

Robert Frost: A Symbolist in Literature

Abstract

The present work is an endeavour to make a study of symbolism in the poetry of Robert Frost which is one of the chief characteristics of his poetry. Considered as one of the first modern poets, Frost knowingly or unknowingly does make use of symbols in his poetry. Usually taken from Nature, his symbols make his poems multi-layered in meanings and implications. Above all, at times he seems to use his symbols for certain stylistic devices. However, the beauty remains that he as a poet imparts new meanings in novel poetic contexts to his symbols.

Keywords: Robert, Endeavour, Massachusetts, Amherst, Mountain, Interval

Introduction

Robert Frost, the poet in whom the American people have found their poet, their singer their seer- in short their bard, was born on March 26, 1874 in San Francisco. His early education was completed in a school run by his own mother in Lawrence, Massachusetts. When high school years came around Frost attended Lawrence High School. He drifted from one job to another: he became a reporter, returned to farming and then to teaching. He sought semi permanent association with a number of schools and colleges in capacity of teacher, lecturer or consultant. He was offered a full time professorship at Amherst. He was awarded Pulitzer Prize four times. He was also awarded with a degree of doctorate by Yale. Apart from this he received many awards and prizes for poetry. His best known poetry collections are:

A Boys Will (1913), North of Boston (1914), New Hampshire (1923), Mountain Interval (1916), A Further Range (1936), A Winter Tree (1942) and Steeple Bush(1947). Apart from this Frost wrote two masques: A Masque of Reason (1945), A Masque of Mercy (1947).

The word 'symbol' originates from a Greek word 'Symballein' which means 'to put together'. The noun that is a coinage from the 'Symballein' is 'Symbalon' which means 'a mark', 'emblem', 'token' or 'sign'. Hence the term symbol refers most specifically to a manner of representation in which what is shown by virtue of association means something else. In the broadest sense a symbol is anything which signifies something. "A symbol is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or stands for something else". (1) Thus a literary symbol unites an image and an idea or concept which that image suggests or evokes. In other words symbolism may be defined as a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors to communicate unique personal feelings.

Robert Frost is a highly symbolic poet of modern America. He treated poetry as a source of "constant symbols". He frequently uses simile, metaphor, allegory, synecdoche and metonymy to give expression to the symbolic creed in his poetry. Frost's poetry is easy and simple but this apparent simplicity of his poetry is deceptive and misleading. In reality, he is a very complex and intricate poet and this complexity arises from his excessive use of symbols.

Frost is a regional poet and the particular region to which he adheres throughout his poetry is the North of Boston of New England. But his regional art is creative and symbolic. He uses its climate and topography, its man and manners to impart them a universal significance. The region North of Boston becomes symbolic not only of New England as a whole but also of human life at large. His Yankee characters become symbolic of human nature in all ages and countries. That is why even those who are not familiar with New England, love and enjoy his poetry. This regionalism reveals Frost's mastery over the use of Synecdoche which is also one of the techniques of symbolic and suggestive poetry. He



Ajay Singh
Research Scholar
Deptt. of English
Bharatpur

frequently uses this figure of speech in his poetry. Once Louis Untermeyer quoted Frost saying,

"If I must be classified as a poet, I must be called as a synecdochist; for I prefer the Synecdoche in poetry- the figure of speech in which we use a part for the whole."(2)

If we look at *Stopping by Wood on a Snowy Evening*, the words 'woods', 'promises', 'miles' and 'sleep' have deeper meaning. 'Woods' stands for the beauties of the world. 'Promises' and 'miles to go' imply duties and responsibilities. 'Sleep' symbolizes death. The traveler's reluctance to leave the woods is due to some promises which he has made to God. So he cannot relish this beautiful world for long and before reaching Heaven he has to accomplish these duties and responsibilities in the service of mankind.

In *Mending Wall* the fence symbolizes national, racial, religious, political and economic conflicts and prejudices which divide man from man and come in the path of mutual understanding and harmonious relationship. In *Birches* the poet's longing to be a swinger of birches symbolizes his momentary escape from the world so that he may get some momentary relief from the worldly pains. The cobwebs which stick to the poet's face and the tears which fall from one of his eyes, symbolize respectively the hardships and pains.

As an illustration of Frost's symbolism, the early lyric *After Apple Picking* serves ideally. In the poem, the task of apple picking stands for any task; it may be life itself. Magnified apples which appear and disappear perhaps tell us of the opportunities which come and go- big or small. The sleep symbolizes death. 'The barrel not yet full' stands for a life not quite complete, but not really missing anything either. On the whole the idyll lyric symbolizes the life of a person who thinks of a very prosperous life in future. He does his best for fulfilling his aspirations. Many opportunities like apples hang before him. He plans to utilize all of them even though many of them remain unutilized and he goes from the world not fully satisfied.

In *Two Tramps at Mud Time* the amateur wood chopper (the poet) and the two tramps symbolize contrasting views towards human goals and endeavour. The wood chopper desires to unite his vocation and avocation but the tramps' philosophy is single and inadequate. According to the tramps' point of view the poet's taking up the work of wood splitting means unemployment for them. But in poet's view pleasure and need must be combined in work, only then does the highest achievement become possible for man. 'Water' and 'frost' symbolize respectively the fortunes and misfortunes. The poet means to say that one should not be too much happy in his good days and forget the bitterness because there are always two types of movements- good and evil which come in life of every person in turns.

