

CHAPTER

ROBERT FROST

AND

HIS POETRY

CHAPTER - IIROBERT FROST AND HIS POETRY2.1 Introduction :

American Poetry which was once an offshoot now appears to be a parent stem. Due to its speculative, daring and sometimes melodious quality, it has become the register of some of the most independent minds. These qualities have been sustained and fostered by many good poets as well as by a few great ones. " What they have written has urgency, sensitivity to contemporary conditions, force of utterance."¹

When we look at the twentieth century American poetry, the prospect of achieving an innovation which would be more subtle than Whitman's, opened before the brilliant and gifted poets of the United States who were born in the seventies and eighties of the last century. The most important of these poets were Robert Frost (1874), Wallace Stevens (1879), William Carlos Williams (1883), Ezra Pound (1885) and T.S. Eliot (1888). All of them came to maturity after the first decade of the twentieth century and they held the stage upto the end of the Second World War.

When we look at Williams' verse, we notice that it has derived some of its power from his disapproval of both Pound and Eliot. He insisted on the necessity of writing in the American grain. Though Pound considered himself

American, the precise degree of Americanism did not much occupy him. Eliot also increasingly considered himself English. But they meet Williams on the ground that they were equally concerned with speech. All of them gave more prominence to free verse than to the traditional rhythm, rhyme and meter in poetry.

Stevens and Frost offer in American poetry something of the contrast of Wordsworth and Keats. For Stevens, reverse of Frost's old weather beaten world, the world was quite new. There was nothing to take help of because the old gods had left it, and man, on his own at last, could make of it, what he chose.

2.2. Frost as a poet:

From these 'New' poets when we come to Robert Frost we notice that at the time of his death in January of 1963 he was the best known and most celebrated and most widely acclaimed poet in America since Longfellow. In fact Frost was the first American who could be honestly recognized as a master poet by world standards. Though Poe, Longfellow, Whittier, Whitman, and many more of his American predecessors had written good provincial verse, they failed to achieve the title of the master poet. " Frost has won the title fairly, not by turning his back on ancient European tradition, nor by imitating its successes, but by developing it in a way

that at last matches the American climate and the American language".²

Indeed, Frost has been the most honoured of the American poets who received four times the Pulitzer Prize in 1924, 1931, 1937 and 1943. He also received many honorary degrees, including degrees from both Cambridge and Oxford, and numerous other prizes, distinctions, fellowships and special appointments. He led very active life during the last forty years of his life, reading his poems to the audiences, lecturing on poetry, holding special appointments in Universities and in the library of congress. In January 20, 1961 at the inauguration of President John F. Kenedy, he crowded his public appearances by reading "The Gift Outright" in clear crisp New England tones, to the largest audience ever any poet, had.

At the beginning of twentieth century, in America, there was 'New Poetry' movement. The modern poets broke the tradition and found their own way. But Frost in September 1912 left for England with his family. "If he had lingered another year in America, the tidal wave of 'New' poetry movement might have carried him to fame and perhaps to security. As it was, he found in England the companionship in craft and the appreciation for which he had waited so long".³ The outbreak of the first World war forced him to return to America. Now the Magazines which had once

turned him down were found at his doors asking for poems. He was known as one of the "new" poets, but he did little to identify himself with either the Boston or the Chicago branch of the movement. He was always a lone stiker writing his verses on country things.

Any text of Frost will give us an overall idea that Frost was a regional poet. His region was New England, more particularly New Hampshire. "Hand in hand with the common opinion of Robert Frost as a regional poet, rather strictly limited to portraying the rural North-east, comes a corollary opinion which holds that he is restricted also in his handling of major themes."⁴ Frost never tried, like Faulkner to bring his characters into regional unity. The men and the women of his poems are isolated, like e their farms and wood lots. "His regionalism, in short, resembles that of Emily Dickinson and Sarah Orne Jewett. It gave him a place to stand where he could see what was close by in field or cellar hole and as well, a clear view above his hills to the "further range" beyond."⁵ Though many critics had given common opinion about Frost as a regional poet, it is misleading and limiting to Frost to certain area. In this regard Frost explained his position clearly in an interview which he gave to Harvey Breit. "I am not a regionalist. I am a realmist. I write about realms of democracy and realms of the spirit. The land is always in my bones. Someone asked me if I was for democracy or against it and I could only say that I am so much of it that I didn't

know. I have a touchiness about the subject of democracy, of America." ⁶

Frost did not enter into Politics, except to have his fun with the political poets of the thirties who came to him for retreating from the problems of the day. He is not also the religious poet though throughout his poems we are aware of his search for and discovery of order. But fear of chaos is also a dominant theme in his poems; an early poem called " A Fear ", in North of Boston with concluding lines:

" You understand that we have to be careful.

