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Importance of Literature in Language Enhancement With Reference to the Poetry of Robert Frost

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Abstract

The widely celebrated New England poet, Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California, on March 26, 1874. He wrote eleven separate volumes of poems. So, in my research paper, I want to do a critical study of these volumes of poetry to highlight the importance of literature in language enhancement. For example, in the lyrics of A Boy's Will, he was content to use traditional forms; but even in the earliest of these lyrics he had already begun to displace "musicality" by emphasizing dramatic intonations and cadences of everyday conversational speech, together with a simple vocabulary which heightened the typical Yankee understatements.

Even in his dramatic dialogues, another kind of Frostian matrix is provided through his poetic representation of thought, in various forms of inner and outer dialogue. From the poetic practice of Robert Frost, certain essentials of it can be deduced. If we remember that his wide acclaim has been earned during an era of artistic innovation and experiment, we may marvel at his having achieved such distinction merely by letting his idiom discover old ways to be new, within the traditional conventions of lyric and dramatic and thematic modes. Like Wordsworth, and like many poets before and after Wordsworth, Frost has particularly emphasized his concern for catching within the lines of his poems the rhythms and cadences and tones of human speech. Among the modern poets, he has been one of the many who have advocated a capturing of what he has repeatedly referred to as "the sound of sense" or "sound posturing" to provide a complicating enrichment of the underlying metrical rhythm.

Frost's entire work is deeply rooted in the American, even in the most vital Puritan, idiom. It is "native to the grain", and yet thoroughly original.

Keywords: Idiom, image, lyric, dramatic dialogue, dramatic intonation, cadence, Frostrian Matrix, rhythm, esoteric scholarship, symbolic imagery, transcendentalist etc.

The widely celebrated New England poet, Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California, on March 26, 1874. Robert Frost often said that when first he came to New England he prided himself so much on being a Californian that he felt a decided hostility toward those reticent Yankees whose idiom he later honoured in his poetry. Perhaps it was

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June 2022

the shock of newness which sharpened his various responses to those peculiar New England speech ways, images, scenes, characters and attitudes. At different times, he worked in mills in Lawrence, dabbled in newspaper reporting, taught school. Meanwhile, his fondness for writing poetry occupied his leisure hours.

During the winter of 1906, he came so near to death from pneumonia that both he and his doctor were surprised when he recovered. Thus reduced to the verge of nothingness, and feeling completely without prospects, he turned more and more to his almost furtive writing of poetry as a kind of consolation. Having grown accustomed to gambling with his own life, he decided, in 1912, to bet all on poetry. After selling his farm in Derry, Frost took his wife and four children to England and settled in to write. The gamble was successful. Much to his relief, his first book of lyrics, ***A Boy's Will*** (1913) was accepted by the first publisher. Next, his book of dramatic dialogues, ***North ofBoston*** (1914), attracted so much attention and became a best seller and he returned to the United States.

Hereafter Frost received more honours than any other contemporary literary figure in America. He was elected to membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1916, to membership in the American Academy in 1930. Four times he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Two times the United States Senate adopted a formal resolution extending felicitations to him. He was given honorary degrees by forty-four colleges and universities including Oxford and Cambridge and he was invited to participate in the inauguration ceremonies of President-elect John F. Kennedy. On this occasion he read his poem entitled "The Gift Outright". In August 1962, President Kennedy sent him to Russia on a "good-will mission".

In the lyrics of ***A Boy's Will***, he was content to use traditional forms; but even in the earliest of these lyrics he had already begun to displace "musicality" by emphasizing dramatic intonations and cadences of everyday conversational speech, together with a simple vocabulary which heightened the typical Yankee understatements. The consciously arranged pattern of lyrics in A ***Boy's Will*** was designed to represent the poet's youthful growth, in a wavering progression of subjective moods.Independent searchings, questionings, doubtings, affirmings, cherishings are dramatically and poetically realized. The sequence begins with the poet's acknowledged need for separateness and isolation ("Into My Own"), progresses through a group of subtly intense love-and-courtship lyrics ("A Late Walk", "Flower-gathering," and "A Dream Pang") turns to a newly perceived sense of the brotherhood of men "whether they work together or apart" (in "The Tuft of Flowers"), and finally circles back to a mood of isolation which has become wistful ("Reluctance").