The 'two roads' in the autobiographical poem *The Road Not Taken*, going in different, directions stands for two different professions. The 'wood' symbolizes the world. The poet chooses the less frequented road that determined his destiny and made him poet different from others. The poem *Fire and Ice* impresses us by its bold metaphors. The value of the poem consists in the care with which Frost develops

these metaphors by linking desire to fire and hate to ice. In terms of imagery alone the poem is extremely rich. Fire symbolizes passion, while ice symbolizes cold hatred, and both are capable of destroying the world. The underlying symbolic meaning of the poem is that the intensity of man's passion, the very thing which makes him human, creates inhuman forces of disaster.

The poem *The Mountain* depicts a man who, in spite of living at the foot of a mountain, did never climb to the top either to see the great view from there or to see the brook or mere for the sake of climbing. This man symbolizes the uninquisitive, unadventurous and unambitious spirit. There are some people who are contented with their routine life who have no curiosity to go beyond the narrow sphere of their daily activities and who are devoid of the spirit of investigation and adventure. On the other hand there are people symbolized by the traveller who represent the opposite temperament.

Neither out Far nor in Deep has been regarded by some critics as the most symbolic poem of Robert Frost. It describes a number of mysterious people standing on the shore, with their backs to the land and looking at the sea all day. Here the 'land' symbolizes earth with all its change and flux while the 'sea' symbolized world of imagination. By turning their backs towards land people try to forget what exists. Because this world of change and flux is not satisfying so people look out for a perfect world that no reality can shatter. A perfect world can be visualized only in imagination. The lyric thus expresses symbolically the romantic quest for the mysterious, the far off, the unknown and for the ideal and the perfect.

Apart from these, in many of his poems, Frost uses symbols. The poems like *Out Out*, *An Old Man's Winter Night*, *Home Burial*, *West Running Brook*, *The Onset*, *Directive*, *Meeting and Passing* etc. are marked with symbolic significance. Frost's technique of communication is essentially symbolic and oblique. Therefore it is possible to read his poetry on several levels. In this sense he is truly a modern poet. Frost, from the very beginning of his poetic, career had metaphor coursing in his veins. He was ready to admit with pride that he laboured always within "the constant symbols" and to declare aloud that "education by poetry is education by metaphor." Such admissions make Frost one with Emerson who believed, "Nature is a symbol, in the whole and in part."(3)

Though Frost has left behind him a number of excellent philosophical and narrative poems, his genius was essentially lyrical as Lawrence Thompson rightly points out:

"His primary artistic achievement which is an enviable one, in spite of his shortcomings, rests on his blending of thought and emotion and symbolic imagery within the confines of lyric." (4)

The expressiveness and richness of his poetry becomes possible only because he, like the great moderns, seeks to achieve a synthesis of such opposites as man and nature, rural and urban and regional and universal in the same way as "my two eyes make one sight." He does all this by the use of symbols and metaphors. Critics have, from the very

first publication of his volume, admired his skill in handling metaphors and symbols.

References

- 1 Cudden, J.A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. England: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005, p. 885.
- 2 Untermeyer, Louis. *Modern American Poetry*. 5th ed. Rev. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1936, p. 25.
- 3 Hopkins, Vivian. *Emerson: A Study of Emerson's Aesthetic Theory*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1959, p. 82.
- 4 Thompson, Lawrence. *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost*. New York: Holt. 1942, p. 75.

Simple Guidelines to Write a Research Paper

Usually research paper consists of the following parts:

- 1 **Abstract**
Please Write abstract of your paper within 100-200 words in which a brief description of your research paper should be given.
- 2 **Keywords**
The important word should be written so that your paper can be traced on internet on the basis of those words.
- 3 **Introduction:** Describe your problem and state your contribution to the solution of the problem. From the very start be very clear about what you will be proving in your paper.
- 4 **The Main Text**
It has four parts :
 - **The problem / Objective of the Study**
First, clearly present the gist of your idea, what is the main problem / question that you are dealing with in this paper? What are the goals/objectives of your research? Why it is an interesting/ significant problem?
 - **Review of Literature**
Move on elaborating your idea with example and comparison. You may refer to previous research done on the same topic/pattern and explain how your work differs from and contributes to the existing literature.
 - **Concepts and Hypothesis**
You may define the basic concepts that you frequently use in your paper. You should clearly state about your hypothesis ?
 - **Research Design**
After above explain your research methodology. What is your research base on/What kind of resources you have used. What is the universe of your study. What tools and techniques are used? Etc.
- 5 **Findings**
Describe the findings of your research paper. In other words what conclusion did you reach based on your research.
- 6 **Conclusion**
Briefly summarize the main text of your paper with findings. Put your suggestions if any.
- 7 **Suggestion**
Give suggestions based on your study, for next research.
- 8 **References:** Please provide Reference in following format-
 - **Books**
Murthy, N. Narayan (2006), *Corporate Ethics*, Tata Mc Braw Hill Publishing Co. Ltd. New Delhi. Page No 69
 - **Ph D Thesis**
Alam, Aftab (1996), 'Study on strategies for Tourism Development in India, Ph. D. thesis, AMU, Aligarh. Page No.
 - **Journal**
Devashish, S. K. (Oct. 1996), *The Giving Model and Corporate Excellence : A field Report Decision*, pp 219-224, Monikutty, S (1997) *Telecom Services in Urban and Corporate Segments : A Consumer Perspective*, Vikalpa, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp 15-18.

In writing a research paper maintain academic honesty. Be very careful to cite the sources that you use in your paper.