



RESEARCH ARTICLE

REALISM AND HUMANISM AS MARKED FEATURES OF ROBERT FROST'S NATURE POETRY WITH
A FOCUS ON A SYMPATHETIC BLENDING OF MAN AND NATURE IN HIS POETIC REALM:
A BRIEF ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This is an attempt to lay focus on the features of Robert Frost's poetry especially blending of realism and humanism as marked features of his poetry with a focus on a sympathetic blending of Man and Nature in his poetic realm, bringing home the point that Nature has been a rich ingredient in literature ever since man learnt to speak and write and all objects of nature like man, bird, beast, trees, flowers and all that man noticed around enveloped in a mysterious irresistible charm taking good shelter in the feelings and language outpourings of man about which Robert Frost has described in detail as an outstanding nature poet and an adept in shaping his art and outlook. It clearly reveals how Frost as a serious artist by his virtual dedication of his life to poetry, he has proved himself to be a representative and embodiment of the American literary imagination probing deeply into the source of his poetic gift so as to nourish many layers of meaning at the surface level.

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that Nature has been a rich ingredient in literature even since man learnt to speak and write. Actually all human beings got attracted in the beginning by the beauty of their surroundings; the sights and sounds around them and their hearts leaped up in joy as well as in answer to Nature. For men, the meanest flower on earth was perhaps capable of giving them thought and imaginative insight. All objects of nature like man, bird, beast, trees, flowers and all that he noticed around him appeared to him enveloped in a mysterious irresistible charm and as such, nature was given good shelter in the feelings and language outpourings of man. It is beyond doubt that there has been an American history pertaining to the treatment of Nature. In the words of S.C. Dubey, "The Americans admired nature less for its metaphysical and transcended meaning than for serenity, beauty, simplicity and wonder which Nature connotes" (P26). No doubt, Robert Frost has succeeded in bringing out these elements of serenity, beauty and simplicity. Of all the well-established poets, Robert Frost has been considered as the most widely-known and the least criticized of the 20th century American poets.

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Being an outstanding nature poet, he is an adept in analysing the cultural background that shaped his art and outlook and his poem are marked with freshness because "they are less reliant upon day and year, less adorned by names, idioms and actions of the years passed by" (Gerber 139). His literary capability was used out and out to apprehend the American life, its changing patterns and their impact on the minds of the people, his sense of place and belonging, sense of national consciousness, his perceptive powers, his ability in getting across his ideas to the readers with a focus on the purpose of his poetic art and treatment of nature in his poetry. He is of the opinion that a poet should not be universal without being provincial and that is why the pastoral elements form rather richly the background of his poetry. His poems, which are supposed to be the projection of the mind constantly gazing at the natural world so as to deal with various themes under the disguise of nature, transcended the immediate environment in which they were written. Becoming very much of a national symbol by the end of his long and distinguished career, he voiced almost the voice of New England emphasizing "rural experience, sometimes with a self-conscious wisdom, sometimes with a bleak ironic view of man's place in the world" (Paxton 631). Such an eminent poet Robert Frost was born on March 26, 1874 in San Francisco, California. His mother Isabella Modi, an ardent lover of poems, named her son

Robert after the greatest Scottish poet by name Robert Burns. Even during his school days, he loved writing poems and as such he won the title 'class poet' at school. After school education, he entered Harvard University for graduation but he left it without receiving a degree. For livelihood, Frost took up such various jobs as farming, shoemaking, working in a factory and teaching in a grammar school where he with his sister Jeanie got his early education. In 1900, his grandfather purchased a farm for Frost and so he moved to New Hampshire to engage himself in Poultry farming. Whatever jobs he took, he proved himself a failure. So he turned to poetry for comfort and solace in moments of utter distress and despair. Being completely disgusted with life, he sold his farm in 1912 and left for England with his wife and children so as to devote himself completely to writing poetry. He has to his credit publication of such notable book of verses as *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston*, *Mountain Interval*, *New Hampshire*, *A Witness Tree*, *A Mosque of Reason and a Mosque of Mercy*, *Steeple Bush*. In honour of his poetic achievement, The Pulitzer Prize for poetry was awarded for times to Robert Frost in 1924, 1931, 1937 and 1943 for *New Hampshire*, *Collected Poems*, *A Further Range* and for *The Witness Tree* respectively. The well-known poems like 'The Pasture', 'Mowing', 'Reluctance', 'After Apple-Picking', 'Birches', 'Stopping by Woods on a Snow Evening', 'West-Running Brook', 'Two Tramps in Mud Time', 'Mending Wall' won him unequalled fame and name in the field of poetry from all literary circles.

