

# The Poetic Theory of Robert Frost

## Abstract

The poetry of the twentieth century followed the path shown by their ancestors of the literary field and adheres to the rules and regulations to represent a poem. Being a modern poet of the modern age, Robert Frost—the great American poet tends to break the shackles of this traditional way of opting the manner of representation as had been done by the Victorian poets of the past British period and opted a middle way and highlighted the social realities of his age within a proper structural pattern. The most distinctive quality of Frost is that he never turned back from the challenges thrown before him. Thus, in the view of Frost, the pillars on which poetry stands are mainly meter and versification. The reason is that these two are the grounds through which a familiar idea can be represented within a de-familiarized structure.

**Keywords:** Rhyme, Meter, Metaphor, Tone, Diction.

## Introduction

It (a poem) begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood—and indeed from the very mood... It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at once wise and sad—the happy-sad blend of the drinking song. (Cox 20-21)

## Aim of the Paper

Robert Frost is one of the highly acclaimed poets of America. His theory of poetry that “a poem should begin in delight but ends in a momentary stay against confusion” outlines that Frost tries to find out the hidden meaning of the text through close observation or reading. In his opinion, a poem should not be a replica of pre-conceived notions rather it should have a natural flow but should end with the discovery of some philosophical thought. Hence, the paper examines the poetic theory of Robert Frost and its relevance to the past with the study of his individual attempt. It also examines Frost’s text in relation to the dead poets and to what extent he is original.

Robert Frost is one of the most highly admired poets of America. To talk about Frost’s poetic theory, it may be said that Frost tries to outline the hidden meaning which a reader finds through the close reading and minute observation of the text. A poem should not appear as a replica of the poet’s preconceived notions. Rather, it should have a natural flow and ends with the discovery of some philosophical thought. Hence, Frost stresses on the spontaneous flow of the poem with the finding of an ultimate truth of life—if not an abstract one, then a momentary stay against confusion. Frost avoided sticking to any particular poetic theory. Unlike other modern poets—Eliot, Pound, Lowell and others; Frost put a limitation on modern experimental techniques. On the contrary,

Frost carried on his own distinct experiments, emphasizing speech rhythms and “the sound of sense”. He has called attention to “those dramatic tones of voice which had hitherto constituted the better half of poetry”. In Frost’s theory of poetry, the self-imposed restrictions of meter in form and of coherence in content stand not halfway down the scale of grace. He has made many casual references to the general quality of those limitations which work to the advantage, not to the disadvantage, of new and lively poetry. (Cox 17)

Certainly, Frost practices his own distinct experiments by means of his emphasis on sound in poetry or which he defined as



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“the sound of sense”, “education by metaphor” and poetry as a “momentary stay against confusion” as is clear from the above mentioned definition by Frost.

By the “sound of sense” Frost does not advocate the Victorian use of assonance. In fact, the notion is that sentences should possess meaningful tones and thereby create vitality. Frost declares his concept of “the sound of sense” in a letter to John Bartlett in such words:

I am possibly the only person going who works on any but a worn out theory (principle I had better say) of versification. You see the great successes in recent poetry have been made on the assumption that the music of words was a matter of harmonized vowels and consonants. Both Swinburne and Tennyson arrived largely at effects in assonation. But they were on the wrong track or at any rate on a short track. They went the length of it. Anyone else who goes that way must go after them. And that's where most are going. I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense (Faggen TCIRF 26-27).

Frost here tried to advocate something which was not practiced either by Victorians or by the modernists like Eliot and Pound. Indeed, Frost formulated meter and rhythm as component parts of poetry. Meter refers to the regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables while rhythm to the realization of the pattern of meter. Thus, in the view of Frost, the pillars on which poetry stands are mainly meter and rhythm. The reason is that these two are the grounds through which a familiar idea can be represented within a de-familiarized structure. As Frost talks about poetry's having a “metric frame on which to measure the rhythm”, and in his aphoristic essay ‘Poetry and School’ he remarks, “Poetry plays the rhythms of dramatic speech on the grid of meter” (Faggen 124).

Analysing Frost's “One of my wishes” from A Boy's Will, it can be mentioned that Frost has followed the traditional iambic pentameter here. The poem is composed in Shakespearean model. “The iambic line requires only the maintenance of the lighter to-heavier fluctuation—and because the only requirement of an iamb is that its second syllable be weightier than its first”. Some lines need to be quoted here:

u / u / u / u / / /  
One of my wishes is that those dark trees  
u / u / u / u / u /  
Sold and firm they scarcely show the breeze  
u / u / u / u / u /  
Were not as't were the merest mask of gloom  
u / u / u / u /  
But stretched away unto the edge of doom

(Lathem 3, 1-4)

In first line, the first four foot is in typical iambic form but the last two words of the first line are both stressed. However, the remaining three lines of the first stanza are in iambic pentameter form. Shakespeare too had written most of his plays in

metrical form specially in iambic pentameter form. The reason is that iambic pentameter is the most common meter in English poetry. Example can be taken of Romeo and Juliet:

u / u / u / u / u /  
My grave is like to be my weddingbed.  
u / u / u / u / u /  
But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

(WEB)

One of the most renowned poems of Frost “Birches” from Mountain Interval is also dipped in the same traditional format.

u / / / u / u / u /  
When I see birches bend to left and right  
u / u / u / u / u /  
Across the lines of straighter darker trees  
u / u / u / / / u /  
I like to think some boys been swinging them  
u / u / u / u / u /  
But swinging does n't bend them down to stay.

