

A CRITICAL STUDY OF MODERNITY IN ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

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One of the most popular poets Frost received very high honour and admiration for his glorious poetic achievement. He received a large number of prizes and awards for his outstanding achievements as a poetic artist. At the Inauguration of the Presidential office of John F Kennedy in 1961 he was the special invitee to recite his patriotic poem, The Gift Outright. Even Jawahar Lai Nehru always kept at his table as a constant source of inspirations.

Frost's lines : and miles to go before I sleep
 and miles to go before I sleep

The central themes of his poetry are men and women. Like Words worth he chose incidents and situations from common life. Like Words worth again, he fought against the existing traditions of poetry. His poetry makes a real appeal to the people of his country with its lyrical fervour, his impulsive utterance and his fresh and natural expression, his patriotism, symbolism and modernity. Like Words worth, he is a great poet of nature in American poetry. He found poetry bound in chains and tried to liberate it, like Words worth.

Frost's poems are particularly liked for their modernity which implies a broad outlook, a fusion of the metaphysical and the symbolic. He has the skill to put a great deal in a small space. His simplicity and regional flavour, his originality of thought, his sweet lyricism lend his poetry an exceptional power of appeal.

Robert Frost appeared on the scene of American poetry when America was coming out of the old and entering a new era. There was no great light on the ferment of American poetry. Frost made a great poetic achievement for which he was highly admired and honoured both by the followers of the old and the new school of poetry. His poem North of Boston was admired by Howell, the representative of the old school, and Ezra Pound, the original exponent of new poetry. Howell said, "Amidst the old striving and the striving of new poetry, here is the old poetry as young as ever, and new in extending the bounds of sympathy. Through the recorded to the unrecorded knowledge of humanity." To Ezra Pound, " Frost's poetry afforded a welcome break from the allied pseudo - literary language. He felt that Frost's decision to write in the natural speech of New England was a happy thing for American poetry. This simultaneous recognition from both the schools was followed by a long list of honours bestowed upon him.

He went to England when he enjoyed the encouragement of poets and critics like Grlison, Lascelles Abercrombie. His volume of poetry, A Boy's Will which appeared in 1912 won him immediate recognition as the success of a mature poetic genius.

Soon he returned to his own country where he brought out a number of volumes like Selected Poems West Running Brooke, and Collected Poems. To his preface to the Collected Poems Frost added a preface which explains his views on poetry and poets, the most remarkable part of it is the idea that "poetry begins in Delight and ends in Wisdom."

Simplicity is one of the important features of Frost's poetry. The simplicity of his poetry, however, should not be construed as triviality of thought. According to Cecil Day Lewis, the simplicity of Frost's poetry is "the simplicity not of nature, but of a serious and profoundly critical spirit."

In Frost's poetry one often finds layers of meaning even. If one fails to grasp the deeper significance, he is still satisfied with the surface meaning. According W.G.O. Donnel, His lucidity is such that he who runs may read there is always a meaning or image for the reader, some perception of nature, some comment about Birches or deep woods. There is always something below the surface level. For example, his Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening, on the surface tells of man's temptation to answer the strange call of the Woods by getting into it and of his resisting the temptation by thinking of the promise he has to keep.

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

It is clear from the above that the poem is full of deep meaning

As Louis Untermeyer says, "one of the most quietly moving of Frost's lyrics, it was superb craftsmanship to come to a climax of responsibility, the promises to be kept, the obligations to be fulfilled. Few poems have said so much in so little." It signifies the element of modernity which gives to his poetry a lofty tone and dignity. A lot of critical commentary has been published in books, papers, and treatises, about the different aspects of Frost's poetry. But this aspect of his poetry has not received due attention in spite of the fact that it is this aspect of his poetry which ensures him a place of honour among the greatest poets of the world.

Of Robert Frost's poetry it is this aspect which the researcher intends bringing to light along the chapters given below :

Robert Frost enjoys an exalted position as a poetic artist. On the one hand he strikes the reader as a traditionalist, and his poetry appears to be entirely free from the modern technique. On the other hand, one finds that bound as he is with tradition, he made certain important innovations in the field of poetic art. Referring to the originality of Frost's poetic style Isder Shneider remarks, "He had made a renunciation of usual poetic subject matter and usual poetic effects, not primarily for originality but in disdain of literary comforts. Hence, he chose of writing about homely things regarding them with his matchlessly keen observation and celebrating them with the almost painfully restrained eloquence.

The simplicity of Frost's art made him widely popular. It is such a simplicity which is the result of long experience and a great deal of painful questioning. If Frost's poetry has the qualities of homeliness and simplicity, it is because Frost has laboured hard to achieve them. It is an effect achieved by skilful craftsmanship. It is related to the technique of understatement, a device for concentration and subtle shading of meaning. Beneath the simplicity is found an intellectuality of attitude, a discernable structure and a highly developed figurative technique.

Frost employed different metres. For example, in his long poem *Build Soil*, a political pastoral, Frost has shown how keenly his mind works. The poem reminds us of Browning's monologue. At the same time, as Lawrence Thompson says, "He is primarily a subjective lyrical poet at his best." Thompson's remarks about Frost's lyrical achievement are significant.

