

Frost of Pessimism

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Abstract

Four-time Pulitzer winner Robert Frost (1874-1963) was arguably the most popular poet in the United States during the twentieth century, and still he retains his popularity not only in US but among the international audience, as a nature or pastoral poet with modern philosophical vision. His universal appeal is due to his sublime art, an act of clarification of life, which, without even simplifying the truth, makes him accessible to everyone. He drew his images in poetry from the New England countryside and his language from New England speech. Although his images and voice often seem familiar and old, his observations have a tinge of skepticism, which may not be evident in the first reading but need several attempts for discovery. In being both traditional and skeptical, Frost's poetry provides a link between the English poetry of the 19th century and the American poetry of the 20th century. In the present article I have tried to establish Robert Frost as a pessimistic poet. I have examined a wide range of poetry composed by him and garnered instances for my thesis. I have argued that Frost's poems appear simple at first glance, but reveal themselves to be subtle and enigmatic upon further scrutiny. His poetry harbors pessimism at the core. As I have observed, Frost's pessimism has been expressed through the themes of death, decay, destruction, frustration, anxiety, loneliness and agony. Existentialist theme like absurdity of life also features prominently in his poetry.

1. Introduction

Pessimism denotes a tendency to expect bad happenings, i.e. a tendency to see only the negative or unpleasant aspects of all things. It also refers to a doctrine that all things become evil or that evil outweighs good in life. Pessimism may generally be identified with a mood of negation expressed towards life and world. It is an ideology which prevents a person from getting too complacent in thinking and actions. An artist who cherishes a pessimistic philosophy loses faith in scriptural truths and builds a spiritual world of his own replete with complex equations of life. However, pessimism is not negating truth per se; rather it is a careful leap towards truth, to clutch at the phenomena in deeper level. Being pessimistic, one only avoids the hype of wholesale consolations and takes shelter in some personal contemplation of practical value. He becomes a solitary sage, preferring night to day, darkness to light, for the comparative advantage of self-enlightening meditation.

Robert Frost, presumably the most influential American poet in the twentieth century, was a pessimist in his poetic vision. A master artist of nature depiction, with richness of imagery and symbolism, Frost delicately incorporated pessimism in his poetry. He cannot be termed plainly as a nature or pastoral poet, as the sense applies to William Wordsworth and Edmund Spenser. He is a great reader of nature with deep philosophical vision, embedded in a bleak aesthetics. His poetic compositions are congruous, as it were, with the rhythm of nature, but what sounds ironic is that his search for symmetry ends in asymmetry, to his dismay. His depiction of nature is

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loaded with an acute sense of gloom. He is found to be more concerned with negative forces in nature rather than the benign ones, or he discovers darkness in light – sun-spots in the sun. Beneath the bright surface of his poetry, a condensed darkness is at work. As readers delve deep into his verses, they are sure to feel the chill of pessimism – a dark world wrapped in the beauty of nature. His poems are like sugar-coated pills, which give a sweet taste initially but leave bitter feeling in tongue finally.

In this paper I have attempted to bring into light Frost's pessimistic philosophy, collecting instances from a good number of poems. This is an odyssey of finding truth – the true nature of a poet. As I have observed, Frost's pessimism has been expressed through the themes of death, decay, destruction, frustration, anxiety, loneliness and agony. Existentialist theme like absurdity of life is also evident. There is reason to be convinced that Frost was entirely conscious of the complexities of modern life and his poetic lines hit upon the very crisis of contemporary times. Kantak's (1990, p. 166) remark is enlightening in this respect:

Frost's world has so little to do with the early bucolic tradition and he so much involved with the sophisticated world of man's knowledge that there is no question of his juxtaposing a modern complex world with a simplified construct for the purpose of the kind of illumination that the pastoral affords.

Thus Frost's pessimism is rooted in the crisis of modern life, floating in the void of meaninglessness. The invocation of urbanity as an antidote to the spiritual crisis hits a snag, which inspires the poetic persona to take shelter in nature, which is however not devoid of danger. Therefore the groan of helplessness of life becomes intense in Frost's poetry, defying any romantic escape.

