

A Natural Introspection into Robert Frost's Poetry

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The writer, Robert Lee Frost, was a nature poet, a poet who spoke with rhyme and meter of all things natural, and in so doing plumbed the depths of emotion of people in all walks of life. Louis Untermeyer best describes Frost's work as "poetry that sings and poetry that talks ... his poems are people talking" (xxi). In describing a simple act of nature, the mundane, or the heartfelt grief of people, Robert Frost displays an insight into the sometimes simple instances in our lives that when brought together constitute our very lives. One aspect of life that touches everyone is death, whether it is the loss of a friend, neighbor, or loved one. Some of Frost's most beautiful work displays this stark reality of life. In all of Frost's works, the reader sees encapsulated in verse a depth and level of human emotion that is not easily discerned by the eye, but rather felt and nurtured in the heart. Robert Frost uses nature at its most beautiful to explain life at its harshest.

In Robert Frost's poem, "After Apple-Picking," the reader comes to know an old man who has worked harvesting apples his entire life. In the smell of the apple blossoms and the beauty of the russet color of the apple, the reader realizes the old man's love of his apple orchard. His death is coming slowly and peacefully to him, allowing him time to see and hear his life once again, but much more acutely. He hears the rumbling of apples in the cider bin and feels the rung of the ladder on the arch of his foot. The harvester's senses have become heightened to ordinary, daily activities. The reader can feel the bone weary ache of tiredness and the quiet acceptance of endless sleep. By letting the reader feel the old man being lulled into death through

the use of the senses, the poet subtly interweaves into the reader's consciousness the hold that the land has had on this farmer; "Essence of winter sleep is on the night / The scent of apples: I am drowsing off" (7-8). In the final four lines of the poem, the old man knows that if the woodchuck were still around it could define the nature of the sleep. By using the senses of smell, touch, and even sight, Frost lets nature ease the old man into rest.

The stark simplicity in the poem "The Death of the Hired Man" gives dignity to the old man, Silas, who has nothing material to show for his life. He does, however, have the love and affection of a couple, Warren and Mary. Silas was an unreliable hired hand who passed in and out of their lives throughout the years. Silas could build a load of hay and could find water with a divining rod. He has come "home" to die. He talks of clearing the pasture and ditching the meadow for the couple. In the act of working the land and doing it well, the land gives Silas value to his life. He dies alone with thoughts of working the land in his head. The entire poem is spoken softly so as not to disturb Silas' rest; "The story unfolds itself in undertones; a poem heard—or overheard—in whispers" (Untermeyer 147).

In "Home Burial," we experience the aftermath of the death of a beloved child and quite possibly the death of the marriage. The poem's setting is only a small portion of a house containing the staircase and the area leading to the front door. At the top of the staircase, there is a window that looks out upon a small family cemetery. We meet the wife and mother at the top of this stairway and the husband/father at the bottom. She is quite clearly upset and the husband asks why. When he reaches the top of the stairs and looks out, he finally understands. He grew up here, and like everyone else, tends to not see details that he has always known. His wife sees this as coldness because he buried their child in this cemetery. The story progresses and he pleads with her to talk to him, to not seek consolation from others, but to turn to him. She cannot,

for all she can see and hear is what she deems to be callousness on his part. The poet expresses such deep emotions in this work. The reader feels the anguish of the mother as well as that of the husband; therein lies the problem. The woman can only function and feel as a mother and not a wife while the man is still a husband even though he is a father who strongly feels the loss of his child. The mother sees the spade lifting, and hears the gravel pelting the ground while her little boy lay in the "darkened parlor" (line 100). She feels hurt and betrayal that her husband comes in from digging the grave and talks of such mundane matters as a fence. Her grief blinds her to the reality that people deal with grief in different ways and that dealing with mindless, routine chores often helps to block out the unthinkable. The husband shows his grief in the physical action of digging the grave and burying his child. I think lines 92 and 93, "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day / Will rot the best birch fence a man can build" is this father's anxiety concerning laying to rest his little one in the cold, wet earth. As a man of the soil, he knows how quickly things rot and return to the earth continuing and thus perpetuating life's cycle. Quite possibly this thought wears on him, and by stabbing at the earth in the act of digging the grave, he is giving vent to the horrible mind-numbing grief of returning his precious child to the earth ("Home Bmial").