(Lathem 121, 1-4)

Poets like William Wordsworth and Shelley too are major writers of metrical pattern. Shelley's sonnet “Ozymandias” is a mixture of Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet and is written in iambic pentameter lines.

Indeed, poetry was composed in every age and in every society. Poetry has gone through several experiments. It was composed without meter, without capital letters, without the use of punctuation, without sentiments but poetic lines were always inherent in it and it distinguishes it from all the other genres of literature. But Frost asserts that “meter is the basic norm or paradigm of a line...rhythm, on the other hand, is the realization in speech of this pattern” (Faggen TCCRF 124). Thus, poetry which delights its readers should be combined with meter, rhythm, words and sound. Frost has well defined the parameters of poetry for a better comprehension:

Poetry is prowess

Poetry is the renewal of words

Poetry is the dawning of an idea

Poetry is that which tends to evaporate from both prose and verse when translated.

Poetry is the Liberal Arts. The Liberal Arts are Poetry. A poem is a momentary stay against confusion

Rhymes and meter are an excess

Words and syntax interpose resistance enough you would think. Rhyme and meter are taken on extra to show—

Rhymes are less limited than is apparent. They are merely the last syllable on the various phrases just as “ly” and “ation” are on the ends of many words. Many more phrases than you would think have any off hand chosen word for an ending. (Faggen TNRF 595)

What Frost here tries to emphasize is that,

Meter and rhythm coexist inextricably in actual verse. When we read poems, we do not hear meter at one level of the brain and the rhythm at another. Rather, our experience of the two is integrated. We hear at once the comprehensive metrical pattern and the individual rhythmical

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realizations of it. Frost makes this point in an interview with William Stanley Braithwaite. The poet speaks of his desire to convey meaning by tone and “sound posture” as well as by the literal sense of words...

Because Frost so keenly appreciates how meter and rhythm support each other—rhythm giving meter life and energy, meter giving the rhythm shape and focus—he is suspicious equally of prosodists who disparage the simple frame element of meter and of prosodists who try to reduce the complex rhythmic element to false simplicity. (Faggen TCIRF 126-127)

Apart from the intricate mingling of meter and rhythm, Frost’s emphasis on “sentence sounds” makes him different from others. Hence, writing should be adjacent to hearing. Frost’s deep interest in everyday speech is equally another aspect of his sentence sounds. These sounds are audible to imagination and to the proper voice-tone of the reader. The sound of sense gives liveliness to our speech and in order to make it livelier Frost opted the everyday speech of the New Englanders. The sound of sense refers to the tone of speaking. Frost’s poems are rich in the admirable tones of the lively speeches. Mention can be made of the opening poem of his poetic volume *A Boy’s Will* entitled “The Pasture” which is decorated with various tones:

I’m going out to clean the pasture spring;  
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):  
I shan’t be gone long—you come too.  
I’m going to fetch the little calf  
That’s standing by the mother. It’s so young,  
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.  
I shan’t be gone long.—you come too.  
(Lathem 1, 1-8)

The first line deplores light, informing tone while the second line is composed in reserving tone. The third line of the poem shows the possibility and the fourth line is written in free and inviting tone. Throughout the second stanza the tone is free, persuasive, assuring and inviting.

Another well-known sonnet of Frost “Mowing” starts with the light/ informative tone too which continues in the second line. The third line is written in the questioning or curious tone. The fourth and fifth lines contain the word “perhaps” and thus suggest the possibility. The sixth line is having empathetic tone. The seventh and eight lines are evasive (unclear) in tone and thereby arise excitement within the reader. The following four lines are light in tone. The last second line is pensive (philosophical) in tone as it suggests that life with all its labour is the greatest gift of a man’s life. The last line is in free tone.

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 labor  
knows.

My long scythe whispered and left the hay to  
make. (Lathem 17, 1-14)

Defining his “sound of sense”, Frost in  
another letter gives a more clear picture of his  
sentence-sound theory in this way:

But if one is to be a poet he must learn to get  
cadences by skillfully breaking the sounds of  
a sense with all their irregularity of accent  
across the regular beat of the meter. Verse  
in which there is nothing, but the beat of the  
meter furnished by the accents of the  
polysyllabic words we call doggerel. Verse is  
not that. Neither is it the sound of sense  
alone. It is a resultant from those two.  
(Faggen TCIRF 27)

Though Frost’s “sound of sense” is the highly  
acclaimed aspect of his poetics but at several places  
in his prose and letters metaphor occupy a special  
place. In one of his essays, Frost strongly advocated  
the importance of metaphor in poetry.