2. Surface Meaning and Deep Meaning

It is often said that Frost's poems are easy to read but not easy to understand. Almost all of his poems contain a secret message. That message has to be extracted diving beneath the surface level. At first glance things look nice and orderly, but once the surface has been scratched, the real complexity surfaces. His poems are rather elusive. Under the apparent simplicity of his verses lurks a hidden commentary on both life and nature. Frost uses simple words to describe complicated phenomena. He utilizes ordinary techniques to cause an extraordinary effect, which is mainly brought through the expert use of symbols, images, irony and paradox. For Frost, the hidden meaning is shadowy – in fact, too shadowy to figure out:

But whenever the rood came white
The head in the dark below
Was a shade less the color of night,
A shade more the color of snow.
("They Were Welcome To Their Belief" 9-12)

Frost creates deeper meaning in an extremely subtle way. The deeper meaning entails the deeper realization of life and the deeper realization entails a dark reality.

With a process of unfolding secrets, readers meet pessimism at the end of tunnel. Frost is conscious of the whole process. In nature lyrics, Frost presents a comparison between the outer scene and the inner psyche, to use his own phrase, 'outer and inner weather' (Baym 2003, p. 1879). Geddes (1996, p. 46) makes the same observation:

Initially few readers progress in their appreciation beyond the deceptively simple surfaces of his poems. But Frost writes symbolic poetry; to arrive at certain basic truths about life, he explores feelings and thoughts obliquely through the use of simple bucolic incidents. Poems as immediately accessible as "Stopping by Woods", "Mending Wall", and "Birches" possess levels of meaning that are dark and profound – like subtle literary parables.

The observation is echoed by Stanford, with an explanation (1999, p. 1190):

Frost's poems often seem deceptively simple because he draws on familiar subjects, often depicting scenes from the natural world as well as people with easily recognized strengths and failings. Frost's language, while powerful and evocative, is easily accessible to most readers and so it is easy to overlook the way his poems often depend on ambiguity for their impact.

At the deep level the poet sprays the frost of pessimism in the atmosphere around him. The readers get a stunning effect as if from the tune of pipe played by a snake charmer. Frost's poems often contain multiple layers of meaning, just more than two, where unwrapping one layer leads to the other, deeper and deeper, continually. On writer's part, it is a great craftsmanship of encoding meaning in hierarchy. There is no end of mystery. Resolution of one mystery just opens the door of another.

3. Pessimistic Themes

3.1. Horror of Death

The theme of death figures prominently in the poetry of Frost. Death is the end of human life and the thought of it gives rise to a bizarre mood of sadness. It is the unavoidable, though unwelcome, destination of life. All human hopes and aspirations are lost in death so nothing can be more tragic than it. Frost sometimes seems to be obsessed with morbidity and mortality. He proclaims the incomprehensibility of death with his powerful prophetic incantations, making readers somber and heaving deep sigh in their private moments. In "The Death of the Hired Man" readers, with horror, discover the dead body of farm laborer Silas sprawling pitifully on chair at a lonely corner of the house of Warren and Mary. The 'miserable sight' fills the eyes of any sensible reader with tears. In "The Impulse" section of "The Hill Wife" the loving sporty girl finds her 'finalities besides the grave'. Why are all these deaths, unexpected and untimely, after all? No answer on writer's part. Only the readers are thrown into a fearful fantasy.

Frost's other poems including "In a Disused Graveyard", "The Onset" and "The Witch of Coös" witness the horror of death. It is felt as the most irresistible destructive force. The death reference can also be found in "The Wind and the Rain",

“Out, Out–”, “Departmental”, “The Quest of the Purpled-Fringed”, “The Draft Horse”, “A Leaf Treader” and “Not Quite Social”. In “A Leaf Treader” the fallen leaves beckon men to death. In “Not Quite Social” death is consequential, coming through self-approval:

Anyone is free to condemn me to death –
If he leaves it to nature to carry out the sentence
I shall will to the common stock of air my breath
And pay a death tax of fairly polite repentance. (Stanza 4)