Being a serious artist by his virtual dedication of his life to poetry, he has proved himself to be a representative and embodiment of the American literary imagination probing deeply into the source of his poetic gift so as to bring home the point that though his poems are simple and straight forward, they have layers of meanings beneath the surface level not only evoking an emotional response from the readers but also making, Frost the poet of both the laymen and the learned few. It is learnt that only under the influence of Emerson; Frost did identify himself with his country and recognizes his complete American temperament. He learnt the importance of communicating with the environment from Emerson and the treatment of nature in his poetry from the Georgians. Despite the fact that he was influenced by the Georgians in his treatment of nature, he appeared different from them, for mostly the Georgian poet's depicted nature and village folk in a superficial manner because they had neither personal contact nor personal experience with them. But Robert Frost is very accurate in his observation of natural objects, rural people and their problems. Another notable point that does differentiate Frost from the Georgian poets is that the Georgian poems are so simple that they can easily be understood at the surface level itself. But it is not so with Frost, for in Frost's poems, symbolic and metaphysical traits are richly found with layers and layers of meanings at the deeper level, even if the and layers of meaning at the deeper level, even if the meanings are understood somewhat easily at the surface level. In the outer lightness that hides the inner gravity lies the greatest achievement of Robert Frost.

Robert Frost is considered as a modern poet in the sense that he lived and worked in the twentieth century. In another sense, he is considered as a contemporary of T.S.Eliot, W.H.Auden, Ezra Pound and W.B.Yeats who are also considered as 'modern poets'. It is generally held that Frost was introduced to the world of poetry at a period when the old political order was about to break and when poetry was at its graving stage. He is

a poet standing between what is old and what is new? Most of his poems reveal his mode of expression as something symbolic and indirect in meaning. This is a mark of modern poetry to which Frost is said to have attributed rather richly with an elegant style of his poetry, richest use of pastoral elements and profound understanding and study of man in relation to Nature and Natural laws so as to achieve great subtlety, vividness and diversity in his attitude, and approach to men and matters.

Frost's nature poetry gives evidence of his capacity for minute observation and accurate description. The descriptive power of Frost has been described as the most wonderful thing in his poetry. A Snowfall, a spring thaw, a bending tree, a valley mist, a brook, - all these are brought into the experience of the reader. What he describes is never a spectacle only but an entire adventure. In 'Our Singing Strength', one can follow him disputing with birds a bit of roadway; in 'A Hillside Thaw', we almost see him on his knees trying to feel with his hands the process of snow turning into water. With the sight and the fact the emotional response comes naturally. The three fuses together and the experience come to us as a whole. In his poem, "Birches" one can find Frost's capacity for minute observation and accurate description at their best and the opening lines of the poem are a characteristic example of the same. He gives her a simple, concrete description of the "habits" of birches and the changes wrought upon them by the wind and the ice storms. There are a few marked similarities between Robert Frost and Wordsworth as nature poets. "Detachment, for him as for Wordsworth, is a necessary condition of the creative power". It is worth noticing that his most consistently successful work, *North of Boston*, which is concerned throughout with the New England landscape and character, was written while he was living in Gloucestershire. This is as clear an example of emotion recollected in tranquility as the lines of Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*.

It is so common that Nature has been a charming theme for poets of all times and all climes. The things which attracted them all as a whole are nature's grand majesty, its loveliness and its serenity. As Dubey has put it,

"In nature, poets have discovered sometimes indifference and cruelty, sometimes sympathy and companionship, sometimes simple delight and sensuous beauty, sometimes an enveloping medium of human passions... and sometimes spiritual significance" (P65).

