice of Elizabeth Jennings, who points out that Frost shows a yearning for a movement that is heavenward but also declares empathically, "Earth is the right place for love."

2.7 The Road Not Taken (1916)

The poem was published in the volume "Mountain Interval." This poem is one of the finest and most popular ones, which requires a realistic

interpretation because of its symbolic dimension. The 'road' used by the poet is nothing but a man's way of life, and the 'diverge' (L-1) indicates a particular stage in life where an individual has to choose one of the two choices. An individual always chooses one of the two choices and goes ahead because life can't be a static entity. G. Monteiro regards the poem as the traditional theme of "a choice of two paths." At this time of initial selection of the fresh choice, a man may not be aware of the other end or the ultimate consequences of the choice. The real problem comes to the scene only when a man fails to meet his goals. Ultimately, he does not regret it despite not taking the other option. The reality of man's life is that the way of life is single, and every individual has a single identity. So he cannot take both paths. So, the poet expresses his inability because of his being a solo traveler:

- "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
- And sorry I could not travel both
- And be one traveler, long I stood
- And looked down one as far as I could (l.1-4)

Regarding the poem, G.W Nitchie points out that this poem has for its theme, one of the major themes in Frost's poetry—the problem of having to make a choice. So, symbolically the poem is the ultimate reality and destiny of man's real life. Relating the poem to the reality of Frost's life, Untermeyer says that Frost has gone his own way. It was not he that chose his destiny. He was inevitably guided towards his destination by some spirits, some unseen forces, that keep working on man. This inevitability, which apparently has an element of choice, is brought in this oft-quoted and oft-misunderstood poem "The Road Not Taken". In fact, the matter of choice in life is a common dilemma in man's life but he has to take one way avoiding the other, and this reality of life is reflected in this poem.

2.8 The Sound of the Trees (1916)

"The Sound of the Trees," published in the volume of "Mountain Interval," is a short but complex poem. The poet asks why men wish to endure the sound of the tree. The sound of the tree is like a man who talks of making a move, but he does not do so. Men should be dynamic. Formative decisions are not matters of clear-cut choices but are much more complex- this is what Frost seems to imply in the poem. But Yvor Winters thinks that the poem highlights the "whimsical, accidental, and incomprehensible nature of the formative decisions. The poem deals with a desire to depart 'which has never quite been realized.'" The reality is that Frost portrays nature as a temporary healing agent. The trees in this poem deliver a message of going away by swaying, but they never go:

- "They are that that talks of going
- But never gets away." (L,10-11)
- In other words, trees cannot leave rather, they stay:
- "That now it means to stay" [L.14]

Though men in trouble get inspired to leave, they cannot because they have duties and responsibilities. Similarly, the trees are unable to leave because of their roots. To some extent, man gets relieved of his burdens through imagination under the influence of the trees. But it is temporary. Another interpretation of realism is examined in this poem in general terms of 'talking' and 'acting.' It is generally believed that the people who 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 leaving. Therefore, the fact is that a balanced individual who is often quiet in nature goes ahead by performing his duty and responsibilities:

- "I shall have less to say,
- But I shall be gone" (L.24-25)

Thus, the last two lines also depict the reality of man's life, and the figurative use of trees is a vehicle to convey the poet's thoughts.

2.9 Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (1923)

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is one of the most-read, well-known, and moving lyrics published in "New Hampshire," which claims a series of interpretations. The surface theme of the poem presents a sole traveler who stops by the beautiful woods, getting attracted by the beauty. The harness bells have reminded him of the horse of his distant journey, and he leaves. The underlying meaning of the poem is a grim truth that a disturbed individual may seek shelter in the lap of nature. At the same time, the reality is that he can't be cut off from the real world. Though the poet is overwhelmed with the scenic beauty of nature, he leaves no stone unturned to express dismay. The poem embodies a tincture of tragic implication. He regards the evening as 'the darkest evening of the year' [L.8]. But life on the real earth is assigned with duties and responsibilities. In this regard, 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.70). A man has to fulfill his discharged responsibilities to obtain perfection in life. This is possible only in the real and true world. The sheer reality is that the duty in life is mandatory, which is reflected in the last stanza of the 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 (L.13-16)

On a critical study of the poem, it supplies layers of meaning. The above last stanza of the poem portrays the climax of duty and responsibility that a man has to discharge in reality. The phrase "promises to keep" (L.14) implies man's obligation to be fulfilled. Thus the poem conceives a realistic approach relevant to a real-life situation.

2.10 Tree at My Window (1928)

It is one of the well-known nature poems published in "West-Running Brook" in which Frost describes the feelings of companionship with an old, dependable tree outside his window. He recognizes the fact that he does not want to be separated from the tree ever. The window sash may go up or down, but he will never leave:

- "Tree at my window, window tree,
- My sash is lowered when night comes on;
- But let there never be curtain drawn
- Between you and me." (L.1-4)

In fact, he goes on to describe how thoughts of the tree have penetrated his mind. He personifies the tree and finds an affinity between them. The tree suffers from bad storms and long nights, which are visible, or in other words, it is 'taken and tossed' by rough outer weather. Similarly, the poet suffers from the pangs and pathos of life, which are invisible. The agony of life lowers his head. So he says:

- "Your head so much concerned with outer,
- Mine with inner, weather." (L.15-16)

Here, it is clear that Frost is a poet of nature, and he identifies the similar destiny of his in the destiny of the window tree regarding suffering. But he is not blind to nature like the Romantics. His attitude to nature is rationalistic and realistic. To Frost, man is different from other creatures and objects. Regarding the realistic treatment of nature of Frost, an American poet, novelist, educator, critic, and a professor of English at the University of Georgia, Marion Montgomery says, "What is high seriousness to Wordsworth is fancy or humor in Frost" we should never suppose "that Frost feels the kind of brotherhood for natural objects that Wordsworth expresses through much of his poetry." Frost does not disintegrate himself from the hard reality of life. He has generalized his inevitable fate compared to the fate of the old window tree. This realistic attitude to nature makes him different from the Romantic poets who used to fly with the wings of imagination.

3. CONCLUSION

A survey of Frost's selected poems discussed above reveals that Frost is a sane realist. His realistic and rational views on life are easily comprehensible from the poems studied above. His artistic caliber as a poet lies in the selection of his subjects which are mostly the real struggles of the real people. As literature mirrors the facts of the society, an enormous scope to his readers for an exploration of reality prevails in all through his poetry. Frost's focal point is to depict the path of truth and concentrate on the subjects like everyday activities, pains, and pleasures, duty, hard work, and responsibilities of the individuals, which are the universally accepted reality. Assessing the real need of Robert Frost, John F. Kennedy (1963), the former

president of America, 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).

To conclude, William Joseph Long (1867 – 1952), an American writer, naturalist, and minister's comment can be cited, "Robert Frost. finds his poetry out of doors, either in the face of the fields or the faces of men who are in daily contact with the elemental realities of earth and sky. There are no joyous lyrics in his work, but only narrative, descriptive and meditative verse. Of him more than any other poet, the word 'realistic' may be used in its best sense. He describes a scene or an incident in a way that makes you see what he sees---a thing that few descriptive writers ever accomplish." Therefore, Frost is a realist in the true sense, and his realistic approach in poetry is harmonized with the touchstone of realism.

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