3.2. Pangs of Loneliness

The loneliness of human life has found a spacious room in Frost’s poetry. “Desert Places” stimulates images of depressing loneliness. In the poem the speaker is a man who is traveling through the countryside surrounded with a peculiar feeling of abandonment and isolation. The word ‘desert’ itself is associated with harsh living conditions. There animals are smothered in their lairs and the speaker is too ‘absent-spirited’. The closing line ‘To scare myself with my own desert places’ gives a message of self-intimidation. He is scared of his own loneliness, his own desert places. A paradoxical element may be found in the poem. The speaker views a snow-covered field as a desert place. ‘A blanker whiteness of benighted snow’ causes an effect of numbness. Whiteness symbolizes emptiness, nothingness and death. He recognizes that this winter place is like his life. He has let loneliness creep into his life and totally take over like the snow had crept up on the plain to silently cover it up.

The pangs of loneliness are also evident in the poem “The Most of It”. The poem begins with the man, a nameless individual, in a mysterious, unidentified location. He is surrounded by a lake, by ‘tree-hidden’ cliffs, by a ‘boulder-broken beach’. The poem ends in disappointment. The animal is unwilling and unable to provide the man with the companionship he needs, and the whole event proves nothing but an anticlimax: ‘- and that was all.’ The readers look back and hear the cry of loneliness again:

He thought he kept the universe alone;
For all the voice in answer he could wake
Was but the mocking echo of his own
From some tree-hidden cliff across the lake. (“The Most of It” 1-14)

The pangs of loneliness may be felt in “Bereft”, “An Old Man’s Winter Night”, “Ghost House” and other poems. Frost’s poetic approach to loneliness emanates from his pessimistic philosophy of life. Montgomery (1962, p. 148) makes it clear:

Frost’s view of man’s nature, then, is consistent throughout his poetry. Each man is, in a sense, a stranger in this world, and so he remains. His is not to question why he is alone or why the world seems to be against him.

3.3. Decay and Destruction

Nothing is permanent in this world; everything is subject to decay and destruction. This aspect of nature makes Frost ponder to provide him with necessary poetic artifacts. In “Nothing Gold Can Stay” he observes that golden moments fade away in life as in nature. ‘Leaf subsides to leaf’ implies autumn, when the leaves begin to turn gold and fall to the ground. The poem also illustrates the loss of innocence. As the seasons change, life progresses and innocence can no longer be sustained. The color gold represents the process of ageing which is associated with overwhelming feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. We can hear the symphony of decay in the rhymed lines:

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay. (“Nothing Gold Can Stay”)

Human body is also subject to decay and deformation. Human beings cannot retain their youth and beauty for ever. We may find regrets of lost beauty in “Provide, Provide” (1-3):

The witch that came (the withered hag)
To wash the steps with pail and rag
Was once the beauty Abishag.

In “The Wood-Pile” we see that noble life dedicated to the welfare of downtrodden humanity finds salvation at the cost of its own doom. Life is seen as a pile of wood in the deserted forest – ‘The wood was grey and the bark warping off it / And the pile somewhat sunken’. It has been lying untouched for many days there, waiting to be used by the people needing warmth. The wood-pile seeks (39-40):

To warm the frozen swamp as best as it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

The desolation of decay becomes unbearable in “Directive”. Nobody is ready to discover a doomed house in a doomed place. It does not seem to be a reality at all as life appears to be only a shadow. Frost writes:

Of detail, burned, dissolved, and broken off
Like graveyard marble sculpture in the weather,
There is a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in a town that is no more a town.

In “Wind and Window Flower” flowers wilt and love rots. In “The Oven Bird” the midsummer and mid-wood bird is reluctant to sing as ‘leaves are old and that for flowers’. The nature has changed with a sign of poverty – ‘a diminished thing’. Life is ultimately removed from sweet music. It becomes barren and lackluster.

The tragic aspect of life, with decay and destruction, is also prominent in his other poems including 'Home Burial', 'The Fear', and 'A Servant to Servants'. In "Fire and Ice" he draws a picture of the destruction of the universe. Ultimately man can stand nowhere. He is doomed to be destroyed.