As a poet of nature Frost is compared with Wordsworth. Frost's attitude to nature offers a mood of understanding. A critic has pointed out, "it is no spirit of nature which sends Frost rain or wind, he does not see in the world of nature the pervading spirit Wordsworth saw. To him mountain is not a personality as it is shown in *The Prelude*. Frost did not idealise or glorify the objects of nature. He rarely makes his lessons or his philosophy of nature as obvious. His attitude towards nature is realistic rather than romantic. Nevertheless, he has Wordsworth's simplicity of style in the descriptions of nature." The critics like Alvarez deny Frost the title of nature poet. They look upon him only as a poet of the countryside. Indeed, Robert Frost's poetry has an agrarian bias. It is the poetry of a countryman, "he is a country poet, whose business it is to love with nature rather than through nature. He is essentially a poet of pastures and plains, mountains and plains, woods and gardens, trees and birds. To him,

"Woods are lovely dark and deep"

"Leaves are all my darker moods."

In fact, Frost is no ordinary lover of nature. His love for nature is the outcome of his mood and temperament. Whereas most romantic poets loved nature for its own sake, Frost looked at nature as a realist.

As already stated Frost's great power lies in his modernity. Frost's modernity should not be confused with contemporaneity. Some writers in the past appears to be nearer to the modern age in spirit and thought than many of the writers who are writing in our own time. For example, Fraser has remarked, "When we declare a work of art as modern, it does not mean that it has been written in our own time. On the other hand, when we describe a piece of art as modern we ascribe to it certain intrinsic qualities. Thus, the question of the date of the creation of a work is not relevant." Some other critics have pointed out that Robert Frost is not a modern poet because he does not deal with the objects and situations of modern life. Another critic has pointed out that by assessing Frost's achievement as a poet, due consideration should be given to the fact whether he has expressed modern sensibility or not. However, the critics recognize that Frost's poetry is modern in spite of the fact that apparently he is a poet of tradition. Wintner has pointed out that Frost's insistence on the idea of man as a creature of impulse rather than of reason means that Frost follows tradition more than modernity.

Yet there are other critics like Cleanth Brooks who consider Frost to be a modern poet. For example, Cleanth says, "Frost's best poetry exhibits the fusion of symbolism and metaphysics." Frost presents the disintegrations of values in modern life and the disillusionment of the modern man.

Frost brought out great glory to the United States through his poems which are in high esteem even today. He gained wide popularity. His fame rests on the fact that no poet was so thoroughly American as he was. He was deeply interested in everything American. He described the natural scenes of America with a vividness which has been highly and widely admired by all.

O'Donnell's remark about his poem, *A Boy's Will* distinctively brings out the point, "One distinctive quality of the volume in the scene it reveals is that Frost endeavours to root his art in the soil that he had worked with his own hands for a decade before his sojourn in England. No

one before him except Thoreau responded to sensibility, to the peculiarities of a rural landscape. Aspects of the rural New England flash very widely. On reading Frost's poetry one finds oneself in the midst of the wooded valleys and hills. One hears clearly the jay's sweet screech and the whimper of hawks beside him.

Frost carried on his own experiments emphasising rhythm and the sense of sound. He was always careful about the form and meaning of a poem. His guiding principles were simplicity and clarity, variety and homeliness. He himself said, " I am interested in emphasising the sound, because to me a sentence is not interesting merely because it conveys a meaning, it must do something more." Frost knows how to say a great deal in a short space. His is essentially a simple poetic diction. What he writes has grace and naturalness. Lawrence Johnson remarks, " His was a simple colloquial diction which is, however, purified in the manner of Words worth, of all that is slangy, coarse and vulgar. His popular poem Stopping by Wood on a Snowy Evening illustrates the idea fully well;

And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep

It is clear from the above that Frost can produce marvelous effects by repetition.

It may be noted that Frost has turned the speech of living men and women into poetry. Thus, for Frost poetry is a metaphor. One finds in his poetry both spontaneity and discipline.

Robert Frost enjoys a distinguished place not only among the American poets, but also among the greatest poets of the whole world. Robert Graves calls him " The Voice of America." He has enriched poetry and imparted to it a new tone and dignity. His central themes are humanity, homeliness, isolation and nature. He chose incidents and situations from common life. It is said that his poetry has cropped out of the farmers life. He is a great poet of nature in America as Words worth is a poet of nature in England.

He is a great liberator of poetry from unhealthy restrictions. His poems are also remarkable for their modernity. Modernity to him meant a broad outlook, in a fusion of the metaphysical and symbolic technique. He knows how to say a great deal in a short space. While some critics like Schneider don't regard him as a modern poet, there are the other critics like Cleanth Brooks and Lionel Trilling who consider him to be a modern poet. Cleanth Brooks says, " Frost's best poetry exhibits the structure of symbolist metaphysical poetry much more clearly than does many modern poet. Frost portrays the disintegration, of values in modern life, and the disillusionment of the modern man. Most of his poems deal with persons suffering from loneliness and frustrations, loss and disease of modern life.

Robert Frost
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