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A Critical Analysis of Robert Frost Poems

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Abstract: ***Many a Frostean poem poses a question and presents two points of view. In some, Frost slants the argument in favour of one viewpoint, by using an allusion. But the allusion is so implicit that it escapes the attention of the reader, leaving him with the feeling that the poem is ambivalent because the poet has not decided the argument one way of the other. Such is the case in "The Ax-Helve". It is an argument about "natural" education and academic education between the narrator and his neighbor. Baptiste, the neighbor, argues that the knowledge his children gain naturally from experience is far more valuable than the bookish knowledge "laid-on" artificially in schools. To him, the ex-helve is a symbol of natural education, by virtue of its built-in curves "native to the grain". After trimming it, he stands the helve "Erect but now without its waves, as when" the snake stood up for evil in the Garden". The allusion is to that moment in Milton's "Paradise Lost" when man, prompted by the Serpent, ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Because of man's disobedience of God, this has been called "evil", which Milton held to. It is good because it is what embarked man on the human process of acquiring knowledge for himself, through his own experience. The implication of the allusion is that nonacademic experience offers a better and more valid education because it is "natural" human activity. Thus the poem resolves the question. But the implication of this allusion is so covert that it escapes the reader, making him treat the poem ambivalent.***

1. INTRODUCTION

Frost's poem **"The lovely shall be Choosers"** is a good example wherein his reticence and openness operate. As the poet acknowledge it is about his mother, but its allusions to her hardships are so veiled that it is difficult to understand it unless the reader has considerable knowledge of her life. The poem speaks about her joys most of which turn out, in the end, to be sufferings. But the poet does not spell out what some of these difficulties are. The first two are a good case in point.

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Be her first joy wedding,
That though a wedding
Is yet-well, something they know he and she
And after that her next joy
That thought she grievers, her grief is secret:
Those friends know nothing of her grief to make it shameful.

The obscurity of these lines is caused by frost's mistaken belief that his parents were forced to marriage because he had already been conceived. As he considered this shameful, he would not make is public in a poem. Similarly, her last joy is equally obscure the reader is not given to know who is referred to be the "one" to whom here heart will go out as this last joy. In the poem, he reveals himself and his mother as much as he conceals by deliberate vagueness.

Frost's poetic techniques play no less a role in causing ambivalence that his temperament; allusion irony, wit, dramatic objectively, to name a few. As often as not, the reluctant ambivalence of such techniques is intentional. However, there are occasions when it is unintentional.

Literature Review:

Elliott Baker corroborates Thomson's claim that "A Road Not Taken" is not autobiographical: Frost allowed me to film him reading this poem for use on television. He then prefaced the poem with talk of when and how he came to write it. He said that it was not autobiographical, that the 'I' in the poem as his friend Edward Thomas, and that the poem was prompted before making them. (Qtd. in Thompson, Years of Triumph 548) So, in the poem Robert Frost is really mocking at Edward Thomas and his habit of fretting over choices, present and past. The poem is an ironical treatment of Thomas and its message is that dithering is silly. But the poem appears to be ambivalent, because Frost has concealed his irony.

Edward Thomas with who Frost botanized in England. About their botanizing days, Thompson writers: These ventures had ended with self-reproachful sighs and regrets. Even the most successful of these walks failed to satisfy Thomas's fastidiousness. He blamed himself for having made the wrong choice of location, and would sigh wistfully over the lovely specimens he might have shown if only he had taken Frost to a different place. Frost….. was amused by the laments. Teasing gently, he accused Thomas of being such a romantic that he enjoyed crying over what might have been. After one of their best flower-gathering walks, he had said to Thomas, "No matter which road you take, you'll always sigh, and wish you'd taken another".

