

ATIA REVIEW OF THE CRITIQUE ON ROBERT FROST'S POETRY AND PERSONALITY

Dr. Saed Jamil Said Shahwan

Associate Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Hail University, P.O.Box 2440.
KSA

ABSTRACT: *Poetry and personality of Robert Frost, a highly-acclaimed 20th century American poet, are still favored topics for debate among literary critics even half a century after his death. While a group of critics call him a modernist poet, another group denounce him just as a rural poet of New England, while another group sets him at a crossroad and finds assorted elements in his poetry. Frost's personality too lobbed biographers and critics at varied directions. While one group of critics termed him as a quiet, loner gentleman, the other one portrayed him as jealous, mean-spirited and misogynist career-builder. The third group of critics certified him as a complex man who juggled uncommon fame with an uncommonly difficult private life. Jay Parini, a Frost biographer, said, "You see there are so many Frosts". This paper runs a review of criticism on Robert Frost's poetry and personality for a deeper insight into the tug of war and tries to locate the real Frost among "so many Frosts".*

KEYWORDS: Critique, Poetry, Personality, Modernist Poetry, American Colloquialism, Sympathetic Humor.

INTRODUCTION

In 1959, Frost said, "It is smart today ... to be reading St. John Perse, or T. S. Eliot, or me. No, leave me out. Not smart."⁶ Robert Frost, one of the most popular and critically respected American poets of the twentieth century, was honored frequently during his lifetime. He received four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry.¹ Ultimately, he became one of America's rare "public literary figures, almost an artistic institution."⁵ He received the Congressional Gold Medal in 1960 for his poetic works. On July 22, 1961, just before two years of death, Frost was named poet laureate of Vermont. But, this well-acclaimed poet's poetry as well as personality is shrouded with mystery even after more than half a century after his death. Stafford (1974) observed, "Robert frost liked secrets." Don't trust me too far," he warned. Now, in the centennial year of his birth, it looks as if he has become America's foremost poet, its emblem poet. His picture is on a stamp; his residences are marked ("Seven colleges claimed me," he once said); his books and books about him are everywhere. But he still holds his secrets, and presumably we still cannot trust him too far." Schuessler (2014) wrote, "Few figures in American literature have suffered as strangely divided an afterlife as Robert Frost. Even before his death in 1963, he was canonized as a rural sage, beloved by a public raised on poems of his like "Birches" and "The Road Not Taken." But that image soon became shadowed by a darker one, stemming from a three-volume biography by his handpicked chronicler, Lawrence Thompson, who emerged from decades of assiduous note-taking with a portrait of the poet as a cruel, jealous megalomaniac—"a monster of egotism" who left behind "a wake of destroyed human lives," as the critic Helen Vendler memorably put it on the cover of *The New York Times* Book Review in 1970. In the brief essay "The Other Frost,"

first published in 1947, Jarrell (1947) considers only the single thesis that the Frost of popular legend has been allowed to obscure the poet, the real but less known and greater Frost.

Rationale for the research

The rationale behind this research sprang from my personal interest in reading Frost's poems, interviews and letters as well as personal efforts in discovering his poetry and personality. I fell in love with his poetry when I was a student of literature. His poems offered me quite a virtual tour to rural America and introduction to American colloquialism through his poems. Moreover, his other poems like "Home Burial" and "The Road Not Taken" took me to the crossroad of life and allowed me dip into the depth of complex human psyche. To me, he was a complete poet. He was also awarded with lots of prestigious titles. But, when I started reading critiques on his work and life, I found layers of mystery wrapping his life and work and they led loopholes that some fraudulent critics (as I personally think) used to stigmatize him as a man as well as a poet. Such unfortunate repute of my favorite poet inspired me to run a research on his works and life as well as others' works on his poetry and personality. In this venture, I met Jay Parini, Frost's biographer, who said, "You see there are so many Frosts". Trailing Jay's remark, this research is a little tribute to my favorite poet to locate his real identity, a portrait of a great poet that thousands of his admirers like me love to bear on their hearts.

Robert Frost: a modern poet or not?

