
Modernist Exponents in Robert Frost's Poetry: A Critical Analysis

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T.S. Eliot explained about the modern age in his essay 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), "It appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning"(1). Modernism is a radical break from past traditions and to experience something new. It is an artistic movement which began in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The focus of such a movement was to find out something new and interesting. In other words, to introduce new subjects, themes, styles and forms is what can be come under the category of modernism. In fact, this modernism or in other words, 'to find out something new' also varies from time to time and from place to place. This so called modernism emerged during the Victorian period through the rise of the Industrial Revolution which brought sudden changes in our society. But the fact cannot be ignored that as a literary movement, it cannot be keep aloof from the World War I. The fact is that modernism is nothing but the outcome of the World War I which brought sudden destruction into the world and the purpose of such a movement is to bring literature closer and closer to the harsh realities of life. The same is the reason as to why the modernists plead for the absence of the subject matter. The reason is that in the same way as life cannot be transformed into a story; literature must also keep parallel to it. 'Alienation', Frustration', 'Ambiguity' are nothing but the responses of the human beings to the World War I which are the prevalent themes of the literature of the then age.

The same modern tendency can be found in Robert Frost who is one of the leading figures of literature. Robert Frost is the major American Poet, born in the year 1874 in San Francisco. He is worldwide known as a New England poet. In fact, Frost is known for his depiction of the rural life which is quite paradoxical to that of Wordsworth. Whereas Wordsworth portrayed rural life with the eye of a fictionist; Frost has portrayed rural life in its true colour. The meaning of the statement is that Frost has depicted rural life with all its harsh realities. Mention can be made of the poem *Misgiving* where the birds express their desire to go along with the sweet breeze of the spring season or in other words, the primeval time when man had an eco-friendly relation with Nature. The technological man has diverted the routes of the rivers, constructed dams or we can say that the work of constructions excavations devastate our abode—Nature. Because of the reason that this suffocating air disturbs all the inhabitants of this earth—whether men or animals and birds, the living ones other than the human are migrating to another country where they can have the bliss of sweet and serene air. The following lines are worth quotable here:

All crying, "We will go with you, O Wind!
The foliage follow him, leaf and stem;
But a sleep oppresses them as they go,

And they end bidding him stay with them.(2)

It is only in the last stanza that the speaker expects that the human race will discover the after effects of the havoc created by them:

I only hope that when I am free,
As they are free, to go in quest
Of the knowledge beyond the bounds of life
It may not seem better to me to rest.(3)

Taking into consideration the poem *Mending Wall*, we can say that it fulfills the creed of the modernists. In this materialistic and industrialized world, men have become self-centered and the same is the reason of the feeling of alienation within them. If we make a psycho-analysis of the speaker through the present poem, we came to the conclusion that the neighbour is no one but the inner self of the speaker. This wall is nothing but the gap between the human beings on various aspects—culturally, economically and socially. Having crushed our instinct which wants to bridge this social and economic gap, we confined ourselves within our culture and society. But our inner self always inclines to break these barriers. The same idea has been represented in the beginning of the poem with the line, ‘Something there is that does not love a wall’. (4)

Through the poem *Departmental*, Frost has symbolized the attitude of the modern man. In this present era, man has become concerned so much with the purpose of pleasing his own self that he does not have even time for his own near and dear ones. Man has become so indifferent towards his fellow beings that the miseries of others does not affect him because he has nothing to do with it. A few lines need to be quoted here:

One crossing with hurried tread
The body of one of their dead
Isn't given a moment's arrest---
Seems not even impressed.(5)

Moreover, the futurist tendency also gets highlighted in the poems of Frost. On one of the poems entitled *Mowing* is written from the pure modern perspective. The line, ‘The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows’(5) clearly suggests the idea that it is nothing but the dream of getting scientific and materialistic progress which can be achieved by moving ahead on the way of industrialization. As Moholy-Nagy mentioned in his essay entitled “Constructivism and the Proletariat”(1922):