It seemed to Frost that such an amusing attitude should provide the makings of a poem which could represent, with dramatic and subtle irony, the very human and familiar posture of his romantic friend. (Years of Triumph 88)

Irony is a basic causative technique of ambivalence in Frost

Irony is a device by which a writer means the opposite of what he says. At times irony may not be readily perceivable. But a reader who takes pains to understand a text often finds the difficulty not insurmountable. But in frost, irony sometimes goes unnoticed because frost

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deliberately conceals it for purposes of his own. Sometimes, he treats both attitudes in a poem ironically, leaving the reader helpless and perplexed. This has resulted in ambivalence in poems which are otherwise clear in their poetic stance.

A well-known poem, "The Road Not Taken" is illustrative of concealed irony: The poem is about the dilemma of a traveler. In front of him, two roads diverge into the woods. He chooses the second road, "less traveled by" because it is "grassy" and has "the better claim". Then he thinks of the future, "ages and ages hence", when he will tell, "with a sigh, "how" that has made all the difference". In symbolical terms, the traveler becomes man in general. And the roads through the woods become choices he has to make regarding his unknown future. The poem, thus, dramatizes the hesitancy man experiences in making a crucial choice at a critical moment, which determines the rest of his life. Such a decision is a step in the dark. It may be a choice for the better or a choice for the worse. If it is the first choice, he will tell, with a sigh of regret, how it has worsened his life. Since the human tendency is to look upon untried choices as possessing brighter prospects, even the man who has made the first choice might have a sigh of regret and tell that he would have had a better life than the best he now has, if only he had made the other choice. But this is not all that there is to the poem. Many readers take the poem to be autobiographical. The traveler is none other than the poet, recalling his gaudery about his poetic career.
In "Haec Fabula Docet ", Irony works in a different way. Frost treats two persons of the poem ironically, who represent individualism and excessive solicitude. La Fontaine is a blind man, independent by nature. In his anxiety for the blind man's safety, a do-gooder offers to help him, provokes his rage and causes him to fall into a trench and die. So ironical is the handling of the poem that frost seems to attack the officious interference that causes Lafontaine's death. At the same time, the poem points to the moral that proud and independent men like the blind man are doomed to trouble. The suggestion of the poem is that if the blind man had been left alone he would have found the trench with his cane and avoided it. Apparently the poem endorses the blind man's stance of fierce independence. Yet frost calls him "the apogee of human blind conceit" and indicates that independence like his disastrous consequences. In other poems like "A Roadside Stand", Frost disapproves of overly solicitous humanitarian impulses. In his life, he has often stood for the principle that the individual should be allowed to "go it sole alone". But in "Haec Fabula Docet" by his ironic treatment of both sides, he seems to disapprove of individualism as well as interference. The reader does not know what Frost's view exactly is, as far as this poem is concerned. It is ironical that the very independence of the blind man should bring death on him and that the do-gooder's anxiety for the blind man's safety should prove the cause of his death.

God and Man

In life, Frost's attitude to God and religion varied from orthodox Christian faith to agnosticism and atheism. He was brought up by a devoutly religious mother and faith in God was entrenched in his mind. At the core, he was religious, but his views sometimes swung to atheism and Agno.
In "A Masque of Reason" and A Masque of Mercy" humor conceals his views on the relation between God and man. The former explores the nature of religious faith and the latter, the relation between God's mercy and His justice. Both lack the high seriousness of the

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Romantics and the Victorians on the one hand and the ironic bleakness of moderns like Eliot on the other. The fooling employed by Frost in these poems hides his real attitude to God from the reader. "A Masque of Reason" concerns Job's rather comic attempts to wrest an explanation from God for the afflictions visited on him. None of God's explanation makes sense to Job, and the conclusion is inevitably that we cannot expect God to be comprehensible in human terms. But Frost's humor often clouds the theme. God in this masque is not the Almighty that the reader meets in serious poems like Milton's paradise lost. He has to be introduced to Thuatira whose recognition of God provokes laughter. "If you're the deity I assume you are /I'd know you by Blake's picture anywhere. "Frost's God has none of the golden touch about him when he pulls his collapsible prefabricated plywood throne upright. When Job's wife asks him what God is doing, he says, "Pitching throne", I guess". In a play that deals with the cosmic theme, Job's wife takes a snap of Job flanked by God and the Devil, with a Kodak Camera. With episodes like this, Frost conceals his view on God from the reader. "Forgive, O Lord, my little joke on Thee/ and I'll forgive Thy great big one on me".