Critics find difficulty in positioning Frost in the canon of English poetry. Writing in modern period, Frost emulated many norms and rules of modernist poetry; while, at the same time, he retained some features of traditional poetry. As a result, critics failed to call him 'a modern poet', but they could not disown him totally for Frost's use of the techniques of modernist poetry. In this way, Frost maintained a double-standard in his style. In his essay, "To The Laodiceans" (1952), Jarrell defended Frost against the critics who had accused him of being too 'traditional' and out of touch with Modern or Modernist poetry. In Frost's defense, Jarrell (1999b) wrote "the regular ways of looking at Frost's poetry are grotesque simplifications, distortions, falsifications—coming to know his poetry well ought to be enough, in itself, to dispel any of them, and to make plain the necessity of finding some other way of talking about his work." And Jarrell's close readings of poems like "Neither out Too Far or in Too Deep" led readers and critics to perceive more of the complexities in Frost's poetry. "Though his career fully spans the modern period and though it is impossible to speak of him as anything other than a modern poet," writes Cox (1962), "it is difficult to place him in the main tradition of modern poetry." "His own oppositional modernism was as revolutionary as Eliot's", wrote Dan Chiasson⁹ of *The New Yorker*. Poetry Foundation⁷ believes that Frost stands at the crossroads of 19th century American poetry and modernism, for in his verse may be found the culmination of many 19th century tendencies and traditions as well as parallels to the works of his 20th century contemporaries. Taking his symbols from the public domain, Frost developed, as many critics note, an original, modern idiom and a sense of directness and economy that reflect the imagism of Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. On the other hand, as Leonard Unger and William Van O'Connor point out in *Poems for Study*, "Frost's poetry, unlike that of such contemporaries as Eliot, Stevens, and the later Yeats, shows no marked departure from the poetic practices of the nineteenth century." Adam Plunkett expressed his bewilderment over Frost's style. He wrote, "It is no exaggeration to call Frost the least understood of the great modernists, despite the aspects of his work that children can understand easily. His symbols are often straightforward enough that the prospect of exegesis seems like

middle-school English (green is *innocence*, the dark woods are *death*)... Critics have looked past him because of his lack of ostensible difficulty, and we misunderstand him because of his difficulties. It is difficult even to say what they are.”⁶

Was Frost a rural poet?

Robert Frost’s numerous use of American colloquialism, rural setting, basically that of New England, Yankee spirit and ‘down to earth’ approach has led his critics to call him a rural poet. In fact, he is highly regarded for his realistic portrayal of rural life and his command of American colloquial speech. His work frequently employed settings from rural life in New England in the early twentieth century, using them to examine complex social and philosophical themes.¹ In *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry (1988)*, editors Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair compared and contrasted Frost’s unique style to the work of the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson since they both frequently used New England settings for their poems. However, they state that Frost’s poetry was “less [consciously] literary” and that this was possibly due to the influence of English and Irish writers like Thomas Hardy and W.B. Yeats. They note that Frost’s poems “show a successful striving for utter colloquialism” and always try to remain down to earth, while at the same time using traditional forms despite the trend of American poetry towards free verse which Frost famously said was “like playing tennis without a net.” The editor of *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe⁵, an American editor, scholar, literary critic, poet and patron of the arts, emphasized the folksy New England persona and characters in Frost’s work, writing that “perhaps no other poet in our history has put the best of the Yankee spirit into a book so completely.” Harriet notes his frequent use of rural settings and farm life, and she likes that in these poems, Frost is most interested in “showing the human reaction to nature’s processes.” She also notes that while Frost’s narrative, character-based poems are often satirical, Frost always has a “sympathetic humor” towards his subjects.

Ambiguity in Frost’s style

Studying Jarrell Randall’s essays on Robert Frost, Browne (1973) concluded, “Jarrell feels, that although Frost has somehow escaped the limbo of obscurity reserved for the poet in our prosaic age, his own fostering of an inappropriate image has helped to obscure his real poetic achievement.” From Kendall’s comments on Robert Frost, we get to know that the poet maintained an intermediary stand both in poetry and personality. Kendall (2012) wrote:

One hardly has to mention that he is often thought of as the simplest of the great English-language modernists, even the most simplistic... We have been taught that Frost’s poems are not earnest or kindly, not optimistic or light. Not saintly, he was also not monstrous. Never clearly present in his poems, he was never quite hidden. He was not even a native New Englander. (He was, however, a racist.) He was rarely ever just serious, and all that his critics clearly agree on is that he was often mischievous but rarely for its own sake, which is another way of saying that we do not understand the tricks he played on us or where they came from. We know the glory of his works, or at least we feel it.”