Robert Frost lays emphasis upon the need of being versed in country things. According to him, Nature serves for man as an open book having lessons on every page. This idea came to him as a result of his close identification of nature as an instructor. In the natural objects, Frost always finds out a symbol of man's relation to the world. As his real subject is humanity, he portrays nature in man. Though nature seems to be sometimes malevolent and harsh, insensible and brutish, cruel or in different, it is lovable to man always in all ways possible. It teaches him many good lessons absolutely necessary for his survival. In the poem, "After Apple-Picking", Frost reminds one of the facts that human life is similar to the seasons. For example, spring, summer, autumn and winter represent the various stages in man's life. Change is the only permanent thing in nature. Frost spent most world both during his childhood and adulthood days. When he grew older, he

was aware of the activity, beauty and mystery of the exterior world. New England is considered to be the Wessex of Robert Frost. It is the place from which he derives his clues for his poetry. The region which lies north of Boston mostly forms the background to his poetic creations. The characteristic features of this particular region – the hills, rivers, forests, trees, flowers, plants, animals, birds, insects, seasons and seasonal changes – get picturized and beautifully described with accuracy and minuteness in his poetic world.

Robert Frost has skillfully painted the characters in such a way as they feel free in expressing their ideas. Though living together, men exist as individuals. Motivated by love and need, they are drawn together. The need of sharing fear and fragilities is common to all. The love is that of individual companionship. Equally must be taught to accept and to resist the pull of nature. He is capable of contemplating while exercising the ability to act. Frost found a solution to the problem and this is given expression to in the poem "Mowing": "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows" (13). As a result of his study of rural folk, he is suffused with a deep understanding of human nature. Having deep faith in life which is full of contradictions, he does not mind the unsophisticated life that these village folk are leading. His depiction of those village folks is so realistic as if he had entered into the minds and hearts of those people. He treats them with tenderness of heart. His greatness lies in his touch of universalization which he gives to the study of his characters. For example, the village boy in "Birches", has no pastime other than climbing of birches. This too has the touch of universalization in the sense that it is applicable to any poor rustic boy who belongs to any part of the world. The boy finds satisfaction in swinging on the branches of trees and tries to attain perfection instead of longing for the sophisticated game with his companion.

Frost's characters are born and brought up in the lap of nature in that they wander amidst natural environment doing all sorts of activities that are connected with nature. Sometimes his poems touch upon metaphysical value. According to him, ethical dimension is of "substantial significance" (Dubey 71). Frost's enthusiasm for nature comes to him in the nature of the talk of his characters. Those characters are mostly country bred who cannot dissociate themselves from the background of their living. The swinging of the birches in fierce winter storm is a common sight in England. This has been immortalized in "Birches":

"...Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises and turn many-colored
as they stir cracks and crazes their enamel" (Lines 5-9)

In the 19th century, Thoreau and Emerson were considered to be the principal champions of nature and interpreters of things. Traditionally, both have remarkable influence upon Frost. The snow-pilled deep lake and woods, forests of birth trees had their origin from Thoreau. They were Frost's "intellectual and spiritual godfathers" (Adams 2). His love and sense of kinship with nature matured his mind into religious consciousness. The courage attempting for a tried in a new surrounding is "the living spirit which redeems himself from the inevitable flux" (Harris 45). Frost has chosen the urban life as the most suitable to find escape. He finds a vast difference between the outer

world and the rural world. The outer world brings in frustration and it is harder than the rural world. "After Apple-Picking", "Two Tramps in Mud Time" and other poems like "Moving" show that New England with its humble business of earning a livelihood coincides with his imaginative power. Though Frost is a nature poet, he is primarily a poet of man and humanity. He is found illuminating the common things, events and people thus adding new colour and new dimension to them:

"It is this background motion toward the source
Against the steam, that most we see in ourselves
The tribute of the current to the source
It is from this in nature we are from
It is most us" (Lines 73-77).

