

## SYMBOLISM IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST: AN ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

*Robert Frost, the great American poet used symbols abundantly and judiciously in his poems. The use of symbols helped Frost to express more meanings associated with the word in addition to the simple meaning. Symbols are words not merely connotative, but evocative and emotive. Frost's poetry appears to be simple and easy, but it is deceptive and misleading due to the use of symbols. His poems are symbolic and have layers within layers of meaning on a careful reading. Symbols make the language of poetry rich and expressive. Frost has written many beautiful poems rich in symbolism to express his thoughts. This paper is an attempt to analyze the poetry of Robert Frost in the light of symbolism.*

**Keywords:** Symbolism, Words, Imagery, Meaning, Nature, Regionalism.

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### Introduction

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California, on March 26, 1874. His father was a New Englander. New England is the name given to certain states in the U.S.A. namely Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. The inhabitants of these states are known as "Yankees". Frost's mother was a poetess. Due to her interest in poetry, she wanted to name her son Robert after Robert Burns, the greatest poet of Scotland. Thus the boy was named Robert Lee Frost. After his father's death due to Tuberculosis in 1885, the family moved to New England. They settled in the village of Salem, New Hampshire. In 1892, Frost joined the Dartmouth College for learning but soon left it. He worked in mills, did newspaper reporting, and taught in schools. In his leisure hours, he wrote poetry. In 1912, Frost decided to make poetry his vocation in life. The first volume of his lyrics 'A Boy's Will' was published in 1913, and the second one 'North of Boston' was published in 1914. Frost was shy by temperament and liked a quiet life to live. Therefore, he bought a small farm in Franconia, New Hampshire, and again bought a farm in Ripton, Vermont. After the first two volumes 'A Boys will' (1913) and North of Boston (1914) mentioned above, eight more volumes of his poetry were published in U.S.A. - 'Mountain Interval' (1916), 'New Hampshire' (1923), 'West Running Brook' (1928), 'A Further Range' (1936), 'A Witness Tree' (1942), 'Come In and Other Poems' (1943), 'A Masque of Reason' (1945), and 'A Masque of Mercy' (1947). In America, Robert Frost was the poet who received many honours and rewards in comparison to other contemporary writers. In 1930, he was elected as the member in the American Academy. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry four times - for 'New Hampshire' (1924), 'Collected Poems' (1931), 'A Further Range' (1937), and 'A Witness Tree' (1943). In 1961, recited his patriotic poem 'The Gift Outright' when the late President of U.S. Kennedy took office. The following four lines from Robert Frost's poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' were written in Jawahar Lal Nehru's own hand on a piece of paper which was found on the office table after Nehru's death on May 27, 1964

The woods are lovely dark and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.

(Stopping by Woods, lines 13-16)

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Obviously, these lines served as an inspiration to Pt. Nehru, former Prime Minister of India, and one of the greatest men of India, and reminded him of the service of humanity and of his people. This poem inspired him to fulfill his duties as a leader of a great nation.

Robert Frost used the technique of symbolism in his poetry. Cambridge dictionary defines symbolism as “the use of symbols in art, literature, films etc. to represent ideas.” In poetry and other arts of French and Belgian origin, symbolism was an art movement in late nineteenth century. This movement sought to represent absolute truths with the help of symbols. Language and metaphorical images were to be employed to convey the truths, concepts, and messages symbolically. This movement to employ symbols was primarily as a reaction against realism and naturalism. It favoured spirituality, imagination and dreams. It retained Parnassianism’s liking for word play and concern of the song like and musical qualities of the verse. Parnassianism, a movement in poetry which began after romanticism and prior to symbolism, advocated “art for art’s sake” as the movement was inspired and influenced by the doctrine of “art for art’s sake” given by Theophile Gautier. The Parnassians sought for clarity, objectivity and faultless workmanship in art and poetry. The symbolists admired Theophile Gautier’s motto of “art for art’s sake.” The ‘Symbolist Manifesto’ published by Jean Moreas in 1886 names Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine and Stephane Mallarme as the three major and leading poets of the symbolist movement. In 1891, Mallarme defined symbolism as:

“It is the perfect use of this mystery that constitutes the symbol: to evoke an object, gradually in order to reveal a state of the soul or, inversely, to choose an object and from it identify a state of the soul, by a series of deciphering operations...” (Mallarme)

The symbolist poets were in favour of greater room for “fluidity”, and as such developed an affinity towards and liked free verse. Symbolist poetry attempted to evoke, rather than primarily to describe. It aimed to express the ideal. Symbolic imagery signified the state of the poet’s soul. The major symbolists in poetry include William Blake, Thomas Carlyle, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Stephane Mallarme, Gustave Flaubert, Paul Verlaine, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, Edmund Gosse, Arthur Symons, T.S. Eliot, Katherine Mansfield, Edith Sitwell, Wallace Stevens, A C Swinburne, Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, and Robert Frost.

Symbols are words which are not merely connotative, but also evocative and emotive. In addition to their literal meaning, they evoke lot of associated and connected ideas, concepts, figurative and implied meanings with them. For instance, the word ‘lily’ connotes a ‘flower’ only, but it also evokes images of purity, beauty, innocence and, pity. Thus, symbols are used to convey abstract ideas through concrete images.

### **Frost’s Poetry: Deceptive and Complex**

Frost’s poetry is easy and simple. But this apparent simplicity of his poetry is deceptive and misleading. In reality his poetry is very complex and intricate, and this complexity arises from his extensive use of symbols. In an article ‘the Figure a Poem Makes’, Frost asserts that “he is by intention a symbolist who takes his symbols from the public domains.” By the use of symbols, Frost enriches the texture of his verse and reveals the full significance and deeper meaning of particular situations and events. On the surface the poem presents a plain and simple narration or description, but a careful reading reveals the hidden and deeper meaning. The scope widens when the poem is symbolically interpreted, and the full implications are brought about.

### **The Symbolic Significance of Frost’s Regionalism**

Robert Frost is a great regional poet. The scenes, sights, characters and events of New England form the setting and background of his poetry. In New England, he writes only about the region that lies North of Boston, and of this region, too, only with the countryside and country-dwellers. This shifting and selecting of material for his poetry only from this countryside of the North of Boston results in his regionalism to acquire a symbolic meaning and significance. The region North of Boston represents the world at large and becomes a microcosm of it. His Yankee characters emerge as human beings symbolizing human nature in all ages and countries. Emotional responses of his characters have a deeper significance as these become symbolic of basic human instincts and responses. For instance, the emotional turmoil and trouble of the mother in the poem ‘Home Burial’ becomes symbolic of the universal emotional stress and pain felt by all mothers. In the poem ‘The Death of the Hired Man’, Frost talks about the fate of a servant which becomes symbolic of missed opportunities, self-respect and alienation.

### **Natural Symbolism**

Warren Austin uses the term 'natural symbolism' to describe Frost's symbols. They are all drawn from the phenomena of nature, and from the commonplace objects. The events and situations of day to day country life provide stuff for symbols in Frost's nature poetry. Since long time, great poets have used such symbols as these symbols come to the poet's mind spontaneously and naturally. His symbols are simple due to their simplest sources, but they are also complex, as they express more than one idea or meaning at the same time. A brief analysis of a few prominent lyrics of Frost would suffice to bring out the characteristic features of his symbolism technique.

#### **Symbolism in *Mending Wall***

The symbolism in the poem "Mending Wall" lies in this famous line:

"He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'" (Mending Wall, 27) as well as in the following lines:

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.

(Mending Wall, lines 1-4)

The above lines have contradiction in them and oppose each other. The wall has been taken to symbolize all kinds of man-made barriers. The wall suggests and represents the divisions between nations, classes, and groups- economic, racial and religious. In this context Lynen says that "In the voices of the two men- the younger, whimsical, 'new fashioned' speaker and the old-fashioned farmer who replies with his one determined sentence, his inherited maxim- some readers hear the clash of two forces: the spirit of revolt, which challenges tradition, and the spirit of restraint, which insists that conventions must be upheld, built up and continually rebuilt, as a matter of principle." The dispute between the two neighbors symbolizes the clash or conflict between convention and modernity, between aged and youth.