3.4. Bitter Frustration

Human life is full of frustration. Frustration comes from unfulfilled dream, making life replete with sighs and regrets. In "The Road Not Taken" the speaker was bound to choose a path in the forest but he later looked back and thought what could have happened if he had chosen the other path. He became nostalgic thinking the untrodden course. He could not go back to the initial juncture and change the consequences any more. So memory and rumination accompanies him now. It is a harsh reality of life that the passed time cannot be made otherwise and decision cannot be revoked. There is no return and no way to correct the errors of life. Once chosen, set for ever. It evokes a mood of sadness. Just hear the sigh:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
Took the less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Hamilton (1969, p. 18) says, "The air of loneliness, or irretrievable error that hangs over the poem is a beguiling means of disguising its essentially inert bleakness." Readers may also discover a sentiment of indecision in the poem. Indecision is the trait of modern life. Man cannot decide what to believe, what to do, what course to take. They are always in a fix of dithering.

Even his most celebrated poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" which starts rather in a happy mood is not devoid of the tone of despair. Its welcome note of solitude is only apparent. In depth it illustrates a dark complexity. The poem captures images of loneliness and indecisiveness by selective word choice. For instance, woods are depicted as dark and deep, as inviting as death. It is a place of isolation. The speaker also uses images of darkest evening and frozen lake to solidify the mood of isolation. The speaker is riding into the darkness on an unknown journey, only to find himself caught between the woods and frozen lake. In a sense, he is caught between old patterns and new possibilities. The woods represent the unfamiliar while the frozen lake represents the familiar. The speaker is afraid to venture out into the unknown. In general, people live in fear of change. A tune of frustration should not be missed out when the speaker says he has promises to keep before he sleeps. Many things are yet to be accomplished but the days are numbered. Promises and their unfulfilment make the person pensive. The last stanza answers the question why he stopped by the woods. He stopped because he was attracted by their dark beauty. And the repeating final line takes the readers beyond the literal meaning inviting them to read 'sleep' in the meaning of death. (DiYanni 2004, p. 529)

The sorrow of unfulfilled dream is grossly noticed in the poem 'After Apple-Picking'. The orchard owner has filled many barrels with apples while one barrel is

still half-filled and there is little hope that it will be filled up this season around. 'And there is a barrel that I didn't fill / Beside it, there may be two or three / Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.' (3-5) This gives rise to a feeling of frustration. Human minds are never satisfied with hundreds of achievements. They want more and more and it never ends. Mismatch of expectation and fulfillment is a source of great agony for humans.

3.5. Failed Communication and Relation

Frustration in human life may also emanate from the inability or breakdown of communication and the broken relation. Humans try to communicate with each other but they may fail to do so in the long run. Nothing is more disappointing than being unheard by the person at whom words are targeted. "Mending Wall" focuses on the communication problem in human society. A big wall separates humans from one another. The poet thinks that this wall cannot be crossed. It is insurmountable. And so he concludes with an ironic remark: 'Good fences make good neighbors.' People become separated without even realizing it because they become so caught up in what is happening in their lives. The fact that they do not take notice of one another creates a place that becomes more and more divided by differences.

The poems "Putting in the Seed", "Snow", and "A Time to Talk" bear the evidence of agony from failed communication. The frailty of human relationship has been expressed with allegory of flower and breeze in the poem "Window and Window Flower". At the end of some intimate relation, two are separated.

But the flower leaned aside
And thought of naught to say,
And morning found the breeze
A hundred miles away. ("Window and Window Flower", last stanza)

Hamilton (1969, p. 21) explains Frost's theory of separation in the following terms:

...Frost was popularly admired for his promotion of ideals of separatedness, of self-reliance. Many of his nature poems concern the intrusion of one natural phenomenon upon another, and many of his lyric and dramatic poems present situations in which withdrawal, separation, standoffishness, are positively recommended. At his best, Frost's doctrines of self-reliance shaded into very moving confrontations of solitude, of alienation, of a low-spirited sense of exclusion, settling foe tough, short-term objectives.