Man must learn to adjust with the pull of nature. While engaging in action, he must have the ability to contemplate over it. He finds the solution in "Mowing". He loves both the pleasant and the unpleasant aspects of nature. Though he enjoys her sensuous beauty, he never fails to portray the harsh, bleak and barren in her. To Frost, nature is neither a source of romantic feelings nor an embodiment of evil. His approach is rather realistic. He is a true poet writing for himself from his own knowledge and emotion, considering both joys and sufferings as one and the same for men and he never fails to express the unpleasant things in life. Thus, in portraying the frustration, disillusionment and isolation of modern life, he has established himself as a modern poet, using his poetic capability to mould the confusions and problems of daily occurrences and thoughts.

Frost's love of nature is so ingrained in his blood that it runs deep into every vein and leaf of his work. His poetry can be considered as a composition of his concept of nature, attitude to nature and doctrine of nature. Nature means a good deal to Frost. He is always conscious of the line that separates nature from man. He turns to mankind when he is tired of trees and natural objects and when he is weary of men, he turns to nature. In his poetic world, nature and man confront with each other in one way or the other. Nature as he feels, thinks and writes, is a holy book with many good things to be read out. The mind is the tongue to express the ideas that nature connotes. The moral influences that it exerts is the amount of truth that nature tries to convey to every individual. Frost has no hesitation in expressing his ideas towards nature outspokenly as nature is sometimes indifferent and even hostile to man. The basic concept of Frost is that man differs essentially from other creatures and objects. For example in "Tree at my window", out of comparison he comes to the conclusion that the essential difference is,

"That day she put out heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
You head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner weather" (Lines 13-16)

His trees do not put on a grave expression though he speaks to them. The weather that hits them is outer. In "Birches", just as the girls are drying their hair in the Sun, the trees are also trailing their leaves before them:

"You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on lands and knees that throw their hair
before them over their heads to dry in the sun" (17-20)

To Frost, the land remains lonely to those who do not recognize its friendliness. He advises them to;
 "Be glad of water, but don't forget
 The lurking frost in the earth beneath.
 That will steal for the after the sun is set.
 And show on the water its crystal teeth"
 (Two Tramps in Mud Time 37-40)

Leading a life of simplicity, he changes himself as a man of farms and woods of the earth of New England. His love for the place is evident by his naming of his collection of poems under the names of different places like *North of Boston*, *Mountain Internal*, *New Hampshire*, and *West-Running Brook*. Frost, the Swinger of Birches, has the New England spirit of adjustment in him. Living for away from the city, he has the mentality of having been satisfied with what is at hand. He plays on the birches,

"One by one he subdued his father's trees
 By riding them down over and again"
 ("Birches": 28-29)

It is obvious that his poetry is concerned more with men and nature. He is a naturalist accepting everything which is present in nature. In the poem, "Tree at My Window", men is projected as very intimate to nature. There is "a sympathetic blending of human head and tree head, of inner and outer weather" (Gerber 158). This comparison draws man and nature so close together. There is a sense of mutual understanding like twin hemispheres. His poems are not simply the composition of an exalted, rare and chosen moments but of his daily and common experiences. He does not picture the natural world without realism. Indeed, realism is a marked feature of Frost's nature beauty poems. No doubt, the woods are lovely but their beauty cannot hold back the poet for a long time as he has "promises to keep and miles to go" (Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening 14-15). Reality is never absent from Frost's nature poetry. Less than nature, he is more concerned with the common human activities of life. Those activities are mowing, apple-picking, swinging-birches etc. He is not satisfied by observing such everyday activities but also he tries to study man in relation to his environment and the lower creatures that live within her.

To conclude, it may be said that Frost's final conclusion is that nature is little more in favour of man. When Frost realises his dilemmic position with no consistent attitude towards nature, he is similar to that of Thoreau. Thoreau has a variety of attitudes towards nature. Both Thoreau and Frost at times feel isolated from nature but wish to see themselves one with nature. Being a supporter of humanism, Frost emphasizes the worth and nobility of the natural order and so both are intertwined.

Humanism is inseparable from the natural order of the world and it is not something outside of it. "In the words of Squires, "Frost is a poet not because he is affected by nature or because he had lived in a farm, but because he speaks to men about men" (P68). He considered himself as a singer of humanity rather than belonging to a member of any literary group. So it is quite justifiable to call him "an environmentalist", (Speider 114). No doubt, Frost can significantly be called as "an environmentalist, a realist and a humanist" from an analytical point of view.

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