

Robert Frost and Poetry

"Neither Out Far Nor In Deep"

Hong, Sung Myun

Contents

- I. General Characteristics of Robert Frost's Poetry
- II. A Detailed Analysis of One Poem of Robert Frost
- III. A Summary Analysis of Two Other Poems
- IV. Conclusion

I. General Characteristics of Robert Frost's Poetry

Robert Frost, one of the well known poets of the twentieth century, was not just a simple person who wrote simple poems but an individual who related many of his poems of nature to man. Frost's poetry did not become popular all at once because other prominent authors such as Thoreau, Emerson, etc. were at the height of their popularity when Frost first started writing poetry. These authors influenced his life in another way too because a lot of his poetry reflects their beliefs and philosophies.

According to Philip Gerber from this nineteenth century background Robert Frost inherited four basic attributes which influenced his writing of poetry immeasurably. They are: First, A realization of the necessity for an original relation to the universe. This means that contact with nature and environment was very important but this contact should only be made with natural means. By natural means I means for instance if one were to look up sky on a clear night with a telescope he or she would "Perceive" less than another person looking up with the naked eye. Second, The acceptance of intuition and relying heavily on it. Frost would never on reasoning or logical thinking. His poetry reflected the romanticism of the nineteenth centry. He felt that intuition would be enough in explaining many mysteries of nature. Third, Frost's belief of his own national identity in literature. This is clearly shown when he travelled to England. Emerson, years before had demanded American poets not "blue print copies" of foreign poets. The United States in the nineteenth century had its novelists, short story writers etc. But in poetry its poets were few and far afraid to initiate new styles in poetry fearing non-acceptance by critics of this time. Even though Frost took a trip to England and become accepted there as a "good poet" his poetry was not written in England but in New Hampshire. He merely combine all his poetry in book form in England. Once he became accepted in England he felt confident that he was an individual who wrote American poetry in new

styles and later returned to America to continue his individualism as an American poet. Fourth, A steady confirmation of his own integrity as a self-reliant individual. In the nineteenth century individualism became prevalent among poets. For instance, in Emerson's "Self Reliance" the beginnings of discord and individual freedom become quite apparent. So it is with Frost who carries much of this individualism into twentieth century poetry.¹⁾

Frost used mostly iambic pentameter in his poems and in this way one could classify him as a "simple poet." But for his dramatic narratives Frost used blank verse. "He used it first in 'North of Boston', subtitled 'This Book of people'. The subtitle is crucial. In the numerous and well-known monologues and dialogues, blank verse provides the flavor of idiomatic American speech as it is spoken. If blank verse had not existed, he would have needed to invent it for these poems; and to some extent it could be argued that he did so. For his blank verse, free and unhampered, is no more inhibited by previous models than his sonnets are impeded by established forms. Accents are transposed apparently at will; feet are added and subtracted whenever the occasion demands. Frost's blank verse reads quickly, easily, above all naturally; and at every turn it exhibits the 'careful casualness' with which Paul Engle credits it."²⁾

Another characteristic of Robert Frost is the humor in his poetry. He was a kind of mellow, moving humor that released itself through the inflection of a reader's voice.

Now I am going to discuss one of Frost's major themes in his poetry—Nature. Frost views man trapped within nature and unable to escape its environment. Philip L. Gerber views nature in Robert Frost's Poetry like this: "Nature does not exist to work continual miracles of revelation. Nor will it impart transcendental truths to any poor, bare, forked creature who straggles near a brook or tuft of flowers. For nature is hard as she is soft. She can destroy and thwart, disappoint, frustrate and batter. She may prove as flinty as the rocky soil of New England, and as difficult to till profitably. On the other hand, the poet is unwilling to declare man marooned on a desert isle called 'earth'. Beyond this, man learns his limitations, another lesson for survival. What man can do and cannot do; where he is allowed to stay and where he is prohibited; the length, breadth, height and depth of his domain: these recognitions must be absorbed. At war against nature's posted territories is man's unquenchable desire to reach beyond his grasp. He longs to break through the barriers set against him. If a thing is impossible, then this is what he lusts after. If a further step is mined with danger, than it is the one he must take."³⁾

Clark Griffith, another critic of Frost's Poetry, views nature in Robert Frost's poetry another way. He feels that Frost's poetry is very similar to the nature poetry of the nineteenth century romanticism. Like the romantics, Frost centers upon man and nature as the two prime realities. Griffith states: "He is fond of joining these realities in a dramatic encounter. For in Frost, as in Whitman or Emerson, a poetic climax often occurs when

1) Philip. Gerber(1966), *Robert Frost*, New York, pp.154-155.

2) Elizabeth Shepley Seargeant, Robert Frost(1960), *The Trial by Existence*, N.Y., p.60.

3) Philip L. Gerber(1960), *Robrt Frost*, New York, pp.154-155.

the human observer confronts nature in isolation, and on the basis of the confrontation discovers meaningful facts about himself and world he dwells in."⁴⁾ For instance in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" the speaker is awakened to a renewed sense of his obligation to his fellow man and nature here is the catalyst that awakens the speaker. Frost believed that Nature is the teacher of great and enduring truths. He always believed that nature had something to say and by listening to what nature had to say man could learn crucial facts about himself, his fellow man, and his purpose in a vast universe.

