

## **ROBERT FROST NATURALIST, SPIRITUAL DRIFTER AND PRAGMATIC EMPIRICIST**

**Dr. Abdel Elah Al-Nehar**  
Associate Prof., Dept. of English  
Mu'tah University  
P. O. Box 7  
Kerak- Jordan

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**ABSTRACT:** *A Four-time winner of the Pulitzer prize for poetry, Robert Lee Frost (1874-1963) created a new poetic language that has a deep and timeless resonance. His poems include dramatic dialogues and narratives--stories of farmers and their families, farm workers and villagers, poems of joys and tragedies, written in a language, like wordsworth's language "everyday language", without sentimentality or melodrama. The simple images and themes of Frost's poems are interwoven into a complex pattern of provocative idea and observations. Any poem by Frost is an act of interpretation, an inquiry into the resources of the language it can make available to itself. His poetry of work is quite directly about the correlative work of writing a poem and of reading it. Any intense labor enacted in his poetry, like "mowing", or "apple picking", "Mending wall", can penetrate to the visions, dreams, myths that are at the heart of reality, constituting its articulate form. Manual labor in frost's poetry is often an image of the effort to penetrate matter. Several of Frost's poems sprang from his own experiences. "Storm Fear" for example, is about the frightening, trapped feeling of being snowed in. The elation and hope that come with spring are evident in "To the thawing wind", which is an incantation. Sound and metaphor in Frost's poetry are a source of energies, not signs of meaning ultimately to be enforced. It is not necessary, even if it had been possible, to deal with all Frost's poems in this paper. Instead, besides the topics discussed above, I chose poems which, are relevant to the subject matter of this paper, and I mentioned other poems by passing. The main subjects that this paper tried to tackle and discuss are: Frost's theory of poetry and its application, the naturalist, the spiritual drifter, and the pragmatic empiricist.*

**KEYWORDS:** Robert Frost, Naturalist, Spiritual, Pragmatic, Empiricist

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco and later taken at the age of ten to New England. It is the farm country of the latter with which his poetry is identified. His background of craftsmanship and farming had a great effect upon his poetry, as he demanded that his verse be "as simple and honest as an ax or hoe"<sup>1</sup>. After a long period of farming, he moved to England (1912-15), where he published his first book of poems. **A Boy's Will** in 1913. The tone of his poems contained therein is characteristic of New England life.

Frost returned to the United States to live on a New Hampshire farm, having acquired a reputation as an important American poet of the Twentieth Century. He was deemed as such due to the publication of his **North of Boston** in 1914, which was described by Frost as a "book of the people", containing a keen insight into New England character and the background that formed it<sup>2</sup>.

Concerning his style, Frost is restrained in emotion and language, and would rather convey his message by suggestion. His blank verse is colloquial and possesses the "surcharged economy" native to the New Englander<sup>3</sup>.

Frost is a naturalistic writer. That is, he writes about such subjects as birch trees, mending walls, woods and mowing. His protagonists are nearly always isolated farmers, country laborers or the poet himself on a rural excursion. In addition, the situations of his poetry rotate about country problems<sup>4</sup>.

Besides being a naturalist, Frost is somewhat of a spiritual drifter. His poetry manifests the relationship between his experiences and his beliefs which, in turn, renders an ethical and spiritual atmosphere to the ordinary reality of everyday life.

For Frost, poetry is useful because it contains truth. William James believes as does Frost. "Truth", James states, "is not a stagnant property... Truth is made, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience"<sup>5</sup>. Thus, Frost proves himself to be a naturalist, spiritual drifter and a pragmatic empiricist.

### **Frost's Theory of Poetry:**

A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home-sickness or a love-sickness. It is a reaching out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found the words--My definition of poetry would be this: words that have become deeds<sup>6</sup>.

Robert Frost.