Robert Frost and his wife, Elinor, lost their son, Elliott in infancy to cholera. Elinor "could not forget, but what she saw was only blankness too featureless to express" (Bradley 40). Robert blamed himself and "Elinor scorned such self-pity ... Elliott's dying was a meaningless act of nature ... " (Bradley 41). The death of their first born child stood between them and took a toll on their marriage (Bradley 41). The poem "Home Burial" seems to have some similarities with Frost's own personal experience. Even though Frost did not like farm work, he learned "to listen with a farmer's ear and sniff the weather with a farmer's nose" (Bradley 40). Meanwhile, Elinor

"would stand at a window looking out" seeing "little Elliott's grave back in Lawrence ... sudden and swift life gave way, and then all sign of it was smoothed over" (Bradley 40). Frost seems to have found solace in the land, whereas Elinor only endured it.

Knowing that men and women deal with every emotion differently, it would seem that dealing with grief differently would not come as a surprise, but it does. I think the biggest difference comes from the very physical fact that the woman carries the child in her womb and bonds with that child even before he is born. She knows that child and every child, of course, is different. When my son, Stephen, was stillborn, I was inconsolable as was my husband. Life goes on, however, and my husband was back at work while I was still home recuperating from birth. Death is such a heavy burden and to lose a child is the worst burden of all. I could still feel my child squirm and kick and jump in surprise. I would wake in the night anticipating movement. I would start to talk to him before I remembered, and meanwhile life went on. There is an incredible difference in the sensibilities of men and women. My affinity with the poem "Home Burial" stems from not only the death of a child, but also from looking for solace in the land. I love gardening. Feeling the soil sift through my fingers and smelling the pungent odor of the earth is balm for the spirit. Seeing the buds of spring and feeling the hot sun of summer on my skin aided the healing process. Over the years, tears and rain have watered my garden while shoveling and anger have tilled the soil. Knowing that earth returns to earth is somehow a comfort and affords anyone the opportunity to listen to nature. When I listen closely, I hear the soft sigh of the wind, the buzzing of bees, the rustling of grasses, and the slow healing of my soul.

In the poem "In Hardwood Groves," the poet invites the reader to the realization that all living things must return to dust in order to "mount again" (line 5). Frost uses the change of

seasons, the wind and snow, the smell and taste of grass, the flight of a butterfly, the web of a spider, to time and again show his readers that "change is the presumed necessity of nature" (Squires 38) and "that all nature changes continuously" (Squires 41). People resist change especially during tribulation. However, Frost's work paints a picture of nature at its most beautiful to ease the shock of suffering. Every minute of every day, the earth is continuously changing. Whether or not that change is accepted does not signify. Frost demonstrates how nature has been given to humanity as a respite for the soul. His poems express not only the rejection of that solace by some, but also the quiet rejoicing of others in the comfort of all that nature has to offer.

In "Hyla Brook," the reader is taken to the countryside to see, "in June our brook's run out of song and speed" (1) and is treated to "a brook to none but who remember long" (12). The poet uses contrast " ... song and speed" (1) to "its bed is left a faded paper sheet" (10) to open the reader's eyes to the sure knowledge that "we love the things we love for what they are" (15). We often see with the eyes of remembrance. Robert Frost uses nature in all its forms in most of his work. The reader can see and feel love, friendship, despair, and indecision in his poetry. Any and all human emotions in all their complexity are explored. "The power of his contact with the wild and fearsome elemental struggles" is shown in all of his work be it light-hearted or dark (Sweeney 15).

Robert Frost "remarked that the purpose of poetry is to express the ineffable" (Squires preface). To explain the inexpressible in a way that can be understood is an unbelievable task. This poet has done that and more. He has used nature at its softest and most sweet smelling to its harshest extreme to provide verbiage for emotions that at times can hardly be endured much less spoken about. Frost's songs of nature can typify the joy one feels at witnessing a bubbling brook,

the smooth silkiness of the sun on one's skin, the delight in someone's eyes to the desolation of grief. Nature in all its glory has given wings to Frost's pen. Frost has been defined as a realist. Louis Untermeyer recalls that "Frost once said, 'There are two types of realist. There is the one who offers a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real potato. And there is the one who is satisfied with the potato brushed clean. I am inclined to be the second kind. To me, the thing that art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form'" (18). Nature will certainly strip everything down to form. All things must return to the earth. Frost was honored with many awards in his lifetime, but I think the most value to a human being is being true to oneself. Untermeyer believes "The last lines of the first poem in Frost's first book took on a prophetic conclusiveness: 'They would not find me changed from him they knew- / Only more sure of all I thought was true'" (xxiv).

Works Cited

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