Not all critics though would classify Robert Frost's poetry as the "best when it comes to writing nature poetry. One of these critics with a differing view is Mr. George W. Nitchie. He feels that Frost has no coherence in his views from poem to poem. Nitchie cannot understand how man can endure uncertainties and mysteries about nature without ever demanding answers to many questions like this."⁵⁾

Another contemporary critic John F. Lynen feels Frost's poetry about New Hampshire too "Sophisticated." This means that Frost with his nature poetry sees a rural, rustic way of life is much purer and better than the dilapidated, decadent conditions of urban life. Lynen believes that Frost is taking on a prejudicious opinion without sufficient facts to back his opinion and in this way Lynen is not completely satisfied with Robert Frost and his poetry.⁶⁾

II. A Detailed Analysis of One Poem of Robert Frost

I will make a detailed analysis of Robert Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" and the poetic techniques the poet has used. I will also relate what two prominent critics about this poem which is derived from Robert Frost's book of *Complete Poems*:

"Neither Out Far Nor In Deep"

The people along the sand
All turn and look one way.
They turn thair back on the land.
They look at the sea all day.

As long as it takes to pass
A ship keeps raising its hull;
The wetter ground like glass
reflects a standing gull.

The land may vary more;
But wherever the truth may be

4) Clark Griffith(1968), "Frost and the American view of Nature," *American Quarterly* vol. xx Spring. pp.21-37.

5) L. Thowpson(1960), "Nature's Gard Rediscovered" *Sat. Review* vol. 43, July 2, pp.22-23.

6) *Ibid*, pp.22-23.

The water comes ashore,
And the people look at the sea.

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?

The poem consists of four stanzas four lines of poetry in each stanza as is obvious by looking at the poem. Frost uses mostly iambic trimeter with a few anapests found throughout the poem.

Frost does not use too many poetic techniques that are available to poets but there is a simile in this poem does not have many poetic techniques underlining its words, it does have a very important theme—Nature and its analogies to man.

Frost describes man as trying to find out the secrets of nature by peering into the ocean depths, with various symbolisms such as “ship raising its hull” or “a gull standing on wetter ground” as clues and bits of knowledge for man to observe and investigate to find the secrets of nature. Clark Grieffith sees this poem this way: “The two actors in the poem are Nature, as represented by the human spectators. Each has been given definite properties. Man is pictured as one who hungers for Order, for Intelligibility, for, in an absolute sense, Truth. His purpose is deeply registered on every aspect of his behavior: his daily pilgrimage to the shore; his steadfast gaze once he arrives there: the fierce concentration with which he turns his back one kind of experience and focuses upon another. It is obviously man’s aim to peer deeply and distantly until he has uncovered meaning in the world before him.”⁷⁾

The sea was a good theme to pick for a poem of this type because of its overtones of eternity and infiniteness. It calls out to man with its symbols like a resting place for all knowledge and it calls to man (the people on the seashore) to look and find this knowledge.

Another critic Reginald L. Cook describes Frost’s poem this way: “Neither Out Far Nor in Deep” diverts us by its deceptive simplicity, an earmark of Frost’s poetry. It acquaints us with a familiar scene—people sitting on a beach looking seawards. Off-shore a ship passes; in the foreground a standing gull is reflected on ‘the wetter-ground like glass’—certainly a fresh image and a valid circumstantial detail. Here is the evidence of a telescopic view the off shore ship, and here too is the microscopic view the nearby gull. These two views called by Ortega ‘proximate’ and ‘distant’ represent man’s dimensional possibilities.”⁸⁾

Cook interprets the land and the sea as being a symbol of implied boundlessness. Natural processes are not affected by man’s emotions such as curiosity, perception, etc. Cook feels the sea is a “microcosm into which man with all his scientific and metaphysical

7) Griffith, *Op. Cit.*, pp.21-37.

8) R.L. Cook, “Frost the diversionist”, *New England Quarterly*, pp.323-338.

pretension so far cannot look deeply."⁹⁾

III. A Summary Analysis of Two Other Poems

The first poem is "The Road Not Taken". This poem describes the choice a person has to make between two roads which go in different directions. The individual knows he cannot take both roads and he cannot come back to the other road after he has made his choice. Once a person has decided let's say to become a doctor it will be very hard for him to travel another road for instance deciding to become a lawyer. When a person makes an important decision in life there is no second chance or "different route" to take.

The second poem is "The Death of the Hired Man." This poem is a simple but moving story of an old, half-crazed laborer who comes back to a farm where he has worked occasionally. The farmer's wife is the compassionate, idealistic woman who tries to convince her realistic husband to let this man live on their farm once again. The husband though does not what this man because he feels he no purpose and this old man should live his rich brother not with him. The poem ends abruptly with the old man dying and not only ending his own problems of rejection but the controversy he has caused between the man and woman who own the farm. The poem is a simple one but the genius of Robert Frost makes it a worth-while reading.

IV. Conclusion

Robert Frost no longer lives but his poetry does. His poetry is a simple kind and this type of poetry will always exist as long as man does because man is a curious animal and Robert Frost shows this curiosity in his poems of nature. Amy Lowell best sums up Robert Frost and his poetry. "Mr. Frost writes down exactly what he sees. But being a true poet, he sees it vividly and with a charm which translates itself into a beautiful simplicity of expression. He is an eminently sympathetic poet. He wins first by his gentle understanding, and strong and unsentimental power of emotion; later, we are conquered by his force, and moved to admiration by his almost unapproachable technique. Still, his imagination is bounded by his life, he is confined within the limits of his experience(or at least what might have been his experience) and bent all one way like the wind-blown trees of New England hillsides. After all, art is rooted in the soil, and only very greatest men can be both cosmopolitan and great, Mr. Frost is as New England as Burns is Scotch, Synge Irish, Mistral Provencal. And it is perhaps not too much to say that he is the equal of these poets, and will rank so to future generations."¹⁰⁾

경희대학교
사범대학 영어교육과

9) *Ibid.*, pp.323-338.

10) Amy Lowell(1921), *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, New York, p.136.