The poet, critic Jarrell (1999a) often praised Frost’s poetry and wrote, “Robert Frost, along with Stevens and Eliot, seems to me the greatest of the American poets of this century. Frost’s virtues are extraordinary. No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men; his wonderful dramatic monologues or dramatic scenes come out of a

knowledge of people that few poets have had, and they are written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech.” He also praised “Frost’s seriousness and honesty,” stating that Frost was particularly skilled at representing a wide range of human experience in his poems. In an introduction to Jarrell’s book of essays, Leithauser (1999) notes that, “the ‘other’ Frost that Jarrell discerned behind the genial, homespun New England rustic—the ‘dark’ Frost who was desperate, frightened, and brave—has become the Frost we’ve all learned to recognize, and the little-known poems Jarrell singled out as central to the Frost canon are now to be found in most anthologies.”

In 2003, critic Charles McGrath noted that critical views on Frost’s poetry have changed over the years. He wrote, “Robert Frost ... at the time of his death in 1963 was generally considered to be a New England folkie ... In 1977, the third volume of Lawrence Thompson’s biography suggested that Frost was a much nastier piece of work than anyone had imagined; a few years later, thanks to the reappraisal of critics like William H. Pritchard and Harold Bloom and of younger poets like Joseph Brodsky, he bounced back again, this time as a bleak and unforgiving modernist.”

About Frost’s style, Kendall (2012) wrote: “His singular achievement in meter—what he called “the sound of sense”—was such an achievement precisely because he could convey a wide range of emotions by sentence sounds alone, even when we haven’t made sense of them. Frost believed that “the self-imposed restrictions of meter in form” was more helpful than harmful because he could focus on the content of his poems instead of concerning himself with creating ‘innovative’ new verse forms. An earlier 1963 study by the poet Squires (1963) spoke about the distinction of Frost as a poet whose verse soars more for the difficulty and skill by which he attains his final visions, than for the philosophical purity of the visions themselves. “He has written at a time when the choice for the poet seemed to lie among the forms of despair: Science, solipsism, or the religion of the past century... Frost has refused all of these and in the refusal has long seemed less dramatically committed than others... But no, he must be seen as dramatically uncommitted to the single solution... Insofar as Frost allows to both fact and intuition a bright kingdom, he speaks for many of us. Insofar as he speaks through an amalgam of senses and sure experience so that his poetry seems a nostalgic memory with overtones touching some conceivable future, he speaks better than most of us. That is to say, as a poet must.”

The classicist Bacon (2001) has opined that Frost’s deep knowledge of Greek and Roman classics influenced much of his work. Frost’s education at Lawrence High School, Dartmouth, and Harvard “was based mainly on the classics.” As examples, she links imagery and action in Frost’s early poems “Birches” (1915) and “Wild Grapes” (1920) with Euripides’ “Bacchae”. She cites the certain motifs, including that of the tree bent down to earth, as evidence of his “very attentive reading of ‘Bacchae’, almost certainly in Greek.” In a later poem, “One More Brevity”(1953), Bacon compares the poetic techniques used by Frost to those of Virgil in the “Aeneid”. She notes that “this sampling of the ways Frost drew on the literature and concepts of the Greek and Roman world at every stage of his life indicates how imbued with it he was.”

Themes

In *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (1983), the editors state that “Frost’s best work explores fundamental questions of existence, depicting with chilling starkness the loneliness of the individual in an indifferent universe.” The critic Whipple⁵ focused on this bleakness in

Frost's work, stating that "in much of his work, particularly in *North of Boston*, his harshest book, he emphasizes the dark background of life in rural New England, with its degeneration often sinking into total madness."

