

The Expression of the Human Predicament in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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Abstract

The poetry of Robert Frost obliquely tells us about the human predicament. It tells us about human being in the grip of alienation, despair and disillusionment. Robert Frost got the best honors from his own people but these honors could not change his outlook which had already been formed. Frost went to the extent of sayings:

Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament, a figure of the will braving alien entanglements. (1)

The fact is that there is little scope for happiness on this earth and if we go by what Lord Gautam Buddha said, there is no chance of being happy in this world where we live in the custody of our needs and desires. Aldous Huxley who was probably the greatest intellectual among the English novelists, has also written about the human predicament. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and many other have very laboriously written about the human predicament. Robert Frost was the great American poet who had a very intimate knowledge of human life and this knowledge of human life made him sufficiently acquainted with the human predicament. This is why; his poetry is a veritable account of this predicament.

1. Introduction

Human predicament has been the subject of all great books in all the languages, Homer's Iliad, Virgil's Aeneid, Milton's Paradise Lost and the novels of Thomas Hardy tell the tale of the human predicament. Robert Frost has written about the human predicament because he was unfortunate enough to have spent the most significant years of his life in extreme difficulties. He experienced every type of anguish resulting from economic crisis, loss of faith and the disappearance of a male guardian when he was needed the most. It was to help his mother that Frost tried various jobs including teaching, newspaper reporting and mill work. His leisure time, however, was spent in writing poetry. Frost was also suffering from various illnesses. His intent to train himself to be a college teacher also failed and he had to turn to poultry farming from the world of learning until he decided to gamble everything on his poetry and went to England with his wife and four children to try and test his fortune

as a poet. These trials and tribulations acquainted him with the challenging predicament of human life from his observation of things; Robert Frost had been hurt deeply...

And confused throughout his childhood by family difficulties and the marital estrangements of his parents; difficulties which had made the home in San Francisco more nearly a battleground than a place where a child might acquit a sense of security. (2)

Robert Frost has expressed again and again through a good number of his poems that the society around us is callous and is not prepared to pay attention to our limitations. He went to the world of nature for alleviation and rest but Frost was not an escapist and timely escapes could not solve his problems. This is why Frost comes to the same problems again and again and the problems about which he talks are isolation, alienation, misunderstanding, conflicts, and clash of interests among the different persons living together and so he has rightly been considered to be the poet of the human predicament.

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North of Boston is a collection of poems which is most representative of the reactions of Robert Frost, his dejection and despair, his knowledge of the afflictions of life and his sense of helplessness. According to Elizabeth Jennings, the book shows the thoughtful, meditative Frost, the poet of the dramatic monologue, the inquirer into the drama of nature and natural events. In this second volume of poems, there is an emphasis on darkness, an emphasis both upon an inward and outer darkness or blackness shown here in *Mending Wall* and *The Death of the Hired Man*:

He moves in darkness as it seems to me

Not of woods only and the shade of trees. (3)

It shall not be wrong to suppose that the book *North of Boston* is extremely significant so far as the question of understanding the psyche of Frost is concerned. The poems in the book present before us the inner experiences of the poet, his fears, and his apprehensions from the world he had seen with his own eyes. This thing has been closely marked by Jennings who has written:

Already in North of Boston Frost's reticence is manifested, a reticence which springs both from awe and from a fear of the grandiose. He seems to feel instinctively that the vast continent of America is too large, too unknowable, and perhaps too alien, to demand from man the kind of relationship which Wordsworth, for example, discovered in the Lake District in England. (4)

Mountain Interval, Frost's third book of poems, begins with *The Road Not Taken* which is one of his best known and most anthologized poems. The book contains a wider variety of poems and gives a more interesting view of the mature Frost than that of *North of Boston*. *Mountain Interval* contains reflective lyrics such as *The Road not Taken*, love poems such as *Meeting and Passing*, narrative poems like *In the Home Stretch* and *Christmas Trees* and aphoristic-descriptive pieces such as *Birches*. The general mood of the book is less somber than that of *North of Boston*, though Frost's later, almost habitual stoicism is already apparent in lines like these from the poem *Out, Out*:

The hand was gone already

The doctor put him in the dark of other

He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath

And then – the watcher at his pulse took fright

No one believed. They listened at his heart

Little – less – nothing! And they,

Since they were not one dead

Turned to their affairs (5)

Robert Frost seldom writes a poem that is purely descriptive. His own thoughts usually have some part to play in poems which are mainly concerned with landscape. Frost grew as a poet as he advanced in the direction of poetry and as such the poems in the *Mountain Interval* are reflective in nature. They are reflective in spite of their care for the land and intimacy with natural things. The poems also demonstrate Frost's interest in philosophical and scientific notions. The poem *Bond and Free* makes the comparison between thought and feeling, reason and intuition which was to become one of the major concerns of Frost as a poet. The following lines throw light on the reflective nature of the poem:

**Love has earth to which she clings with hills
and circling arms about wall within wall to shut
fear out.**

**But thought has need of no such things for
thought has a pair of dauntless wings. (6)**

There is another very important poem 'Birches' in the collection which not only tells us about the predicament of life but also offers us a solution to the problem. The poet says probably when he is face to face with a predicament:

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 from a twig's

**Having lashed across it open I'd like to go away
from earth a while**

And then come back to it and begin over

.....

Earth's the right place for love. (7)

The 'Home Stretch' is a dramatic poem in which Joe and the lady indulge in a long conversation. How much reflective are the lines given below:

"What is this"?

"This life"?

"Our sitting here by lantern-light together

And the wreckage of a former home?

You wont deny the lantern isn't new

The stove is not,

And you are not to me nor I to you (8)

The conversation continues in a distinctive manner:

**Now is a word for fools in towns who think style
upon style upon style in dress and thought**

At last must get somewhere. I've heard you as much no. This is no beginning

"Then an end?"

"End is a gloomy word" (9)

Robert Frost considered poetry to be an instrument of understanding. He also considered a poet very much responsible to remember that whatever he writes must essentially contribute to understanding. He considered poetry and life almost one and the same thing although a superficial reading of his poetry is not likely to give us this impression about Frost as a poet but he told this in an interview to the New Yorker. Frost said in a very candid manner.

One thing I care about and I wish young people could care about it, is taking poetry as the first form of understanding. Say it: My favorite form of understanding. If poetry isn't understanding all, the whole, then it's not worth anything. Young poets forget that poetry must include the mind as well as emotions. Too many poets delude themselves by thinking the mind is dangerous and must be left out. Well, the mind is dangerous and must be left in. (10)

References

- [1] Robert Frost: The Constant Symbol Atlantic Monthly October 1946. P 50
- [2] Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938 Lawrence Thompson: New York Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1970 P XIV.
- [3] Elizabeth Jennings: Frost Oliver and Boys Edinburgh and London 1964 P 22-23.
- [4] Elizabeth Jennings: Frost Oliver and Boys Edinburgh and London 1964 P 24.

Elizabeth Jennings has appreciated Mountain Interval in a very distinctive manner. In her opinion, the poems included in the book faithfully serve the object of Frost as a poet and a great object of Frost as a poet was to write about the human predicament. Jennings has said:

In this book, it is as if he had not only found his voice and medium but also discovered the particular territory which is always to be specially his as a writer. Some themes certainly for example, the spirit matter dichotomy, and a brooding, somber concern with man's destiny – are not as yet fully defined but they are already present in these poems. (11)

The poem Hill Wife clears Robert Frost's mood of reflection. It gives a picture of fear, love and loneliness. The poem represents an isolated woman's fear, loneliness and her love. It is misunderstanding by her husband. She disappears from the house of her husband with warning to him.

This is Frost's style of pointing out the predicament of human life, a tragedy that we all have to face with complaints or with equanimity.

- [5] The Poetry of Robert Frost: New York Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1975 P 137
- [6] Ibid. P 120.
- [7] Ibid. P 122.
- [8] Ibid. P 116-117.
- [9] Ibid. P 117.
- [10] Elizabeth Jennings: Frost Oliver and Boys Edinburgh and London 1964P 50.
- [11] Elizabeth Jennings: Frost Oliver and Boys Edinburgh and London 1964P 51-52.