3.6. Ugly and Unruly Nature

Frost regards nature as a beautiful but dangerous force, worthy of admiration but nonetheless fraught with peril. Nature does not offer unmixed blessings for humans but also curses. Nature can be ugly and unruly. We may find the ugly face of nature in "Design". Frost utilizes a triangle of symbols to drive his purpose home. Spider, moth and heal-all – the three agents of nature, which are all of the same color

'white', portray some evil design in nature. According to Jarrell's (1962 p. 89) evaluation, this little albino scene is too widely catastrophic to be accidental, too impossibly unlikely ever to be a coincidence: accident, chance, statistics, natural selection are helpless to account for such designed terror and heartbreak, such an awful symbolic perversion of the innocent being of the world. Nature completes an arrangement of killing on hill-top. There will be blood-shed and unheard cry. The evil design of nature is explicit (13-14):

What but design of darkness to appall? –
If design govern in a thing so small.

Much of Frost's poetry is concerned with how people interact with their environment, and though he sees the beauty of nature, he also sees its potential dangers. "Once by the Pacific" starts with a storm, but it turns out to be more than just a storm. It even gets mysterious in the lines that follow; it talks of 'dark intent'. People should prepare for further danger, because ocean will be more furious. The apocalyptic message is clear (9-14):

The cliff in being backed by continent;
It looked as if a night of dark intent
Was coming, and not only a night, an age.
Someone had better be prepared for rage.
There would be more than ocean-water broken
Before God's last 'Put out the Light' was spoken.

The destructive force of nature can be discerned in other poems like "Into My Own", "The Flood", and "Atmosphere". "In Flood" we notice how water brings inconveniences to human habitation. In "Atmosphere" we see how wind causes havoc on earth. The poet writes (1-3):

Winds blow the open grassy places bleak;
But where this old wall burns a sunny cheek,
They eddy over it too toppling weak

The nature is often hostile towards men, as Frost sees it. We feel helpless 'when the wind works against us in the dark, and pelts with snow'. ("Storm Fear" 1-2) The helplessness of life in nature is the central theme of "The Runway". The ugly face of nature is also evident in "Afterflakes" and "There are Roughly Zones". Frost's sight is often caught by the dark side of nature and his poetic compositions tend to highlight it. Notice how he depicts trees:

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
Were not as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,
But stretched away unto the edge of doom. ("Into My Own", first stanza)

A bleaker description of trees is available in "The Sound of Trees": 'Some day when they are in voice / And tossing so as to scare / The white clouds over them on.' (21-23) We may notice his diction ('shadow', 'black') while describing a mountain in "The Mountain" 1-4): 'The mountain held the town as in a shadow. / I saw so

much before I slept there once: / I noticed that I missed stars in the west, / Where its black body cut into the sky.' Frost's depiction of nature culminates in ambiguity and evasiveness. Kantak (1990, p. 173) notes:

The ambiguity and evasiveness generally charged to Frost's account seems to be conceived by him as an inevitable effect of the nature of reality and our efforts to understand it.

3.7. Predicaments of Human Civilization

Human civilization has grown out from the blood and bones of the tamed and defeated. The victors have occupied lands and claimed them to be their own, displacing the natives. It is the unnoticed part of the history of the world. The sensible poetic mind cannot but feel the sorrow of displacement and its concomitant depression. The gift of conquest comes from a sea of tears. "The Gift Outright" churns out the result of European aggression on the American land (14-16):

To the land vaguely realizing westward,
But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,
Such as she was, such as she would become.

The tragic story of subjugation and annihilation of the Red Indians has been portrayed in "The Vanishing Red". The aggression of Europeans on the native Indians is also conspicuous in "Flight". He voices against the repression on minority, allegorically, in "A Minor Bird". Frost is against any kind of coercion and exploitation. His mind attains great aversion to suppressing even a small entity. He clearly says: 'And of course there must be something wrong / In wanting to silence any song.' ("A Minor Bird" 7-8)

Human intervention has spoiled the sanctity of nature. We can check "Good Hours" for a ready reference. Frost also identifies a lack of harmony between man and nature in "The Door in the Dark". The poet's mind is only wounded by the troubles humans cause to nature. He feels embarrassed.