Divisive personality

Rothman (2013) wrote, "Frost the poet seems like a quiet person, a loner. But, Holden reports, Frost, the man, would often "sit up late and talk, eating apples, gossiping about everyone and everything, a little maliciously sometimes but always brilliantly and soundly." He also studied, "In his poetry, Frost emphasized the part of himself that remained aloof and on the outside. He was like "a very keen-witted boy," In 2014, Harvard University Press published "The Letters of Robert Frost," a projected four-volume edition (3,000 letters from nearly 100 archives and private collections) of all the poet's known correspondence that promises to offer the most rounded, complete portrait to date. "There's been a kind of persistent sense of Frost as a hypocrite, as someone who showed one face to the public and another privately," said Donald Sheehy, a professor at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania, who edited the letters with Mark Richardson and Robert Faggen. "These letters will dispel all that," Mr. Sheehy added. "Frost has his moods, his enemies, the things that set him off. But mostly what you see is a generosity of spirit."⁸ An edition of selected letters was rushed out by Mr. Thompson (with index entries for "Badness," "Cowardice," "Fears," "Insanity" and "Self-Indulgence") a year after the poet's death, followed by several smaller collections, all of which have long been out of print. But the complete correspondence, scholars say, showed Frost in full, revealing a complex man who juggled uncommon fame with an uncommonly difficult private life (including four children who died before him, one a suicide), a canny self-fashioner who may have cultivated the image of a birch-swinging rustic but was as much the modernist innovator as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. "You see there are so many Frosts," said Jay Parini, a Frost biographer who was not involved with the project. "He moves among them, like everyone else, a wounded individual trying to make his way in the world." "The idea of Frost as a jealous, mean-spirited, misogynist career-builder," he added, "is nothing short of nuts."

CONCLUSION

Critics' tug of war on determining the true nature of Robert Frost's poetry and personality continues. Opposing sections are presenting logic and information to establish him as a great poet as well a gentleman or a hypocrite who wrote nasty verses. Surveying all these issues, we understand that Frost had gone through pleasant as well as adverse experiences in his long career of writing. He portrayed rural life of America beautifully; at the same time, he emulated some Modernist features in his poetry. Thus, he may not be called a 'Modernist poet' plainly, but his experimentation on the style of poetry gave birth to a new kind of genre, say "untraditional Modernism". In personal life, he suffered a lot, which might have affected his poetry and personality. By studying his life as well as poetry, we can deduce that Frost was a great poet and a true human being who was very much involved in the American rural life and presented his ideas and experiences through poetry in a very beautiful manner. We can also say that the efforts for stigmatizing Frost's poetry and personality originated from vile desire and we strongly condemn such attempt.

REFERENCES

- Bacon, Helen. "Frost and the Ancient Muses." *The Cambridge Companion to Robert Frost*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 75-99
- Browne, Elizabeth. (1973). *Criticism and the Artist: The Writings of Randall Jarell*. Loyola University Chicago.
- Cox, James M. (ed.) *Robert Frost : a collection of critical essays*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey Prentice-Hall, 1962
- Ellman, Richard and Robert O'Clair. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, Second Edition. New York: Norton, 1988.
- Hepburn, James G. Robert Frost and His Critics *The New England Quarterly* Vol. 35, No. 3, 1962, pp. 367-376
- Jarrell, Randall. "Fifty Years of American Poetry." *No Other Book: Selected Essays*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999a.
- Jarrell, Randall. "To The Laodiceans." *No Other Book: Selected Essays*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999b.
- Jarrell, Randall. Poetry and the Age The Nation, CLXV (November 29, 1947), 588, 590-92., pp. 26-33.
- Kendall, Tim. *The Art of Robert Frost*. Yale University Press, 2012.
- Leithauser, Brad. "Introduction." *No Other Book: Selected Essays*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
- McGrath, Charles. "The Vicissitudes of Literary Reputation." *The New York Times Magazine*. 15 June 2003.
- Rothman, Joshua. Robert Frost: Darkness or Light? *The New Yorker*. January 29, 2013.
- Stafford, William. The Terror in Robert Frost. *The New York Times*. August 18, 1974
- Schuessler, Jennider. The Road Back: Frost's Letters Could Soften a Battered Image. *The New York Times*. Feb 4, 2014.
- Stine Jean C., Bridget Broderick, and Daniel G. Marowski *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed.. Vol. 26. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. p 110–129.
- Squires, Radcliffe. *The Major Themes of Robert Frost*, The University of Michigan Press, 1963. pp. 106-107.

Endnotes

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Frost
2. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jean C. Stine, Bridget Broderick, and Daniel G. Marowski. Vol. 26. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. p110
3. Jarrell, Randall. "Fifty Years of American Poetry." *No Other Book: Selected Essays*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999.
4. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost>
5. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jean C. Stine, Bridget Broderick, and Daniel G. Marowski. Vol. 26. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. p 110–129.
6. Plunkett, Adam. Robert Frost was neither light nor dark. *The republic*. <https://newrepublic.com/article/118046/art-robert-frost-tim-kendall-reviewed-adam-plunkett>
7. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost>
8. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/05/books/volume-of-robert-frosts-letters-renews-debate-about-his-character.html>
9. <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674057609&content=reviews>