The circular or spiral pattern of complementary moods, in ***A Boy's Will,*** is enriched by arranging a rated progression of responses to the seasonal cycle of nature, starting with a subdued enjoyment of the autumnal mood, moving through deeds and images of winter, spring, summer and finally returning "with a difference" to the autumnal settings. In these variations of attitudes toward nature, the young and maturing poet's moods entertain different

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June 2022

values at different times. If nature at one moment, seems indifferent and blind toward man's "faltering few steps" between birth and death (as in "Stars"), or if nature at another moment seems malevolent, hostile, bestial (as in "Storm Fear"), it can and does sometimes reflect a benevolently divine plan or design (as in "A Prayer in Spring"). These contradictions of mood are permitted to remain unresolved; but the structural arrangement itself implies a progression toward a maturing solution.For Frost, this pattern of arranging his poems, within a single volume, became a matrix. It recurs in several of his books, all the way from ***A Boy's Will*** to ***In the Clearing.***

By contrast, ***North of Boston*** is "a book of people," wherein the prevailing mode is dramatic narrative and dialogue. The poet's attention is primarily directed outward, rather than inward, as he portrays a variety of rural New England responses to the human predicament, not for purposes of recording "local colour" but rather to evoke universal extensions of meaning.The kinship of these poems with the idylls of Theocritus is not accidental. Predominantly, these blank-verse narratives of rural manners and ways focus attention on psychological characterisations which represent a tragicomic blend of human failures and triumphs. The poet's own contemplative reveries, thus, oriented, are frequently handled in terms of both implicit and explicit dialogue. For example, in the familiar poem entitled "Mending Wall," the brief narrative represents two opposed attitudes toward tradition, in that the poet imaginatively challenges the literal and therefore meaningless rituals, symbolized by repairing a wall at a point where there is no need for a wall. While the opposed views of the two neighbours are presented with playful seriousness as foils, the conclusion resolves the conflict in favour of the poet's view, as he characterizes his neighbour's typical blindness:

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." (CPRF 48)

Mountain Interval (1916) takes its title from the side-hill New Hampshire farm above the interval or interval where the Frost family lived. The poems in this volume combined the two previously separated modes of the inner lyric vision and the outer narrative contemplation, in ways which reveal increasing poetic subtlety and versatility. For example, while all of Frost's lyrics partake of the dramatic, five lyrics are gathered under the title "The Hill Wife" to provide a miniature drama in five moods rather than acts: obliquely, an isolated woman's cumulative sense of fear, loneliness, marital estrangement, is represented as being so completely misunderstood by her husband that he is baffled when she disappears, irrevocably and without warning. The another indication of Frost's increasing versatility is reflected in his handling of the initial poem entitled "The Road Not Taken". With dramatic irony, the soliloquizing speaker is permitted to characterize himself, of course unintentionally, as one

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Vol. 9 Issue 06
June 2022

who habitually wastes energy in regretting any choice made: belatedly but wistfully he sighs over the attractive alternative rejected.

New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes (1923) constitutes another kind of new departure, for Frost, this time a venture into the humorous, witty, relaxed realm of gentle social satire, particularly aimed at the American glorification of big business, commercialism, materialism. Taking his inspiration from the ***Sermons*** of Horace, the poet here sings New Hampshire by praising it for having nothing to sell – just "one each of everything as in a showcase" – and thus being a safe retreat or pleasant contrast to the mercenary drift of other regions. The flat and relaxed conversational tone of the blank-verse lines deliberately risks and largely avoids the prosaic. The "**notes and grace notes**" which follow the title poem are lyrics and dramatic narratives which serve as oblique commentaries on the initial text, oblique in that no attempt is made at explicit correlation. The more compressed, terse, clipped lines of the lyrics are strikingly contrasted with the mode of the title poem. Some of the memorable lyrics in ***NewHampshire***include "Fire and Ice," "Stopping by Woods," "Dust of Snow," "To Earthward," and "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things."

Of the dramatic narratives and dialogues in this volume, perhaps Frost's most successful one is "The Witch of Coos" (the Biblical place-name is also the name of the northernmost country in New Hampshire). This narrative takes the form of a little drama, beginning with comic overtones and ending with decidedly tragic implications. It begins as an outrageously impossible ghost-story told collaboratively to the stranger-narrator of the poem by an isolated back-country widow and her grown son. When the mother concludes her story, she reveals that the intolerable burden of concealment has gradually driven her to the verge of insanity, and she now sees no reason why she ever made a secret of the truth – the "bones" of the "ghost" were those of her former lover:

"They were a man's his father killed for me.
I mean a man he killed instead of me."

Noneof Frost's dramatic psychological characterizations go more deeply or more subtly into the tragedy of self-betrayal than "The Witch of Coos."