Even science cannot save humans from embarrassment. Science solves problems of material dimension, but the questions of spiritual and moral nature remain unresolved. This is a further point of frustration for Frost. Lynen (1962 p. 185) notes:

We have seen that his special way of depicting nature is a means of dealing with the problem which science posed for the modern poet. It therefore appears that his pastoralism provides a means of dealing with the similar problem. It is that of preserving within the disorganized world created by science the sense of order and unity a meaningful life requires. In his pastorals, Frost's dominant motive is to reassert the value of individual perception against the fragmenting of experience resulting from modern technology. They thus deal with one of the most fundamental concerns of twentieth-century thought. It is an issue which has had no small effect on Eliot's and Pound's efforts to develop a concept of

culture. One sees it too as a motive in Yeats' thought. It is the central theme of countless modern works of social criticism.

3.8. Existentialist Absurdity

The poem "West-Running Brook" illustrates the existentialist theme of meaninglessness in life. The brook rolls on towards west in a mood of indifference. The flow of water is the metaphor of life. It is not all fair but foul, as the poet observes: 'Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool / Below the point, and were at last driven wrinkled.' The poet is at times terrified with the flow, as 'It seriously, sadly, runs away / To fill the abyss' void with emptiness.'

Humans cannot be happy with their designated place in nature with their severely constrained capacities to understand it. This incapacity comes out of their own nature, particular psychophysical shape, to use a notion employed by philosopher Immanuel Kant. Man is detained in the prison of the world. 'Man acts like a poor bear in a cage. / That all day fights a nervous inward rage.' ("The Bear" 13-14) In the poem the speaker contrasts bear and man, asserting that man's philosophical inquiries and scientific studies can make him a blind, comical, and pathetic creature. Humans cannot understand nature, understand even themselves. They cannot go deep into reality. What remains for them to do at last is lying on the sea-shore and counting the waves. For the poet:

They cannot look out far.
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?
("Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" 13-16)

Humans are destined to suffer the physical and mental pains because of the very nature they have. They look around them and feel the big void. Gradually their existence melts into nothingness. Human mind is a constant watcher but without ever discovering any meaning of life. 'He is watching from the woods as like as not.' ("The Smile" 12) Human ears hear the call of mysterious nature but they stumble and lament in the pursuit of deciphering the message. The poet provides the metaphor:

Far in the pillared dark
Thrush music went –
Almost like a call to come in
To the dark and lament. ("Come In" 17-20)

Frost observes nature but cannot decide anything about it. He cannot utter anything with certainty. It is the modern man's predicament – a post-modern dilemma. He is held from speaking – 'No expression, nothing to express'. ("Desert Places" 12) The futility of life on earth has taken effect in the following lines:

'Tis is the essence of life here,
Though we chose greatly, still to back
The lasting memory at all clear,

That life has for us on the wrack
Nothing but what we somehow chose;
Thus are we wholly stripped of pride
In the pain that has but one close,
Bearing it crushed and mystified. (“The Trial by Existence”, last stanza)

According to Frost, human life is not heroic in an epic sense. It is a life of staying – a momentary stay against confusion. Life goes on struggling helplessly against the sinister forces of nature. It is to be continued without any provision of complacency. “This solution is certainly not transcendental. This is not a life in conformity with nature, nor a life striving to be merged into nature. On the contrary, it is rather an endless battle against the decaying flux which nature, lacking mind, is continually victim to and therefore continually illustrates. Because the flux endures as long as existence endures, the battle against it is endless.” (Baym 1993, p. 150)

3.9. Eternal Oscillation:

Strain in modern life with all its complexities is depicted in Frost’s poetry. Modern life has restlessness, among other things, which is met in the poem “Birches”. ‘And life is too much like a pathless wood / Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs / Broken across it, one eye is weeping / From the twig’s having lashed across it open.’ (44-47) Life swings back and forth, up and down, like a birch twig. This oscillation is captured by the lines:

That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

The cycle of going up and down is also evident in “In Hardwood Groves”. The heave of life never ends. Is there any way to get out of it? Frost’s answer is vague. His “Directive”, for example, with its rich words and images, directs a reader to escape the present that is ‘now too much for us’ by remembering a past time and place, which memory has ‘made simple by the loss / of detail.’ The poem concludes with symbolic lines about the value of returning to one’s roots: ‘Here are your waters and your watering place. / Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.’