The passion of Robert Frost during his lifetime was poetry as an art. He asserted that its theory flowed from the recesses of his own experience. Nature is always the same, but, nothing remains of it--nothing of what is "seen" by man remains. Rather, art should immortalize nature. That is, art should allow one to believe in the eternity of it. This, then, is Frost's theory of poetry as an art<sup>7</sup>.

Frost abhorred the arrangement of observations into any type of systematic theory. Experience and expressions require form. It is this "form" that Frost believed to be the most important characteristic of poetry in any era. To Frost, form possesses different, yet interlocking aspects. First, he noted that form involves stanzas, rhyme, lines, sentences and words. Another characteristic of form is balance or even "controlled unbalance". Form is regulated by relationships: the balance of emotion to emotion, thought to thought, emotion to thought, image and metaphor, specific and general, trivial and significant, and of the transient to the permanent. All of these elements constitute Frost's meaning of the word, "form"<sup>8</sup>.

To give form to his poetry, Frost fused organization, shapeliness and fitness to the substance of the meaning of each poem. Before meaning finds its place, it must be properly balanced with structure. This, then, preserves the poet's expression and enables the reader to understand to experience involved in the poem.

Connected with the form of poetry is what is termed the poetic "impulse". Frost states that there exists an analogy between the course of a true poem and that of a true love. That is, each begins as an impulse. It begins in delight and gives way to the impulse. Then, it runs a course of fortunate events ending in a clarification of life. Here, Frost implies that the poem is "believed into existence"<sup>9</sup>.

Frost experienced the interplay between the past and the present as a poetic impulse. This interplay, he affirmed, resulted in a poem. A present experience would incite in him an emotional recall of the past. This motivation would, in turn, inspire him to create.

What, then, did the word "meaning" hold for this poetic genius? For both Frost and Emerson, "beauty is the key to this question". Poems radiate beauty. Emerson affirms that, "The poet is the sayer, the namer, and **represents** beauty"<sup>10</sup>. So, it follows that a poem's meaning, its content is a reflection of the beauty of the world as experienced by the poet, the "namer". A "thought" constituted a poem's meaning and, according to Emerson, this thought is one "so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing"<sup>11</sup>.

### **The Naturalist:**

Frost says, "The land is always in my bones..."<sup>12</sup>.

Nature attracts humanity. Its beauty has been the fascination of many a poet. Frost, himself, spent his life observing and appreciating this wonder called "Nature". His verse focused upon such elements as birches, stars, rose pogonias, mowing, and snow. Nothing in nature escaped his perceptive eye. All facets of the world surrounding man were precious to Frost--everything had its purpose. His experience of nature is reflected in nearly every poem he composed. These nature poems were toys strewn about in order to trip the reader into unexpected ideas on what life is<sup>13</sup>. On the surface, his poetry appeals to the ear, but, with the proper investigation it reveals much more than "flowers and trees".

Frost's famous poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", unlike his poem "In to my own", in which the poet is sure that an escape from the world into "those dark trees" is desirable, deals not only with nature, but with man **in** nature. The man in the sleigh is attracted to the beauty of the woods through which he is passing. He stops his sleigh in order to take a closer look. He notices how lovely the woods are this "darkest evening of the year". This man is enjoying the scene around him while his horse does not quite fathom why his master has halted him in such an odd place. The little horse "gives is harness bells a shake to ask if there is some mistake". This confusion on the part of the animal may symbolize the ideas of the people of the nearby town if they were present. Why stop here? The owner of the woods would also probably be puzzled by the poet-figure's stopping the sleigh on his property out in the middle of nowhere. The man in the sleigh finally does move on, not because he wants to leave or because his horse is restless, but

because of the "promises" he must keep. He does not have the time to fully enjoy the beauty of these snow-filled woods.

The woods of this poem represent Nature, which is asleep. It is not dead, only snoozing. Many critics insist that there is a hint of death in this poem, yet, I interpret the poem as one that depicts life against a sober backdrop. Yes, it is winter, when nature "seems" dead but, the snow is merely a blanket to be raised at the outbreak of Spring. The poet-figure appreciates the white world about him and yet, his obligations (promises) nag at him to continue to his destination.

