

## **Robert Frost: A Modern Poet with Modern Sensibility**

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Frost's first volume of poetry was published in 1913 and his last in 1947, and he died in 1963. Thus, it is as clear as crystal that in point of time, he is the contemporary of such twentieth century poets as T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Auden and Ezra Pound. But at the same time, some critics like Granville Hicks, Schneider and Yvor Winter have regarded Frost as a traditional nineteenth century poet and have emphatically denied his modernity. For one thing, it has been pointed out that his poetry is characterized by complexity and intricacy. In his poetry, we do not find irregular verse-form, fragmentary sentences, learned allusions and references, ironic contrast, and erudite and abstruse symbolism, with which we are familiar and which he regarded as the hall-mark of modernity. Apart from this, in accordance with the views of these critics, Frost writes of mountains, fields and brooks, and of farmers at their humble task; these things have become part of our imaginative inheritance and one must be insensitive, indeed, not to be conscious of the beauty in them. But these are other subjects now more frequently before our eyes-factories, skyscrapers, machines. We see mechanics, shop-girls, truck-drivers, more often than we do farmers, and we set the farmer not as a romantic figure but as the victim of cruel economic forces. Moreover, Yvor Winters analyses such poems as *The Bear* to show that Frost admires man as a creature of impulse and instinct, and ridicules the idea of man as a reasoning creature, and this is the marked opposition to modern thought. It is only through these ideas and views that these critics have tried to show the affinity of Frost with the great nineteenth century romantics rather than with the great moderns.

However, such views arise from a one-sided superficial reading of his poetry. Cleanth Brooks, Jonh F. Lynen, Trilling and a host of other competent critics have now conclusively shown that Frost is essentially a modern poet, and that the surface simplicity of his poetry is deceptive and misleading. There is no doubt that he withdraws into rural New England and writer of New Englanders, of their simple occupations carried on in their primitive setting, away from the haunts of modern civilization, and the concerns of modern life. A few significant lines of Lynen should be quoted in this connection:

“The Frost poem, like other typically modern poems, differs from earlier periods in that it not only actually functions in this way, but intentionally defines itself as a poem that would be in these terms. Its indeterminacy is not only a consequence of its rich complexity of meaning, that being of the very essence of all poetry, it is an indeterminacy that announces itself as a confessed enigma by an imperious confidence of tone, full of Miltonic organ notes so inflating to the readers expectations as to make explicit these non-fulfillment. The promise to bring the reader to a state “beyond confusion” leaves him in the dark as to just what such a state would be like. The plentiful advice he receives gives him no practical enlightenment as to what to do. But if this induces the “blank wall” feelings that Pearce has mentioned, it also reveals some procedural truths. We learn, for example, that the contradictions of experience are not miscellaneous collisions, but contracts between opposed limits within a system that meaning can be a spectrum joining contrary thoughts, like old-new, or imaginary-real, and that therefore, even the most harmonious thought naturally displays some tension within the elements of its system, and must generate some measure of doubt and of formlessness. To quote Pound again:

There is in inferior minds a passion for unity, that is, for confusion and melting together of things which a good mind will want to keep distinct. *Odyssey, The Devine Comedy, Paradise Lost* – give only putative answers concerning the unity of the world and the oneness of man’s duty and his nature, answer which, when we try to specify their exact meanings, turn into fields of exploration, and create to be answers at all. *Directive*, as a modern poem, gives us answers designed to make the question as to the nature of answer and the conditions for finding them its central theme”<sup>1</sup>

Frost studies life reduced to its elemental simplicity, and this elemental life is his norm with reference to which he judges urban life and even life in general, life as it has been in all ages and countries. It is the same method of indirection as is used by such modern poets as T. S. Eliot. Just as Eliot in his poems, for example, *The Waste Land*, juxtaposes the present and the past to reveal and interpret the present, so also in his poetry, Frost juxtaposes the rural and the urban, the rural serving as a comment on the urban. And, as in T. S. Eliot, the comment is implicit rather than explicit. A simple everyday situation from rural life is presented and the situation is such that it serves to illuminate and clarify some aspect or problem peculiar to the modern age. Thus, in *Mending Wall*, the necessity of fences is emphasized – “Good fences make good neighbours” – and thus we get an implicit comment of the modern craze for pulling down barriers. Moreover, Frost is a modern in his attitudes towards nature as well. The nineteenth century poets picture nature as benevolent and kindly with a, “holy plan” and