“The reality of our century is technology: the invention, construction and maintenance of machines. To be a user of machines is to be of the spirit of this century. It has replaced the transcendental spiritualism of past eras. (6)

The stanza of the poem *Rose Pogonias*:

A saturated meadow,
Sun-shaped and jewel-small,
A circle scarcely wider
Than the trees around were tall;
Where winds were quite excluded,

And the air was stifling sweet
With the breath of many flowers —
A temple of the heat.(7)

clarifies the notion that the lands covered with natural surrounding has been replaced by the industrialized area. But this so called scientific development has blinded forth us in such a way that the all-pervading throat-stoking atmosphere seems to the human beings pleasurable. The theme of isolation has been dealt by Frost masterly in his poetry. Considering his *Masque of Reason*, we came to the conclusion that though man has uplifted scientifically as well as socially during the modern era, but the fact cannot be ignored that the same scientific progress isolated him from the moral values and our creator—God. In this age of science, man has become the most powerful creature and started thinking of himself as the ‘God’ of this earth who can control everything on this earth. As Robert Frost himself defined this spiritual dryness, “A great many more than half the industrial class are where by a wise stroke of concession they can be detached from the party of dissatisfaction that threatens the state. We are of little faith not to see the simple way to save ourselves from the Russian contagion”. (8)

In this connection, mention can be made of the poem *Desert Places* too. We can say that by mentioning the deserted areas of the outer world, the intention of the poet is to symbolize the emotionally deserted and sequestered place within human beings. Interestingly, the heathen places of the earth do not create any emotion in the heart of the watcher. The reason of such indifference is that the modern man has become stonehearted on account of the gratification with Nature. During the primeval times, man felt a bond with his natural surroundings but the effect of the age of science is such that man has started questioning about the very existence of God. The denouement of having faith in science is that human beings feel a dearth of faith in the spirit of God, they does not show compassion for the sufferings of the others.

It must also be commented here that this isolated and alienated nature became the reason of the abnormal psychology of man. Poems like *Home Burial* and *Hill Wife* deserve a special mention. The indifferent attitude of the husband on the death of his own son in *Home Burial* should be mentioned here. It is nothing but the impact of science which has made man a machine. As the job of a machine is to work round a clock and cannot feel anything, the same is the case with the modern man. Science has made him emotionless, heartless machine whose job is merely to get economic profit. To quote some lines for a better comprehension, “If you had any feelings, you that dug/ With your own hand—how could you? --his little grave”.(9)

Hill Wife can also be placed among the best examples of it. The psychology of a lonely wife, pining for her husband’s empathy has been represented in a beautiful manner by Frost. The husband was busy with his avocation in such a way that he does not pay any attention to his wife. The last part *Impulses* depicts the abnormal psychology of a barren woman who feels alienated from the world because of the same. But the indifferent attitude of the husband bound him to express her feelings to him. In fact, this apathetic attitude of the husband forces her to put a full-stop to her life as there is no one with whom she can share her grief. To quote some lines:

Sudden and swift and light as that
The ties gave,
And he learned of finalities
Besides the grave.(10)

In the conclusion, it must be commented that the essential qualities of modernism whether Eco criticism, isolation, abnormal psychology or lack of faith, all prevail the poetry of Frost. No doubt Frost has written about brooks, fields and mountains and man and his suffering is the prevalent theme in all of the poems. He writes about factories, machines, and other things. In fact, “To consider Frost’s place in modern literature is to adopt, perforce, a double perspective; for the modern world of Frost was that of Einstein and Eliot, of Mann and Stravinsky, a world which ours includes but which, through times distancing, we perceive as but a part of the larger epoch that not only contains the eleven years since Frost’s death, but extends backwards to include much of what, through the invocation of that grand epithet, “Victorian”, used to be defined as safely historical”. (11)

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