The poem, "In Winter in the Woods Alone", also focuses of nature. As in "Stopping by Woods", the poet-figure enters the woods. It is winter and snow has covered the ground. The man has gone into the woods in order to "lay a maple low". This act is symbolic in that it conveys to the reader that life is a cycle. One maple has been cut down and another will replace it. This is why Frost "sees for Nature no defeat". Frost knows that he, too, will die, that he will "retreat" but, that another human will be born. Neither the felling of the maple nor the "retreat" of the poet-figure are final. Nature will continue and Frost, himself, will live-on-his verse forever immortal.

Of all his poems, "Spring Pools" is, perhaps, the purest nature poem. It evokes springtime in New England, when the snow has melted and has formed pools be jeweled by wildflowers. Here, Frost conveys to the reader his knowledge of the intimacies of nature. He knows that the trees hovering over these springtime pools will soon absorb the water inside them. Frost manifests his ardent desire to prolong the beauty of these ephemeral pools.

The water which has formed the pools from "the snow that melted only yesterday" nourishes the flowers and the trees surrounding it. There is an unbroken process taking place in nature: the spring pools will be sucked away at this season but, they will make their appearance once again the next year. This is the cycle of nature.

In "Spring Pools" Frost laments transience. He evokes the ever-present, destructive element in nature, namely the seasonal process which wipes away nature's own momentary beauty. Even though beauty in nature passes away, Frost has preserved a part of it, the spring pools, in a poem which will never die.

In the nineteenth century, the leaders and the interpreters of things natural were Emerson and Thoreau. Both were discernible influences upon Frost through the tradition they dominated. Thoreau's **Walden** or "In the woods" was Frost's most favorite book, and in Frost's lecture on "Poetry and Education", he says "The most noticing man that ever lived may be was Thoreau"<sup>14</sup>. Frost is considered to be Thoreauian because Frost's subjects are Thoreau's subjects: Snow piled deep against a lake and woods, broad patches of blue barriers ripening over hills, an army of ants on the march, forests of birch trees, ice breaking up in the spring thaw<sup>15</sup>.

Frost adorned Emerson's saying in his Essay on "Nature": "The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present... but all natural objects make a kindered impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance"<sup>16</sup>.

Frost is no doubt influenced by Emerson who has been called Frost's "intellectual and spiritual godfather". Frost made from Emerson's view points of nature a servant for Commodity, Beauty, Language, and Discipline<sup>17</sup>.

What Frost termed "the trial by existence" is "the obscuration upon earth" of souls that had chosen to leave paradise, embracing whatever life might possess. Even after a soul has been saved and has ascended into heaven, it may discover another opportunity for bravery. This opportunity would be more daring because the choice would not be remembered<sup>18</sup>:

"Tis the essence of life here,  
Though we choose greatly, still to lack  
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.

Here two kinds of choices are evident: some decisions are well chosen while others are simply "somehow chosen". Even though one takes pride in consciously choosing this or that, he is denied a full comprehension of it all because of his ignorance of how much it actually entails. In other words, the individual does not really possess the "privilege" of knowing that no one else has made his life as it is. With this poem, Frost manifests his pre-occupation with the "restitution of that lost and diminished sense of responsibility even while at the same time exalted by the mystery of not being able to fully grasp it"<sup>19</sup>.

"The trail by Existence" in **A Boy's Will** concentrates upon the choices of life. What Frost intended to communicate was that life is beautiful because amazingly, nothing happens to a person except what he "chose" to happen to him. All of these life-choices are useful. He wanted to announce to the world that no one can depend on being taken care of by governments or others and that, therefore, an individual is spurred on to creativity. The poem points out that man's real virtue is to dare and seek. When even the bravest human is slain, the poem states, he will awake in paradise to discover that the greatest reward of daring the struggle is still to dare<sup>20</sup>.