Frost's poetry reflects his religious views in life. It is partly religious and partly unreligious. At times, it represents man and the universe as governed by God directly or indirectly. Some poems reflect a relatively conventional Christianity. Some poems reflect a relatively conventional Christianity difficult, but no so much as to threaten seriously the basic faith. However, there are other poems, representing a universe in which God is either irrelevant of absent. Some of them even suggest a dark and malevolent god and a universe in which there is no oversight of human affairs by God. In his dark poems, Frost is a puritan, agnostic existentialist and atheist. As a puritan, he believes that God is harsh and demanding and that the universe and man are fallen. As an agnostic existentialist, he holds that the existence of God is irrelevant and that temporal, earthly human life is the primary and even the only valid human frame of reference, to him external reality is incomprehensible, even meaningless. As an atheist he questions the very existence of God. In his unreligious poems, man is virtually helpless, partly because of his situation and partly because of his inherent weakness and excess.

"For One, Then something" is typically Frostean in the sense that it is ambivalent as to question of the existence of God. It embodies the orthodox faith in the existence of God as well as an atheistic Godless viewpoint. Many a time, the speaker of the poem has knelt at well-curbs, seeking truth deep down in the well water. But "Always wrong to the light", he has seen only an image of himself: "Me myself in the summer heaven, god like / looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs. "The emphasis in the first six lines of the poems is on "Always wrong to the light". In his search for God, the speaker's approach has always been wrong because of his egos. To see God and to be in contact with Him, one has search has been futile in the past, the well water always reflecting his own image instead of his. The following lines of the poem indicate that for "Once", after so many unsuccessful attempts, the speaker discerns something more of the depths", something of God, perhaps.
After a fleeting moment, he loses the glimpse. The poem concludes:

Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple

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Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out, what was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quarts? For once, then, something.

To the question, "What is the glimpse?" the answer is ambivalent. The "whiteness" may be "Truth about God; as likely as not, a mere "pebble of quarts". Thus, the ambivalence of the poem points to Frost's orthodox belief in the existence of God as well as to his atheistic denial of it.

Three kinds of humour in Frost poems

a) Levity or the good humored fooling
b) Wit, the sharper humour which is often ironic and immediately pertinent in its context and
c) A laconic quality, a type of understatement verging on both humour and irony which is faintly amusing because of its inconsistency with its context (Potter 56).

Levity appears in "The Mountain" where the poet exchanges pleasantries with a farmer of "grand liar" type who says that a spring at the top of mountain is "always cold in summer, warm in winter".
The narrator joins the fun saying, "There ought to be a view around the world/from such mountain". Often Frost's wit takes the form of puns. In "Mending Wall", raising the question of barriers, he plays on the words, "offense" and "a fence" which sound alike in pronunciation. In design, the phrase "morning right" suggests "mourning rite". His poem "out, out"-ends with an understatement. On the boy's death, the poet says, "Little-less-nothing- and that ended it". Frost uses all the three kinds to conceal his view from the reader.

2. CONCLUSION

The scope of the study is broader in perspective. Its purpose is not to examine individual poems in detail and decide if they are ambivalent or not. They study aims at bringing out the relationship between God and man, man and woman, man and fellow man and nature. In this writings, simultaneously he held himself back and tried to reach out to others. He put himself forward and remained in the background and, as a result, produced poetry that is quite often deceptive for many readers. He was reticent so that he might conceal his intimate thoughts and feelings from the readers. At the same time he desired to be found out so that his clearness and depth might be appreciated. This combination of self-exposure and reticence is, in fact, a keynote to much of frost. However, this makes it very difficult for the reader to identify his poetic stance with certainly.

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