This is a very, very lonely place. "

expresses the same emotion. But in later poems in Steeple Bush his attitude towards fear underwent a change because they attempt to analyse the emotion rather than simply to express it. He explained it in his first poem of Steeple Bush, " The Fear of God ".

The most noticeable element in Frost's all reflective poems is an almost total absence of despair of pessimism. But it does not mean he is away from darkness or difficulties. He realizes that without darkness there would be no light, without evil there would be no possibility of freely choosing good, without death there is no life as we know it.

Frost is a metaphysical poet in the tradition of Emerson and Emily Dickenson, with all that term implies of the poet's desire to go beyond the seen to the unseen. But we notice that his imagery is less involved than of the older metaphysicals. In his poetry, as in all great metaphysical poetry, the tension increases between the simple fact and the mystery which surrounds it until the total meaning flashes into the final words. Frost commented on the fact and it has been noted, often enough, that poetry was to him essentially dramatic. Whatever his theme may be he works to dramatise it for the reader.

Frost is aptly called a poet of nature. ^{he} But does not seek in nature either a sense of oneness with all created things or union with God. There is nothing Platonic in his view of life; everything is good and valuable in itself, not because it is a fore-shadowing of something else". ⁷ In his early poems we feel the joy in the sensuous pleasure which nature has given most modern poets. But Frost knows where to find the line which separates nature from man. When he is tired of trees again turns to mankind; but if by noon he has too much of men against ~~he~~ he could turn to the earth. In the earlier poems man and nature confront each other across the wall, as the buck and the doe in "Two Look at Two" face the wandering man and woman each pair in its own pasture.

According to Frost man needed nature, though he should never make the mistake of crossing the wall into her pasture. To him the woods are lovely, dark and deep against a place to linger and forget duty. But its attraction is to linger only and not to stay. But in the later poems the bond between man and nature becomes loose. Earlier what had been strength and indifference in nature became for him brute force and hostility. What once was balance was now appeared a struggle.

Though Frost seldom strayed to alien country beyond the sight of his New England upland pastures and meadows, his poetry widened in content and technique from book to book. Any reader can notice that his every book discloses a particular facet of his genius, some new attitude or tone or approach. We notice few modern poets have shown such a capacity for growth ~~ex~~ into old age.

His first book A Boys Will (1913), is surprisingly free from the echoes from the old poetry. It may be due to Frost's long practice of poetry into silence. His second book, North of Boston (1914) which contains all the poems which are on New England themes gave for the first time his long dramatic monologues. Frost deserves praise for this because he so quickly mastered a genre which only E. A. Robinson had excelled in since Browning invented and perfected it.

In his next volume, Mountain Interval (1916) Frost had turned his attention to another kind of poem for which he became equally noted. It is in the form of a brief meditation prompted by an object or a person or an episode that seized his attention and compelled his wonder. Here also he presents the great drama in the elaborated situation though there is no speaker and there are no longer poems as in his earlier book, North of Boston. In the Sonnet, "The Oven Bird " the starting point is an object, the mid wood bird whose question is " What to make of a diminished thing ". In " An old Man's winter Night ", the thought moves out from a person, an aged man, trying to keep a house, a farm, a country side against ghosts, the moon and the cold.

New Hampshire (1923), winner of the first Pulitzer Prize, came with several new qualities. The title poem, long and satirical, announced Frost's determination to prefer this state which has " one each of everything as in a show case" to all others. In this volume we find new self-consciousness. The poet is willing to talk about himself and his art somewhat defiantly. The title of his next volume, West Running Brook (1928) has a special importance. Like the brook ~~the brook~~ which runs west while all the other brooks run east to reach ocean, the speaker of the poem trusts himself to go by contrary. Thus with new insights Frost continuously wrote poems. Meanwhile in 1930 his first volume of Collected Poems was published which brought him second Pulitzer Prize in 1931.