The poem itself invites a comparison with Wordsworth's "Intimation ode". It seems as though Frost had Wordsworth's poem in mind when composing "Trial by Existence". Frost's poem depicts souls in heaven before they descend to the earth. Each soul desires to come to earth so that it may "pit itself":

Heroic in its nakedness,  
Against the uttermost of earth.  
The tale of earth's unhonored things  
Sounds nobler there than 'neath the sun...

Thus, God, permits the soul to come to earth. There is one condition: Frost's God (unlike Wordsworth's) decrees that once a soul has chosen to descend to earth, it may not remember that it made the choice. This is because the soul, if it knew that it had made the choice, would, in times

of despair find it as such a comfort that its tribulation would be less courageous, less heroic, if not "invalid"<sup>21</sup>.

Robert Frost conceived poetry as a form of life. Each poem was a "made" thing. So, moreover, is truth. The truth of a poem is that quality which allowed it to seem familiar and recognizable to the reader. It was this truth that Frost knew constituted beauty of its height. William James shared this conviction. In turn, the beauty of a poem was reflected in its usefulness. This usefulness was itself a sign of truth. In his work, "Pragmatism", James wrote that if consequences useful to life flow from something (in this case, from a Frost poem) it contained beauty which was truth. He continued to say that universal conceptions have no meaning or reality if they have no use. In the same line of thought, if the universal conceptions do possess any use, it follows that they have that amount of meaning. This, James affirmed, was a direct proportion<sup>22</sup>.

Frost shows his profound understanding of this concept, as he composes each poem with its particular usefulness in mind. After an intelligent canalization of a Frost poem, one is able to see that he has portrayed a universal concept, useful to man.

How did Robert Frost want to be taken as a poet? What did he have to say to aid his reader in understanding him? When one truly comprehends a poem, what he knows of the poet is what he learns about him in the poem. Moreover, when one reads other poems by the poet, their subjects "combine in all their multiplicity, completing and confirming one another to form the one polyphony of the person's existence"<sup>23</sup>. This is true with Frost.

Robert Frost advocated action--the positive action of man. Action enriched him. The trials he endured strengthened him. He was made a hero by living. Nature interacted with him. The spiritual drifter in him took him everywhere even though he knew not why or where he was going. In fact, everything he did in life was useful. This was Robert Frost the man, Farmer and poet ... "a swinger of birches".

### **The Spiritual Drifter:**

Frost's observation of life and nature led him to meditate upon what he had experienced. He would flow with the present moment into the past, or at other times into the future or into a corner of his mind. He cherished meditation, for life held much to be contemplated. His reflections are evident in every poem. Poetry was his way of life, which his observation made possible. He was able to write about such abstractions as life, death, eternity and love.

"The Road Not Taken" is the poem of a "spiritual drifter". The poet-figure is walking through a wood when he comes upon a fork in the path: "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood". He would like to travel both roads but, alas, this is impossible so, he leaves the first for another day. The poet-figure makes his choice arbitrarily and whimsically for, after all, he is a spiritual drifter, going and coming as if blown by the wind with no particular direction or purpose in mind. What Frost is telling his audience is that sometimes in life decisions are made recklessly and without a real comprehension as to why. As a result, they can lead to great achievements or disaster. But, for Frost, it is better to be right than wrong, and better to be wrong than uncommitted or neutral because neutrality does not lead to a clarification of life. The poem not only encounters a Fork in the road but, symbolically, a division of the self. It shows how man can be divided within himself.

This is so true of the human condition, for, in life, conditions can be terribly deceptive and not one person can boast that he or she has made only well-planned, relevant choices. This Frost paints quite well in his "Road Not Taken" for he portrays the potential for either success or failure due to the "choice" the spiritual drifter made. After all, each one of us is a spiritual drifter... .