#### **Symbolism in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening***

This poem on the surface is a simple anecdote which narrates how the poet pauses along a country road one evening to watch the beauty of snowfall in the woods: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep", and as he gazes into beauty of soft, silent whiteness, he is tempted to stay on and on, and his mind is lost itself in the enchanted grove. Lynen says the poem "expresses the conflict which everyone has felt, between the demands of practical life, with its obligations to others, and the poignant desire to escape into a land of reverie, where consciousness is dimmed and the senses are made independent of necessity." The "sleep" here is the well-earned reward at the end of day's work; but it symbolizes the final sleep, death itself. The woods are kind of attractions which hinder the promises he must keep. The woods represent a kind of irresponsibility. Dr Raghukul Tilak writes regarding the use of "woods" as symbol:

"The wood in Frost's poetry is an ever-recurring complex symbol. It symbolizes perilous or sensuous enjoyment, the darkness of ignorance, as well as the dark inner self of man". (Tilak, 55)

#### **Symbolism in *Birches***

The poem 'Birches' can be read and enjoyed as a plain, simple description of the habits of birches. But, it has deep symbolic meaning. The upward climb towards heaven of the birch swinger symbolizes human ideals and aspirations, the human desire for withdrawal from harsh reality, the dream-world of fancy into which man would like to escape from the wearisome conditions of life on this earth. Frost expresses this idea in the following lines:

Earth's the right place for love:

I don't know where it's likely to go better.  
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,  
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk  
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,  
But dipped its top and set me down again.  
That would be good both going and coming back.

(Birches, lines 52-59)

The poem through the metaphor of swinging birches suggests that man should arrange his life in such a manner that he should attain a balance between his work on earth and his spiritual aspirations. It is not desirable to leave the earthly duties completely, nor is it advisable to have no spiritual aspirations, and be always pinned down to the earth.

Frost's poems of rural life are symbolic and highly suggestive though they appear simple and may be a reflection of the simplicity of rural life. "The Onset," "An old Man's Winter Night", "Out, Out", etc. deal with incidents and characters taken from rural life, but these events and characters are invested with a rich symbolic significance. The rural world, the centre of his attention, implies and suggests much more. The "moon" in the poem "An Old Man's Winter Night" symbolizes the organizing power which dies for the individual when his consciousness fades but which cannot itself die, because, though it controls and exists within the physical, it is a principle. The portrait of the old man alone on a winter night symbolizes not only age and death, but any situation in which man's ability to keep watch upon his world seems about to fail.

Frost's other poems like "Mowing", "the Mountain", "After Apple- Picking", "The Road Not Taken", "Fire and Ice", "Acquainted with Night", "Two Tramps in Mud Time", and "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" are highly suggestive and symbolic.

### Conclusion

Robert Frost has symbolized his lyrics. The simplicity of the lyrics is only apparent. In reality, they have a richness of texture, and a careful and deep reading reveals that they carry layers within layers of meaning. The unlearned may enjoy them as simple lyrics celebrating the charms of rural New England, but to the more thoughtful they appeal because of the deep moral and philosophical significance that lies underneath. Frost suggests much more than he actually describes. His imagery is drawn from the most commonplace and ordinary objects and phenomena of the world of nature and the world of man, but the poet endows it with a figurative significance so that the lyric reaches out much beyond the immediate and the physical. Randall Jarrell points out that he makes extensive use of symbols to convey profound truths, and in this respect he is one with such modern poets as T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and W.H. Auden. Frost himself tells us that "he is by intention a symbolist who takes his symbols from the public domain."

The above poems of Robert Frost analyzed in the context of symbolism prove and testify this statement of Frost. Thus, Frost's technique of communication in his poetry is essentially symbolic, and he is regarded as a great American poet who used symbols extensively in his poetry to convey deep moral and philosophical meanings and significance.

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