<sup>1</sup> *Frost – Centennial Essays*, John F. Lynen, University Press of Mississippi, pp. 581-582.

emphasized the harmony, the oneness, of man and nature. Modern science, on the other hand conceives of nature as merely matter, soul-less and mechanical, and so entirely different from, and alien to, man. Frost, too, is constantly emphasizing this, 'otherness' of nature. He is a great poet of boundaries, and he shows at every step that some fence or boundary ever separates man from nature. That is why he teaches in poems like *Most of It*. The rural world, the world of nature into which he withdraws, is not a world of dreams a pleasant fanciful Arcadia. But harsher and more demanding than the urban world. As Lionel Trilling stresses the world which he depicts is a terrifying one, more terrifying than the urban world, depicted by poets who are generally regarded as modern. A few lines of Trilling are worth quoting in this connection:

"So radical a work, I need scarcely say, is not carried out by reassurance, nor by the affirmation of old virtues and pieties. It is carried out by the representation of the terrible actualities of life in a new way. I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet... The universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe. Read the poem called *Design* and see if you sleep the better for it. Read *Neither out Far nor in Deep*, which often seems to me the most perfect poem of our time, and see if you are warmed by anything in it except the energy with which emptiness is perceived... talk of the disintegration and sloughing off of the old consciousness! The people of Robert Frost's poems have done that with a vengeance... in the interests of what great other thing these people have made this rejection, we cannot know for certain. But we can guess that it was in the interest of truth, of some truth of the self... they affirm this of themselves; that they are what they are, that this is their truth, and that if the truth be bare, as truth often is, it is far better than a lie. For me the process by which they arrive at that truth is always terrifying."<sup>2</sup>

One of the great virtues of Trilling's speech is that in it he has made clear the essential way in which Frost's poetry reflects modern life. Frost does not depict the outward events and scenery of urban life, but the central facts of twentieth century experience, the uncertainty and painful sense of loss, are there and seem, if nothing more bleakly apparent in that their social and economic manifestations have been stripped away. Frost may not depict the scenery of modern life – its chimneys and factories, its railways, and automobiles, but he certainly deals with the basic problems and the basic facts of modern life. The ache of modernism finds its fullest expression in his poetry. The modern note of frustration, loneliness, isolation and disillusionment is often struck.

Brooks has made critical analysis of some of Frost's poems and has also explained as to how far the elements of modernity are to be found in them. Here is an analysis of *Mending Wall*. *Mending Wall* is a symbolic poem in which the poet symbolizes the conflict between the new trend of bringing down barriers between men

<sup>2</sup> *Partisan Review*, 26, Lionel Trilling, 1959, p. 445-452.

and nations and the old view that for good neighbourly relations, fences and boundaries are essential. The poem relates an anecdote typical of the conservative approach of the rural people in New England, but its implication has universal application. In this way, the poem becomes a symbol of the modern conflict in the minds of the people. The poet simply portrays that conflict, and does not give his judgment on it, because in spite of his standing for the bringing down of barriers, he appreciates the view of his neighbour who insists on following the old principle of his fore fathers:

“I see him there  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness, as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father’s saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, ‘Good fences make good neighbours.’”<sup>3</sup>

Another sense in which Frost is a truly modern poet is his portrayal of the disintegration of values in modern life, disillusionment of the modern man. Most of his poems deal with characters who suffer from frustration, isolation and helplessness – diseases of modern life. For example, in *The Hill Wife*, Frost has portrayed obliquely the cumulative sense of fear, loneliness and marital estrangement of an isolated woman who is so completely misunderstood by her husband that he is baffled when she disappears, irrevocably, and without warning. Both the husband and wife feel lonely in the house and are afraid of entering it:

“Always – I tell you this they learned –  
Always at night when they returned  
To the lonely house from far away  
To lamps unlighted and fire gone gray,  
They learned to rattle the lock and key  
To give whatever might chance to be  
Warning and time to be off in flight:  
And preferring the out to the in-door night,  
They learned to leave the house-door wide  
Until they had lit the lamp inside.”<sup>4</sup>

And this is how she disappears leaving the man in utter loneliness:

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost, *Mending Wall*, lines – 38-45.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Frost, *The Hill Wife*, lines 13-22.