Another poem exemplary of Frost's contemplation of life is "A Prayer in Spring". It is, as its title indicates, a prayer, a supplication. This is a prayer to preserve the beauty of the time as it is. The "us" of the poem want to fully enjoy the moment for as long as possible before it passes away. "It is a request that nature imitate poetry by providing a momentary stay"<sup>24</sup>.

The poem takes place during the Spring of the year and the "us" wish to preserve the beauty around them for as long as possible:

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;  
And give us not to think so far away  
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here  
All simply in the springing of the year.

It is not only Spring but everything (man and nature) is springing. The "us" mention that the flowers, orchards, bees and birds constitute love. It is their perception of, and participation in the springing. Everything in nature, man included, is celebrating rebirth and recreation of body and soul<sup>25</sup>. Springing, Frost tells the reader, exists not only in nature, but in man, in the "us" of the poem. This springing is present in a dual form for Frost: first, in husband and wife who complete nature by "putting in the seed" and awaiting the new creation; and second, in the "us" who are poets and who have swallowed the poetic conventions of this poem. We, then, are kept in the springing of the year in order that we renew and refresh ourselves<sup>26</sup>. In this poem, Frost allows his reader to preserve in himself this sense of "springing" and renewal.

Frost's "Rose Pogonias" is closely linked to "A Prayer in Spring". The tone of both is one of sheer wonder, awe and celebration. The "us" of this poem are thrilled to have discovered such a "saturated meadow" where the trees are as tall as the meadow is wide: "where winds are quite excluded". This is a sanctuary to which the "us" of the poem can retreat. It is here where the self finds freedom--freedom away from the outside pressures of social reality. Frost encourages each reader to become a spiritual drifter with the aid of this poem. That is, he presents his audience with the impulse, the seed to create his own little world, his own special spot to which he can retreat at any time.

As in "A Prayer in Spring" the "us" pray. Their prayer is this:

"That none should mow the grass there  
While so confused with flowers".

In the meadow there are little orchids which grow on spears of grass. The people "us" make their supplication in earnest. They want the beauty of their tiny sanctuary spared. Implied in "Rose Pogonias" is the assertion that sexual love can make one aware that he participates in the larger creative processes of nature<sup>27</sup>. This awareness is preserved by metaphors. The "heat" of the poem is associated with that of human sexuality<sup>28</sup>.

All of Frost's poems concerning the theme of "spiritual drifter" tend to conclude in "momentary stays against confusion". They deal with complex and important matters. They represent Frost's contemplation of the problems related to existence: man's identity and freedom and his relationship to the natural world and flow of time<sup>29</sup>.

### **The Pragmatic Empiricist:**

Essentially a pragmatist, Robert Frost was not concerned with philosophizing as much as he was with trying to find "practical" ways of dealing with what he encountered in life. Frost admired the pragmatist William James whose philosophy is marked by the doctrines that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings, that the function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief. Frost's theory of poetry meets with James's pragmatic doctrines, as discussed above<sup>30</sup>.

There were many aspects of James philosophy that attracted Frost. James emphasized a theme of "self-realization" which Frost advocated. Self-realization demanded "courage, will and effort" in order to spark the individual to positive action. Throughout his verse, Frost employed such ideas as these. In fact, most of his major themes "carry the stamp of Jamesian philosophy"<sup>31</sup>. Frost's pragmatism is an acceptance of life as it is. He does not want the world to be any different than it is. He affirms another aspect of James's pragmatism: the idea of usefulness. James believes that usefulness is a sign of truth. No conception or labor has any meaning if it is not useful to life and Frost adheres to this in every poem he composed.

In 1941, Frost wrote a didactic poem entitled, "The Lesson for Today". Its theme is that of simple acceptance of life as it is. The poet-figure acknowledges that he must accept life as it is. This means that he must accept the good as well as the bad. Time is conceived as a disruptive force which, as such, destroys the stability, the peace and values of man. Man desires a perpetual stability and yet time is nothing but change. Frost portrays "time" in this poem as both destroyer and creator as Shelley's "West Wind". This acknowledgement by Frost is practical because he indirectly states that he accepts time the way it is. He positively symbolizes time by employing such images as daylight, Spring, sun and flower while conversely it is negatively symbolized with the images of darkness, Winter, Fall and chill<sup>32</sup>.