4. Dark Truths

Frost looks at nature through a tinted glass of pessimism and picks up the darker truths for himself and for audience. He depicts nature in such a way that after reading his poems, readers feel gloomy rather than ecstatic. Reading Frost evokes just the opposite feeling of reading Wordsworth, whose poetry is always associated with joy and pleasure. Frost intentionally injects a dark message in the apparent glamour of words. The readers however have to labor a bit to decipher the message. Frost approaches reality in his own reserved way to understand it with pessimistic view. He is transformed into a prophet of darker truths. It is now almost a universal claim about Frost. When President John F. Kennedy dedicated the Frost Library at Amherst in 1963, he stressed this very thought: “If Robert Frost was much honored during his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths.” (Gerber 1966, p. 139) Frost’s poetry runs between two main attitudes –

direct facing of inner loneliness and intent exploration of sinister order and possible chaos. Bower (1963, p. 129) maintains:

[...] all these attitudes have their place in the large Frostian armory of defense against a world often inscrutable, and often frightening when too well understood.

Frost discovers truth in its uncertainty, subjectivity and transience, perceptible in existentialist philosophy. He has no faith in absolute truth of Descartes, Spinoza or Hegel, but his position regarding truth is rather like Hume, Nietzsche and Sartre. Absolute knowledge is not possible and all human statements lack certainty. He stood between Platonic idealism and Emersonian transcendentalism. (Thompson 1962, p. 25) We meet *Frostian truth* in "A Boundless Moment": 'We stood a moment so, in a strange world, / Myself as one his own pretense deceives; / and Then I said the truth (and we moved on). / A young beech clinging to its last year's leaves.' (last stanza) In "Beech" (10-12) we are told: 'Thus truth's established and borne out, / Though circumstanced with dark and doubt-- / Though by a world of doubt surrounded.' Elsewhere, he defines truth as:

One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.
("For Once, Then, Something" 12-15)

Frost's poetry propagates a dark reality through a mood of despair and depression. He is adept at portraying the dark aspects of life than the bright. His metaphors are intended to describe a sinister view of life and nature. The darker aspects of Frost's poetry have been portrayed through rich symbolism, vivid imagery and clever diction. Frost's darker lines reflect his pessimistic philosophy of life. The biographical note in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (p. 1901) reveals the true character of Frost and his poetry:

Even Frost's adoring public was often hoodwinked by his pithiness into missing the menacing forces at work beneath the surface. Astute readers saw an altogether different sensibility, however, one possessed of a propensity toward darkness and terror, in which is a momentary stay against confusion.

5. Making of Pessimism

Robert Frost developed a pessimistic philosophy in his early adolescence and cherished it throughout his life. This philosophy is largely attributable to the turmoil in his personal life. In his life he suffered severe pangs and pains. He lost his father when he was only eleven and his mother struggled to maintain the family. He got admitted into a college but left it to earn his own bread. He got negative signals many a time from the girl he loved -- Elinor White, whom however he later married. He witnessed the death of two of his children -- daughter Marjorie and son Carol, and the demise of his wife. His sister Jeanie was mentally sick and stayed at a hospital in

Maine until she died. He got into poultry business but failed. His health broke down and had to change weather from time to time. He had to go through considerable financial strain. During his days of distress and depression, he even contemplated suicide. In his poetic career he also faced many hostilities and adverse comments which also helped him to form a negative view of the world. He was exposed to the seamy side of life and got chilled. He realized that the world is not heaven; and when we talk of heaven we are also not sure of it. All these harsh realities pushed him towards a pessimistic philosophy. The inward and outward burnings characterized his life and art with a touch of negativity. Hamilton (1969, p. 23) comments:

And here is perhaps the most interesting of all the Frostian paradoxes: wholly alive to the ugly, unloving elements in his own nature, he now and then depicted these elements with maximum accuracy, without any self-forgiving glossing-over or moralistic condemnation.