“And once she went to break a bough  
 Of black alder.  
 She strayed so far she scarcely heard  
 When he called her-  
 And didn’t answer – didn’t speak-  
 Or return.  
 She stood, and then she ran and hid  
 In the fern.  
 He never found her, though he looked  
 Everywhere,  
 And he asked at her mother’s house  
 Was she there.  
 Sudden and swift and light as that  
 The ties gave  
 And he learned of finalities  
 Besides the grave.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, *The Hill Wife* has a wider meaning and it depicts the isolation and loneliness of the modern man who has lost his moorings and finds no comfort from old values. In the same way, the poem *The Road Not Taken* depicts the confusion, which prevails in modern life. The modern man does not know which way to go, and it is difficult for him to make a choice of the means he should adopt in order to come out of the present impasse. He is confused, and his life does not have a clear purpose. The protagonist in the poem (who is the poet himself) represents the modern man, who habitually wastes energy in regretting and choice made. The following lines of the poem clearly describe the utter sense of confusion which is always before a modern man:

“I shall be telling this with a sigh  
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
 I took the one less traveled by,  
 And that has made all the difference.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, *An Old Man’s Winter Night* is another poem of isolation, frustration and loneliness and is an epitome of modern times. The man is not only old, but lonely, and it is the winter night:

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid – lines – 59-74.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, lines 16-20.

“A light he was to no one but himself  
 Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,  
 A quiet light, and then not even that.”<sup>7</sup>

And:

“The log that shifted with a jolt  
 One in the stone disturbed him and he shifted,  
 And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.  
 One aged man-one man - can't keep a house,  
 A farm, a countryside, or if he can,  
 It's thus he does it of a winter night.”<sup>8</sup>

Apart from this, *Home Burial* in which the husband and wife are cursing and irritating each other on the day when their son is dead depicts the disharmony and disintegration of modern life, when each person holds a divergent view from the rest and there is no common, basic approach to life, which is characteristic of modern age. All human sympathy is gone, and it has been replaced by selfishness. Here the wife blames the husband for his callousness:

“I heard your rumbling voice  
 Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why.  
 But I went near to see with my own eyes.  
 You could sit there with stains on your shoes  
 Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave.  
 And talk about your everyday concerns  
 You have stood the spade up against the wall  
 Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.”<sup>9</sup>

The husband replies in a mood of utter despair and frustration:

“I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.  
 I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.”<sup>10</sup>

And here is a slashing criticism of the modern age, where man has lost all sympathy for his fellowmen, and has become brutally selfish, callous and self centered:

<sup>7</sup> Robert Frost, *An Old-Man's Winter Night*, lines 15-17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid – lines – 23-28.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid – lines – 23-28

<sup>10</sup> Ibid – lines – 94-95

“The nearest friends can go  
With anyone to death, comes so far shout  
They might as will not try to go at all.  
No, from the time when one is sick to death,  
One is alone, and he dies more alone.  
Friends make pretence of following to the grave,  
But before one is in it, their way back to life  
And living people, and things they understand.”<sup>11</sup>

It is as clear as crystal that Frost’s poetry is rich in shades and lights. It affects people in different ways. The common man reads it for deriving the pleasures of simplicity, of rural scenery and life that it portrays. Some might see, in Frost’s poetry, a refuge from the urban muck and roar. The erudite sophisticated urban dweller may go to Frost’s poetry for his presentation of human predicament in an alien, perhaps even a hostile environment. Some read it for the clarifications and illuminations it provides. The apparent simplicity of Frost’s poetry is very deceptive. It conceals layers and layers of meaning. As a matter of fact, the extreme expressiveness and rich texture of Frost’s poetry becomes a viable reality, because the great moderns have bequeathed to Frost, the metaphysical symbolist technique. Like metaphysical poets and their admiring inheritors of the twentieth century, Frost juxtaposes opposites. He puts side-by-side man and nature, rural and urban, regional and urban and is able to achieve a rare richness and an effect of variety, vividness and deep meanings through it. He generally tries to synthesize and reconcile opposites. For this, he often takes to the symbolic mode and the method of indirection. The poems that confine to the symbolic mode leap beyond their regional locales and acquire universal meaning and importance. The symbolic strain is noteworthy in poems such as *Fire and Ice*. To all appearances, *Mending Wall* relates an anecdote typical of the conservative New Englanders. But read with a little depth, the poem stands out as symbolic of the conflict prevalent throughout the world the conflict between the modern trend of raising all barriers to the ground and the view that we have inherited from our fore-fathers, that barriers are essential for good neighbourly relations. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, besides being an obviously personal experience, expresses the conflict that every sensitive individual must have felt sometime or other – the conflict between the demands of practical life with its obligations to others, and the intense and poignant desire to escape into a land of reverie, where consciousness is free to breathe and the senses are free from all shackles of necessity. Indeed, the level of meaning offered by this poem goes to prove that the simple fact and surrounding mystery in a Frost poem make it metaphysical. The simple fact of a traveler watching the woods