When Frost was sixty-one his next book A Further Range (1936) ^{was} published. This book also brought him the third Pulitzer Prize. In this book there are two groups of poems which bear the significant captions "Taken Doubly" and "Taken Singly". In the poems "Taken Doubly" he expects the reader to keep his eye on the moral theme. "A Lone striker" is a homily on individual freedom; "The Gold Hesperidee" is a parable on pride. "Two Tramps in Mud Time" preaches the necessity of uniting avocation and vocation. The poems in this group are full of didacticism. They are also delightful.

A witness tree, (1942) which won for Frost the fourth Pulitzer Prize, contains some of his most flawless lyrics. With three exceptions this book is entirely composed of short poems. In this volume we have the sonnet "The Silken Tent", which is perhaps the finest of all Frost's love poems.

Frost's last book of lyric poetry, Steeple Bush was published in 1947. It includes an extremely condensed poem called "Directive". "The poem is a warning, an instruction, an injunction, yet it lies beyond didacticism, largely because one feels the poet is learning about himself at least as much as he is instructing the reader."⁸

At the end of Frost's career, he grew fonder of searching among abstractions. So it was not surprising

when he published in 1945, A Masque of Reason and in 1947 A Masque of Mercy. These two short plays make an illuminating comparison and are his only effort at extended composition, ventured into poetic drama without conquering the stage. A Masque of Reason is a short play that brings the Biblical story ~~of~~ upto date. But Frost's way of doing it is very different. A Masque of Mercy is equivalent of Milton's Paradise Regained. And here Frost unlike Milton is more successful with his handling of the New Testament than he was with his Old Testament.

Frost's last Book, In The Clearing which was published in 1962, one year earlier before his death, completes his legacy of some four hundred poems, but his best work had been done. " It was not given to Frost in his old age to buttress his stays against confusion with a world ordering system of thought like that of Yeats or with religious certainty like Eliot's. " ⁹ Though there is lacking in his work the amplitudes of poets such as those, though Lawrence Thompson's three volume biography reveals that Frost has been often a vain, ruthless and selfish man, still none can deny that his Complete Poems, his Complete Works (1967) contains several score of poems that are essential to the American imagination.

2.3 Frost's ^scraftsmanship and his Theory of Poetry :

"While a fruitful debate might ensue from questioning whether Robert Frost has looked 'out far' or 'in deep' sufficiently to warrant his position as major poet, praise for his craftsmanship has been almost universal. " 10 We also notice that with regard to his art, he knew very soon where he stood. Though he wrote little about his art and the nature of poetry, he enjoyed talking about his poetry. We can outline his theory of poetry from the considerable record kept by the other participants in the nightlong-conversations and from the poems themselves.

According to Frost what we get in life and miss so often in literature is the " sentence sounds that underlie the words. " The individual words may carry to our ears or not every meaning has a particular "Sound Posture" . The listener's ear is atuned to the spoken language which is " instinctively familiar " with the particular sound which goes with the sense of every " meaning". And as language only exists in the mouth of men, the poet must write with his ear to the voice. As a master conversationalist, Frost had often wondered why it was so much easier to create " living sentences " when talking to a friend than when trying to write. "Why was a friend so much more effective than a piece of paper in drawing the living sentences out of me ? I thought it might come to my having to remember exactly the shape

my sentences took under provocation or under social excitement. How would a piece of paper ever get the best out of me ? I was afraid I hadn't imagination enough to be really literary. And I hadn't. I have just barely enough to imitate spoken sentences ". ¹¹

The answer to this question was to recreate in writing the impression of a speaking voice. And the poems that we are going to study will bring out the combination of the speaking voice and the traditional meter.

Though Frost was trying out his idea in the midst of the excitement over free verse, he did not abandon the traditional metrical forms. He made this problem more complicated and enriched his poetry by setting the conventional meters against the natural rhythm of his speaker's sentences. He believes that the pattern of verse and the spoken word must fight out the issue between them and the struggle ends in reconciliation when it is supervised by a skillful poet. According to Frost meter has to do with beat, and sound posture has a definite relation as an alternate tone between the beats. The two are one in creation but separate in analysis. But one must remember that his use of "spoken language" is far from a simple imitation of New England farmer's speech. At its best it would be extremely

complex, though always seeming to be simple and capable of carrying a variety of tones ironies, and emotional gradations.