Frost died in Boston in 1963 amid his illness. He liked poetry and led a life of a poet throughout. He never refrained from writing poetry. He did not band with the fashionable structuralist and modernist movements of his time. He was a lonely walker, following the great traditions of pastoralism and romanticism. He was traditional in his themes but modern in his handling of these themes. He brought about novelty in nature depiction with his philosophical conviction. He elevated aesthetics to an unimaginable altitude, with his fabulous craftsmanship. He did not go with the flow. He wanted to be different and became so. He allegorically narrates the situation in the poem "The Road Not Taken" (18-20):

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

For Frost, any poem is the result of enthusiasm passed through an idea. When he felt any enthusiasm for writing, he would constrain it with pessimism. And when the enthusiasm was shaped into an idea it lost its glee; it would become the music of pain. His poetry is the shining moon that cannot hide the scars on its face. Frost is a magician, but his is black magic. With the touch of his magic wand, light becomes gloom blooming aplenty in human soul. Eventually, his poem begins in delight but ends in wisdom – wisdom of a seasoned soul. That is his poetic theory, to which all his poems stick. Lionel Trilling rightly calls Frost a poet who terrifies and compares him with Sophocles, who wrote great tragedies in Greek literary history. Sweeney and Lindroth (1965, p. 79-80) summarizes the philosophy of Frost in the following terms:

He was loved by the people chiefly because he made plain to them the terrible things of human life; they felt, perhaps, that only a poet who could make plain the terrible things could probably give them comfort.

6. Conclusion

Frost is a constant searcher of truth. For all his descriptive realism, he is temperamentally a poet of meditative sobriety. The truth he seeks is in the heart of humanity and in common objects. (Perkins and Perkins 1999, p. 1310) Robert Frost is a social philosopher in verse, rather interested in dark truths. There is rarely any poem written by Frost which does not bear the scar of pessimism, explicit or implicit. Readers may browse through the pages of 'A Boy's Will', 'North of Boston', 'Mountain Interval', 'New Hampshire', 'West-Running Brook', 'A Further Range', 'A Witness Tree', 'Steeple Bush', 'A Masque of Reason' and 'A Masque of Mercy' to explore his dark world. Although Frost concentrates on ordinary subject matters, his emotional range is wide and deep, and his poems often shift dramatically from a tone of humorous banter to the passionate expression of tragic experience. We must acknowledge that many of his poems start with an optimistic tone but inevitably end in pessimism. I shall term it the 'Frostian structure of poetry'. Frost is a pessimist in the core of his poetic entity. His pessimism is not however aimless. The void runs towards fulfillment. Ellmann and O'Clair (1988, p. 242) note, "Like so many new England writers – Hawthorne and Melville among them – he is a student of the darkness, aware of its encroachments, yet hopeful that it can, by art and understanding, be overwhelmed." Frost is placed beside Buddha, the great sage of sorrow, as his reincarnation in the twenty first century poetic scene. Ultimately darkness is removed by cosmic light when the state of nirvana is achieved. He accepts pain or pleasure with indifference but expects more of the former than of the latter, saying that he makes a virtue of his suffering. Hopkins' (1990, p. 176) remark is remarkable in this regard: "His daemonic drive has pushed road-blocks out of the way, or run them over – the disappointments, the deep sunk grief, the terrible moments of self-doubt." Frost utters with an air of resilience:

The hurt is not enough:
I long for weight and strength
To feel the earth as rough
To all my length.
("To Earthward" 29-32)

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A place to discuss and share content concerning philosophical pessimism. Anything and everything that falls under the broad category of philosophical pessimism belongs here. Anything else will just be removed. Memes, personal problems, thinly veiled cries of despair, et cetera are not the place. Is Frost a Pessimist? Just as there are barriers which separate man from Nature and God, so also there are barriers which separate him from his fellowmen. True pessimism implies a will not to live, a view that it would have been better not to have been born at all. Zhanqiao Liang Professor's name: Professor Jenni Course: Eng 111 11/21/2017 Pessimism in 20th Century War Poetry There is often a current theme in works created in each time period. While the Romantic period took on the theme of imagination and emotion, the Victorian Era took on the theme of knowledge and reason. However, when the time came for the 20th century, the lives of the writers were forced to take on a new theme. This was the theme of pessimism. Pessimism is a negative mental attitude in which an undesirable outcome is anticipated from a given situation. Pessimists tend to focus on the negatives of life in general. A common question asked to test for pessimism is "Is the glass half empty or half full?"; in this situation, a pessimist is said to see the glass as half empty, while an optimist is said to see the glass as half full. Throughout history, the pessimistic disposition has had effects on all major areas of thinking.