...there are many other things I have found  
myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest  
of these is that it is metaphor, saying one  
thing and meaning another, saying one thing  
in terms of another, the pleasure of  
ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor.  
So also is philosophy—and science, too, for  
that matter, if it will take the soft impeachment  
from a friend. Every poem is a new metaphor  
inside or it is nothing. And there is a sense in  
which all poems are the same old metaphor  
always. (Faggen TCIRF 36)

What Frost here summarizes is that  
metaphor is the gist of poetry. In his view, every poem  
is made of metaphors. Metaphor exhilarates one’s  
thinking. But unlike John Donne, Frost’s aim is not  
merely to delight but to educate readers by poetry or  
metaphor. I.A. Richards well commented in this  
regard, “Metaphor is the omnipresent principle of  
language ... we cannot get through three sentences of  
ordinary fluid discourse without it” (Leary 24).

Frost’s “Mending Wall” from *North of Boston*  
at an outer level depicts an account of two neighbours  
who are contradictory in their attitude. One desires  
for a wall between their fields while the other  
considers it unnecessary. But at the inner level,  
the wall metaphorically represented the man-made  
boundaries of nationalism, racial difference,  
economic apartness, political distinction and  
Frost puts up the question that

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whether man should pull down the barriers which alienate the individuals from one another or is it necessary to keep limits among individuals? Robert Frost presented this clash of view through this poem. The neighbour is the advocate building the wall and explains, "Good fences make good neighbours" (Latham 23). The speaker, on the other hand, considers it worthless as they are two different individuals but are human beings so there should be a feeling of brotherhood between them.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass  
abreast...

There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
(Latham 33, 1-4, 23-24)

Frost does not provide any answer to this question and left it to the readers to decide. The same is the reason as to why Frost's poems are replete with freshness. In his essay "A Figure a Poem Makes" he stated:

A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a petal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that over unfolded by surprise as it went. (WEB)

Indeed, metaphors are not used only by poets; we use it unconsciously in our daily lives. Philosophers, literary critics all are in the grip of metaphors. Metaphor helps in visualizing images or beautifies objects but it also highlights the deeper meanings of the texts. Frost has adopted metaphor for decorative use as well as for his aspect of "clarification of life" because metaphor clarifies the hidden truths of life, art and literature.

Defining metaphor, Aristotle states,

Metaphor is the application of the strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy. An example of a term from genus to species is, "Here stands my ship". Riding at anchor is a species of standing. An example of transference from species to genus is "Indeed ten thousand noble things Odysseus did," which is a species of many, is here used instead of the word "many". An example of transference from one species to another is "Drawing off his life with the bronze" where 'drawing off' is used for "severing" and "severing" for "drawing off", both being species of removing. (Levin 24)

Another poem of Robert Frost which through its metaphor gives freshness is "Birches". At first, it appears to be a poem about a boy who desires to conquer each and every birch tree by swinging them. But metaphorically, it is not a static picture of climbing trees but of examining one's capability and keeping

balance. The birch tree is represented as a tool to sweep from reality to imagination. The lines:

It's when I'm weary of considerations,  
And life is too much like a pathless wood  
Where your face burns and tickles with the  
cobwebs  
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping  
I'd like to get away from earth awhile  
And then come back to it and begin over.  
(Latham 122, 43-46, 48-49)

The upward swinging through the birch tree stands for the world of fancy and imagination into which humans desire to escape from the tiresome, weary conditions of this realistic world. But as the poem concludes, it suggests to maintain a balance between life and death, between fact and fancy. Man should not leave his worldly duties unperformed and escape to the sweet world of imagination because "Earth is the right place for love" (Latham 122, 52). So we can stay in imaginative world for a while but should bring ourselves back to earth. Thus, a person should arrange his life in a balanced way.

If we observed Frost's poems, we may observe that his education by poetry/metaphor is the way to momentary stay against confusion. Frost's concept of "clarification of life" is adjacent to his treatment of metaphor. Through his metaphors, Frost represents his philosophical meanings. Though metaphor is an integral part of Frost's poetry but he had not opted it for an aesthetic purpose. The aim of Frost is to reach at the philosophical truth through the medium of metaphor and here he differs from all the other poets. In "Education by Poetry" Frost has defined this aspect:

Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity. This is the greatest attempt that ever failed. We just stop short there. (Faggen TCIRF 44)

### Conclusion

Hence, for Frost a poem should be a combination of artistic capability and poetic impulse. Whereas he advocates the spontaneity of art, the matter of the philosophical discovery of life has not been left untouched by him. Thus,

to study Frost's art is to experience the hope that poets of the future may be able to heal the terrible breach between rhythm and meter that occurred in twentieth century poetry. As do all outstanding poets, Frost delights in putting personal rhythm and impersonal meter into, as he says to John Cournos, "strained relation". But unlike such younger contemporaries as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, Frost never suggests that rhythm and meter get a divorce. Frost is preeminently the modern poet who demonstrates, memorable poem by memorable poem, that the rhythms of colloquial speech can vitally coexist with normative metrical structure. (Faggen TCCRF 124).

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