Another poem of the theme of simple acceptance is "Mowing". In this brilliant poem, the scene is a field beside a wood, with a lonesome figure working his scythe, which is making a "whispering" sound. The poet-figure listens to his scythe, meditating on "What was it it whispered". He does not think that it is whispering about abstractions, but rather, about "practical, substantial things--like the 'heat of the sun' and the labor being performed by the scythe"<sup>33</sup>. It is this task being completed that is of significant value to Frost. He attaches a symbolic meaning to the physical action. This act allows the poet-figure to appreciate and revere what he is doing. "The higher value for Frost is pragmatic, the fruit of the action is in the moment, that is, the immediately experienced richness of the action"<sup>34</sup>. The result of man's labor is great satisfaction in what he himself has done. This satisfaction brings one to a delight which is felt like a dream:

"The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows".

Frost restates his theme at the end of "Mowing" with the words "to make".

"My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make".

What a person creates is, in a sense, the "only fact or reality" of which he can be sure. And, if one traces the word "poet" to its origin, he discovers that the Greek root of "*poictcs*" means to make<sup>35</sup>. This was Robert Lee Frost, the man, farmer, the bard, the spiritual drifter, the pragmatic empiricist, the swinger of birches.

**End Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Hart, James. *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* (New York, 1980). p. 300 .

<sup>2</sup> Ibid .

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 301 .

<sup>4</sup> Greiner, Donald J. *Robert Frost: The Poet and His Critics*. Chicago, 1974), p. 207.

<sup>5</sup> Poirier, Richard. *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*. (New York, 1977). P. xii .

<sup>6</sup> Robert Frost's Definitions of Poetry, printed on the dust jacket of *West-Running Brook* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1929) .

<sup>7</sup> Cook, Reginald. *The Dimensions of Robert Frost*. (New York, 1968, p. 43 .

<sup>8</sup> Cox, James M. *Robert Frost*. (New York, 1962), p. 19 .

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pgs. 20-1 .

<sup>10</sup> Bode, Carl. *The Portable Emerson, "The Poet"*, (1981), p. 244 .

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 245 .

<sup>12</sup> Cook, p. 135 .

<sup>13</sup> Sohn, David. *Frost and His Poetry*. (New York, 1969), p. 40 .

<sup>14</sup> Cook, Reginald. *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, Massa Chusetts, (1974). P. 51 .

<sup>15</sup> Gerber, Philip L. *Robert Frost: Revised Edition* (Boston, 1982). P. 33 .

<sup>16</sup> The Portable Emerson "Nature", Edited by: Carl Bode (Viking Penguin, 1981). P. 9 .

<sup>17</sup> Reginald, p. 52 .

<sup>18</sup> Poirier, p. 50 .

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 51 .

<sup>20</sup> Cox, p. 143 .

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 144 .

<sup>22</sup> Burber, Martin. *Between Man and Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 52

<sup>23</sup> Vanla, Armi., *The Swedenborgian Background of W. James Philosophy*. (Helsinki, 1977), p. 42 .

<sup>24</sup> Poirier, p. 211 .

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 212 .

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 213 .

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 206 .

<sup>28</sup> Ibid .

<sup>29</sup> Barry, Elaine. *Robert Frost*. (New York, 1973), p. 101.

<sup>30</sup> James, William. *Pragmatism on "Truth"*, (California, 1907), p. 16 .

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 105 .

<sup>32</sup> Trikha, Manorama B. *Robert Frost: Poetry of Clarifications*. (New Jersey, 1983), p. 157 .

<sup>33</sup> Barry, p. 106 .

<sup>34</sup> Trikha, p. 109 .

<sup>35</sup> Sohn, p. 87 .

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