When Frost thinks about meter he would say, the poet has basically a choice of two meters : " Strict iambic " and " loose iambic " ; he has a choice of " any length of line upto six foot " ; and he can use " an assortment of line lengths for any shape of stanza". The iambic rhythm used by Frost may range from lines of metronomic regularity to lines in which the rhythm is all but extinguished. " Knowing from study or observation, or intuition, that ^{the} iambic best approximates the rhythms of the English language. Frost recognised also that within this limitation the four or five-stress line would work out most happily. The majority of his lines extended to tetrameter or pentameter . " 12

When Frost speaks of " Form " it has two levels of reference. On one level, it refers to all those elements of conventional prosody - rhythm, rhyme, meter and stanza pattern. Such prosodic elements were for Frost, the essence of writing poetry. Free verse he claimed as like " Playing tennis with the net down". On second level which is more deeper and philosophical he saw " form " as the uniting mental process behind all these technical elements.

Frost's concept of metaphor is close to the concept of form. For him every creative thought rests on metaphor, because every important thought, is a "feat of association", "saying one thing in terms of another". It is the "prism" that takes raw "enthusiasm" and spreads it on a "screen", so that what had been simply a matter of feeling thus becomes matter of perception.

Frost also offered many good definitions of poetry. "A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a homesickness or a lovesickness. It is a reaching out towards expression; an effort to find fulfilment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words".¹³ It is never a thought to begin with. It is at its best when it is a tantalizing vagueness. What Frost stated as generalization is borne out in his own poems. And though Frost held with the romantics that poem is an expression of an experience, his best poems are marvels of construction. They are more exciting to the reader because their form seems to evolve before his eyes and ears.

A poem for Frost had to be "new" presenting a fresh insight, an original response. While talking about the pleasure of a poem Frost said; "The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The

figure is the same as for love. No one can hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It 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 necessary a great clarification of life such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion." ¹⁴

As Frost stated in the above definition his poems do move from delight to wisdom. There is no need to care about their existence but they are rather like the piece of ice on a hot stove to ride on their own melting. Though we read his poems hundred times still they keep their freshness and their wisdom.

I have chosen Robert Frost for my stylistic analysis primarily because of his experiments with sounds. Frost's attitude to music in poetry was ambiguous. "Time and ~~against~~ he protested that music and poetry were quite separate art forms that the intrusion of musical concepts in discussing poetry only clouded a poem's distinctively poetic achievement, that what was really important was the non-metrical sound of ~~the~~ 'the talking voice'. And yet for all such protestations Frost was a skillful and highly conscious prosodist, concerned not only for 'sound' in a poem, but more specially, what he called 'tune' ".¹⁵

The musical regularity of meter brings 'tune ' in poetry which is the aesthetic appeal to the ear. We find such 'tune' in Frost's lyric poetry. We also notice his experiments with sounds in sonnets, dramatic narratives and meditative poetry.

My criteria for the selection of Frost's poems is the "form ", in which he specializes. I have selected his eight poems, form wise- lyrics (four) and sonnets (four). The following are the poems that I have chosen for my stylistic analysis :-

A. Lyrics :

- 1) Reluctance (1913)
- 2) Bereft (1922)
- 3) Neither out far Nor In Deep (1936)
- 4) Come In (1942)

B. Sonnets :

- 1) Putting in the Seed (1916)
- 2) The Oven Bird (1916)
- 3) Design (1936)
- 4) The Silken Tent (1942)

The dates given against the title of each poem are the dates of publication of the volumes in which the poems are included. Out of eight poems four poems are taken from the volumes, A Further Range (1936) and A Witness

Tree (1942), that won for Frost third and Fourth Pulitzer prize respectively. All the eight poems are short and they bring out Frost's genius as one of the well^lknown 20th century American Poets.

Frost tried hard to make his poems artistic as well as symbolic. In his lyrics the musical element is predominant whereas in his sonnets he gives more significance to " form " because for Frost " form " was the uniting mental process behind all the technical elements. When we look at these poems closely we notice that there is a great scope for analysing them on all the three levels of language - phonological, lexical and synt^catic.

After considering Frost's development as a poet and his theory of poetry now we will move on to his lyric poetry in the next chapter.

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