West-running Brook (1928) is particularly important because of the title poem. "Too Anxious for Rivers" is related to Frost's most revealing poetic statement of continuity: "West-running Brook." There he implicitly invokes images drawn from Lucretius and would seem to blend them with Heraclitan metaphors such as these*: the death of the earth gives life to fire, the death of the fire gives life to air, the death of air gives life to water, and the death of water gives life to earth, thus figuratively suggesting the endless cycle of birth and death and rebirth and continuity, in nature.*In "West-running Brook," *Frost* further suggests his awareness that Henri Bergson, in his highly poetic theories of "creative evolution," adapts many figures and images from both Lucretius and Heraclitus. Additional kinship between the poetry of Bergson and of Frost may be found in our remembering Bergson's insistence that all dogmas, systems, and logical constructions are so rigid that they interfere with man's

direct or intuitive awareness; that the effort of intuition is needed to reverse intellectual straining and to provide a more creative, a more poetic, approach to knowledge. Some other Frost's best lyrics are also contained in this volume, as for example "Spring Pools," A Peck of Gold," Once by the Pacific," "Tree at My Window," "Acquainted with the Night," and "The Soldier."

A Further Range(1936), A Witness Tree (1942) and Steeple Bush (1947), while adding some excellent lyrics, are volumes to heavily padded with relatively unimpressive and inartistic "editorials." They provide some pointed satirical thrusts at the American scene without adding much to Frost's poetic stature.

Two complementary volumes of verse drama, ***A Masque of Reason (1945)*** and ***A Masqueof Mercy (1947)*** were eventually and significantly placed together at the end of the collected works which Frost chose to call ***Complete Poems (1949).*** These two masques paved the way for metaphysical and religious considerations which provide a thematic centre for his last book, ***In the Clearing (1962).***

After having completed this superficial survey of Robert Frost's separate volumes, we can say that Frost is extremely gifted in his ability to make even the least lyric poem dramatic, he is primarily a subjective lyric poet, at his best in his apparently contradictory moods of response to experience and his figurative ways of defining differences. For Frost, the ultimate and ulterior preoccupation is with a poetic view of life which he can consider complete, in the sense that it encompasses and integrates all these relationships figuratively and yet not systematically. His ulterior concern is always with psychic and spiritual salvation. Frost's awareness of his differences from conventional attitudes, in his defence of the unsystematic, is the least implied in such a confession as this:

> And were an epitaph to be my story
> I'd have a short one ready for my own.
> I would have written of me on my stone:
> I had a lover's quarrel with the world.

His "lover's quarrel with the world" may have begun through his wanting and trying to discover or define his own sense of simultaneous separateness and integration.More than that, a large part of his poetic pleasure would seem to be derived from his finding verse not only an end in itself but also a means to the end of making each poem a "clarification of life," at least a clarification of his own attitude towards life.

Frost's recurrent elements of theme involves fear, isolation, lostness, not-knowing and discontinuity. They remain operative in the poems, side by side with the recurrent elements of faith and love and continuity. His juxtaposition of contrary and yet ultimately, complementary images and themes finds its most elaborately paradoxical expression in those two masques which Frost chose to place in a significant summary position, at the conclusion to his volume which he also chose to entitle with figurative overtones, ***Complete Poems***.

A Masque of Reason and ***A Masque of Mercy*** explore contrary themes, but they permit us to view the two masques as complementary. They also provide an epitome, or a gathering

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June 2022

metaphor, or many major themes developed by Frost in the poems which precede and succeed them. Relationships are explored in each of the masques; man's ultimate relationships to self, to society, to nature, to the universe, to God or to say in another way, the two masques further extend themes involving man's perennial sense of isolation and communion, or fear and courage, or ignorance and knowledge of discontinuity and continuity. In this way we return to where we started in considering the positive affirmations within Frost's poems: action, in the living present, recurrently represented as providing different forms of human redemption, atonement, salvation, if only such action is viewed as collaborative with whatever little man can understand of the divine design.

While Yeats, Eliot, Pound and others involved or invented elaborate mythic frames of reference which have enriched and complicated artistic strategies, Frost would seem to have risked successfully the purification of poetic utterance, in complicating simple forms. However, he quite consciously assimilates to his own New England idiom such varieties of classical conventions as the relaxed modes of the Theocritan idylls, the terse epigrammatic brevity of Martial, the contemplative serenity of Horace, the sharply satirical intensity of Juvenal, the homely didacticism of Aesop. Yet his treasured first hand familiarity wit and admiration for the classics have not been displayed in ways which make his meanings depend on esoteric scholarship. Quite clearly, he has deliberately chosen to address himself to the common reader.

But if the majority of Frost's admirers would seem content to share the poet's delight in cherishing the humble beauties of nature, recorded by him with such precision of response to images of experience among New England fields, farms, roadsides and forests thosereaders have been willing to settle for too little, when so many other and deeper levels of meaning are available in his poems. Like Wordsworth, and like many poets before and after Wordsworth, Frost has particularly emphasized his concern for catching within the lines of his poems the rhythms and cadences and tones of human speech. Among modern poets, he has been one of the many who have advocated a capturing of what he has repeatedly referred to as "the sound of sense" or "sound posturing" to provide a complicating enrichment of the underlying metrical rhythm.