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid – lines – 102-110

filled up with snow becomes the eternal human situation. A few lines of Rexford Stamper should be quoted in this regard:

“Frost is a modern poet concerned with the same problems of self, identity, the regenerating power of art, and the need for a basis for action that concern Eliot or Yeats. Frost wrote as a result of his individual reaction to the world around him, not because he was inspired by the memory of a lost Eden, not because he expected to create a new Utopia, but because he lived in a world which forced him to create his own verities. These nineteenth century metaphors have little value in helping a reader make an assessment of Frost’s art. However, the connection between the various zones that compose his view of reality and the vantage points he presents so that the creative imagination can grasp the reality of these zones do have significance. Frost, as much as other twentieth century writer, realized that a loss of certitude led to fragmentation; but he unlike many of his contemporaries points out how a juxtaposition of the various views the artist takes of reality might provide a basis for significant human action. Ultimately, one must conclude that Robert Frost is a major twentieth century artist.”<sup>12</sup>

Apart from this, it has, usually, been commented that the style which Frost has employed in his poems does not give the confirmation of the fact that he is a modern poet. But if we make a close study of frost’s style, the above view does not seem to be up to the mark. Almost the same idea has been analyzed by John F. Lynen. A few lines should be mentioned to have a clearer understanding:

“While one must concede that Frost’s style does not involve certain obvious, characteristically modern techniques, this does not mean that it is not modern in a fundamental way. Style is the extension into language of a poem’s basic structure, and Frost’s style, growing as it does from the pastoral design of his verse, displays an indirection and analogical mode of thought which are much more fundamental to modern poetry than any combination of purely verbal devices. The question is not whether his style is modern in precisely the way that Thomas’ or Eliot’s or Cummings’ is, but whether it is modern in its own way – whether it reflects the temper of the age and serves as an idiom for dealing with its most urgent concern.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus, by the above mentioned view of Lynen, it becomes as clear as crystal that Frost is a modern poet from both – the thematic and the technical view-point. In fact, Frost’s use of various techniques of modern poetry like symbolism, ambiguity, etc. naturally confirms his status as a modern poet. For instance, the technique of ambiguity which refers to the multiplicity of meaning is clearly visible in most of his poems.

<sup>12</sup> *Frost : Centennial Essays*, Raxford Stamper, University Press of Mississippi, pp. 83-84

<sup>13</sup> *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*, John F. Lynen, pp. 188, 1960.



Describing Frost's use of the technique of ambiguity, James L. Potter comments the following words:

“This ambiguity is evident in several aspects of the materials of his poetry. The various kinds of imagery and characters are split, to begin with. The divine imagery is sometimes conventionally Christian, that is, high-mimetic of even romantic, and sometimes ironic. The high-mimetic and romantic modes are progressively more idealized representations of the world; high-mimetic literature focuses on human beings who are superior in degree to most people, such as kings and statesmen, and the plant and animal imagery tends to be correspondingly “elevated” above even less worldly, and heroes can become superhuman-knights can slay dragons, for instance, and saints can achieve miracles. The imagery of heaven in “The Trial by Existence” is largely high-mimetic or romantic (“the light of heaven falls whole and white”); similarly, in *Birches* heaven is the ideal realm of purity and light, a place to aspire to. Modally, this is at an even further extreme than the low mimetic level from the ironic. Yet Frost often represents God and other images of divinity in an ironic mode. *Design*, for instance, suggests that the governing supernatural power is evil. More significantly, however, in the *Masques* God appears inscrutable and deceptive, even frightening in some ways; in addition, He and those who concern themselves closely with Him - at least in *A Masque of Reason* - are treated in joking, wry terms rather than with the reverence that would be appropriate in a more conventional romantic mode. It is the ironic mode here that no doubt offends readers - they must feel the tension between Frost's mode and the seriousness of the implicit conventional romantic mode....”<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Frost uses the modern method of oblique communication in poetry; in other words, the indirect method involving symbols, metaphor, analogy and implication. There is plenty of symbolic imagery in Frost's poetry. The image of a spider on a flower holding up a moth becomes a starting point for a poem as *Design*. In *Stopping by Woods*, woods filling up with snow, the frozen lake and sleep are inter-related through their evocative effects. The silent darkening of the woods in snow suggests death hovering over this world of mortals. Thus, Frost's poetry of rural life has significance beyond the realistic presentation of regional themes and characters, for they contain the symbolization of reality in other areas of experience and are suggestive of different levels of values and ideals. In this way, it can be commented without the fear of contradiction that there are layers of meaning in Frost's poems. A few words of Rexford Stamper should be quoted here:

“The aim of a Frost poem is ultimately the same as the aim of an Imagist or Symbolist poem, to release an imbedded idea. Such Imagists as Amy Lowell and such

<sup>14</sup>Robert Frost : *Handbook, The Tension in Frost's Poetry*, James L. Potter, pp. 79-80.

Symbolists as Pound and Eliot developed fragmented patterns in order to juxtapose character, image, and perspective so that the reader could have a non-chronological exposure to the idea in their poetry. But Frost uses a narrative, sequential ordering of events, a structure based on a chronological time pattern, to release the idea in his poems. This difference in technique can explain why many intelligent readers praised the experimenters for opening new imaginative perspectives on reality while they dismissed Frost for anachronistically writing nineteenth-century poetry in the twentieth century.”<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, it should also be observed that because of Frost’s use of these modern techniques of symbolism, ambiguity, synecdoche etc., the meaning gets somewhat complex, and the complexity of meaning is also something, which is closely related to modern sensibility. To quote the words of John F. Lynen, for instance:

“The Frost poem, like other typically modern poems, differs from earlier periods in that it not only actually functions in this way, but intentionally defines itself as a poem that would be in these terms. Its indeterminacy is not only a consequence of its rich complexity of meaning, that being of the very essence of all poetry; it is an indeterminacy that announces itself as a confessed enigma by an imperious confidence of tone, full of Miltonic organ notes so inflating to the reader’s expectations as to make explicit their non-fulfillment. The promise to bring the reader to a state “beyond confusion” leaves him in the dark as to just what such a state would be like. The plentiful advice he receives gives him no practical enlightenment as to what to do. But if this induces the “blank wall” feelings that Pearce has mentioned; it also reveals some procedural truths. We learn, for example, that the contradictions of experience are not miscellaneous collision, but contrasts between opposed limits within a system, that meaning can be a spectrum joining contrary thoughts, like old-new, or imaginary-real, and that therefore, even the most harmonious thought naturally displays some tension within the elements of its system, and must generate some measure of doubt and of formlessness. To quote Pound again: “There is in inferior minds a passion for unity, that is, for a confusion and melting together of things which a good mind want to keep distinct.” Even the greatest organizing cultural statements – *The Odyssey*, *The Divine comedy*, *Paradise Lost* – give only putative answers concerning the unity of the world and the oneness of man’s duty and his nature, answers which, when we try to specify their exact meanings, turn into fields of exploration, and cease to be answers at all. *Directive*, as a modern poem, gives us answers designed to make the question as to, the nature of answers and the conditions for finding them its central theme.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Frost : *Centennial Essays*, Rexford Stamper, p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Frost : *Centennial Essays*, John F. Lynen, pp. 581-582.

Thus, in the final analysis, all the arguments, all the illustrations, logically lead to the conclusion that Frost is modern beyond any doubt. Frost is modern not in any overt and obvious manner. He is modern through and through; and his modernism naturally gets confirmed by getting a proper perspective of layers of meaning that enwrap his poetry and the sensitivity that runs through it. He may not depict the outward conditions and events of modern life, but the central facts of modern experience, the uncertainty and painful sense of loss, the disintegration and confusion of values, the frustration and disillusionment, are all there, and they seem more bleak and terrifying because they are presented in their nakedness stripped of all their social, political and economic manifestations. Thus, even as far as sensibility is concerned, Frost is modern, or perhaps one should say, of 'universal' sensibility.

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