Perhaps without his realizing it, Frost's own Puritan heritage has made him find congenial the related theories of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Emerson, particularly in matters related to the organic growth of a poem and organic relationship betweenimagery and symbol. "When I see birches bend to left and right," says Frost, "I like to *think*…." There it is. His primary artistic achievement, which is an enviable one, in spite of shortcomings, rests on his blending of thought and emotion and symbolic imagery within the confines of the lyric. It would be seem to be an essential part of both his theory and practice to start with a single image, or to start with an image of an action, and then to endow either or both with a figurativeness of meaning, which is not fully understood by the reader until the extensions of meaning are found to transcend the physical.

While no one could correctly call Frost a transcendentalist, his kinship with Emerson goes deeper than might at first be noticed. One approach to this relationship, as it involves a basic element of both poetic theory and practice, may be found through Frost's early sonnet entitled "Mowing":

> There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
> And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
> What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;
> Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,
> Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound-
> And that was why it whispered and did not speak.
> It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
> Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:
> Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
> To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,
> Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers
> (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.
> *The fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows*.
> My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make. [CPRF 25]

The initial effect of that sonnet is one of mood, in which the reverie of the worker picks up for contemplation the tactile and visual and audial images in terms of action and of cherishing. The sensuous response is heightened and enriched not only by the speaking tones and modulations and rhythms struck across the underlying metrical pattern of iambics but also by the intricate and irregular sonnet rhyme scheme: a-b-c-a-b-d-e-c d-f-e-g-f-g. Although the mood of the reverie is not interrupted by the somewhat paradoxical generalization in the thirteenth line, the reader is likely to return to that line, puzzling over it and feeling slightly teased by the possible ambiguities. If the fact-as-dream is interpreted as indicating that the entire reverie reflects an intensely sensuous joy in the immediate human experience, that such pleasurable experience constitutes an end in itself, the poem obviously makes sense in those terms. Taken thus, the sonnet clearly is related to that fundamental theme of live and cherishing which runs throughout Frost's poetry. Any other meaning found ought not to displace or cancel that. But if the fact-as-dream might also be interpreted to represent the act of mowing as a means to an end as well as an end in itself, it could serve to symbolize not only a process of being but also a process of becoming, within the farmer-poet's life. The grass is cut and the hay is left to make for an ulterior purpose.

The context of other poems within which "Mowing" occurs invites and encourages deeper reading. We can notice that in Frost's poetic theory and practice he likes to endow images and actions with implicitly metaphorical and symbolic meanings until they repeatedly suggest a continuity between his vision of the human "fact" and the divine "fact". We can also notice that he likes the tension between two ways of looking at such thought-felt moods; that his

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Vol. 9 Issue 06
June 2022

own moments of doubt, in these matters, seem to afford him the luxury of reaffirmation. In such a context, a poem like "Mowing" reveals further kinships between Frost and Emerson. In his essay on "The Poet" Emerson writes, "I find that the fascination resides in the symbol." Frost would agree. Emerson goes on to say that the response of the farmer to nature is a sympathetic form of worship: No imitation or playing of these things would content him'; he loves the earnest of the north wind, of rain, of stone and wood and iron. A beauty not explicable is dearer than a beauty which we can see to the end of. It is nature the symbol, nature certifying the supernatural, body over flowered by life which he worships with coarse but sincere rites." Again Frost would agree, at least in part; but it must be pointed out that Frost's view of nature-as-symbol does not coincide with the Emersonian view. Neither does it coincide with the New England puritanical view of nature-as symbol. Nevertheless, to those Puritan forefathers against whom both Emerson and Frost partially rebelled, self-reliance was God-reliance. Even those Puritan forefathers also insisted that *laborareestorare*. Whatever the differences in the three positions, the likenesses are significant.

"Prayer," says Emerson, with almost puritanical exultation, "is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul." Frost would have been embarrassed to speak out that frankly in open meeting; but his poems obliquely imply his own assent to the notion. The core of his poetic theory, as of his poetic practice, is to be found in his uses of the sensuous responses of loving and cherishing, first as important poetic images of human actions, then simultaneously, as even more important symbols of divine worship and even of prayer: "May my sacrifice be found acceptable in Heaven's sight."

In conclusion, it should be said that in an attempt to increase our appreciation and understanding of Robert Frost's life and art, is only one of many possible approaches. It is calculated to suggest that many elements run counter to themselves, therein, without any ultimate contradictions. It also provides a means of noticing that Frost's entire work is deeply rooted in the American, even in the most vital Puritan, idiom. It is "native to the grain," and yet thoroughly original. No wonder, then, that Robert Frost has earned a place of distinction, at home and abroad, as a major American poet.

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