

## THE TERROR – MYTH OF ROBERT FROST’S POETRY – A BRAIN STRAIN

Syeda Samar Shahid Bokhari<sup>1</sup>, Sana Akram<sup>2</sup> and Dr. Mahmood Ahmad Azhar<sup>3</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** *This piece of writing analyzes the fear element in Robert Frost poetry. He very sublimely strikes terror in himself as well as in the readers. Full of Keatsian “negative capability” Frost’s characters augment the settings of uncertainty, dark mysteries and doubts. His characters reflect about moral and metaphysical quest in domestic as well as pastoral locales. There is stunning sublimity in all of his poems, rendering deeper insights into them. The pastoral phenomenon leaves indelible impressions of elevated passions. Readers, through mythological subject matter, are engrossed in his “ulterior meanings.” Specifically, presence of death in Frost’s poems strikes the reader with awe and fear. Deep underlying tones, exhibit dark niches which lay hidden if read cursory. While reading his poems we are stunned by magical influence of something lurking in and outside of the settings, giving an impression of predatorily being watched. By going through some of his famous poems this paper strives to bring out terror myth. Which otherwise makes Frost – poetry a lovable touch of nature. We know the woods, we know the surroundings still there is an aura of uncertainty, that universal “fear of the unknown”, “gradually moving towards end”, and yet the paths are too familiarly clandestine. Despite dark despotism we have something very refreshing too, that brings us to reality.*

**KEYWORDS:** Frost Poetry, Sublime, Keatsian, Ulterior, Underlying, Terror.

## INTRODUCTION

The bird would cease and be as other birds

But that he knows in singing not to sing.

The evident swerve of skepticism makes Frost’s poems ironic and richer with latent meanings. An American poet with all his cognitive originality, Robert Frost presents his ideas of today’s America, with subdued tinge of suffrage. He is one of the most widely read poets of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Looking into early years of his married life and starting family he had bouts of misfortunes. His filial love was jolted several times. His first son, died in 1900 during cholera outbreak. After this tragedy Elinor, his wife gave birth to Carol, who committed suicide, Irma, chronic patient of mental disorder, Marjorie, died very young in her 20s while giving birth, and fourth one Elinor, died just a few weeks after birth. Life challenged him with many unsuccessful attempts in adopting some professions too.

Notwithstanding, such heart rending trials, Frost committed himself to rural life. But his mental sufferings and sense of loss is so evident in nature depiction particularly. Nature is not benign for him as it is for Romantics. It is harsh, rigid and unconquerable. Birds sing but their song does not take us to pleasant reverie as Keatsian Nightingale.

<sup>1</sup> Faculty University of Wah – Wah Cantt. Department of Management Sciences

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer University of Gujrat – Gujrat. Department of English Literature and Linguistics.

<sup>3</sup> HOD Department of English Literature and Linguistics – Lahore Leads University - Lahore

**Prowling Dark Energies:**

According to the Gurus of Contemporary Literary Criticism, Frost prowls into the multifaceted questions of “existence”. His characters live through chilling loneliness in an otherwise very “indifferent universe”. (Nelson). “In much of his work, especially in “North of Boston” his harshest book, he emphasized the dark background of life in rural New England, with its degeneration often sinking into madness. “ (Frost) Most of the critics regarded Frost as “dark, terrifying poet” in his real life too. As Trilling said that his poetry depicted his “own dark potential.” (Frost). Selection of language in all of his poems is closer to the theme in his verses. Almost in all of poems theme setting corresponds to dark – darkness- darken or black. There is night and rigid death like austerity of snow. Natural world is also lexically associated with the dark themes.

In his most famous poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, we have a same sense of lurking energies. These energies pull humans towards themselves, even if their job in this world is complete or not they have to leave all the pleasures, there and then. It is utmost reality of life. If we stay for a while this stay would delay fulfillment of our important tasks. “But I have a promise to keep. And miles to go before I sleep.” (Frost). The word “sleep” is mystified by the way it is used by Frost and by the way it is interpreted by critics. It is synonymous with death; a man must have to undergo. Or it is - thinking about committing “suicide.” (Gargiulo)

**Dark Idyllic Background – “Prefiguring his own death.”**

Beauty of Frost’s poetry is “the mystery”, unfolded by his poetical inferences. Frost’s personal dark potential has been described well by F.D. Reeves in his memoirs of Russian trip with Frost. “I had a feeling.... That Frost was prefiguring his own death.” (Reeve) Hence the dark background suggests a legality here, Frost never had his last moments of life out from his mind. Even amid the beautiful pastoral surrounding he had in the back of the mind that those were just temporary fleeting moments, the hard face of the reality is soon to be confronted. “A fillip to his life.” (Reeve).

In his yet another beautiful poem “Acceptance”, first published in “West-Running Brook” 1928, Frost is pre-imagining the change of living life into death. Background working of dark energies is so vividly perceptible that no serious reader can ignore its presence there. “Spent sun” is that span of life that leaving its soul aflight goes down “ashes to ashes”. “No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud, at what has happened.” (Frost) Frost had a deeper sense to the have-to surrendering to predefined destination of man. He has to surrender to what has been there all the time facing him i.e. Death. Death – irrespective of age or circumstance. It has to work its way down on human when the written time strikes the hour. His helplessness in changing the dictates of fate,” let the night be dark for all of me.” (Frost) The particular phrase “let – for all of me”, (Frost) dignifies his retirement into the fate. “Let what will be, be.” (Frost) From passive surrender he solemnly changes his attitude to the sublime admittance of the Will of God: An impulsive paradigm shift. The title of the poem “Acceptance” speaks loudly of its covert context.

Death “fast gaining on” is thus the main theme of Frost poetry. Never out of sight death somehow imprints on his mind impressions of solitude and loneliness. He would be all alone as those beautiful surroundings will be no more in his sight. Being amid Nature lends Frost sense of accompaniment. Once the touch of Nature has been lost, means he would lose all the

connections to the beautiful world. This sense of loss is immensely engraved in his mind and later flagrant in the form of indelible poetic diction.

Some of the critics considered Frost as “master ironist” too. But in fact, there is no irony in his thoughts. His poems never suggest double meaning, showing one and hiding another. When he picks his theme, he absolutely means it. Like in his poem, “Come In”, the expression is totally about death. The feeling of loneliness is so clear in the opening lines, “Now if it was dusk outside, inside it was dark”. Frost liked the “naïf and sophisticate”, (schulz) it was “the pleasure of ulteriority” for him.

Even his freshest of poems like “Nothing Gold Can Stay”, a description of spring time changing into summer, has harsh reality of death,” So Eden sank to grief, So dawn goes down to day, Nothing Gold can stay.” Poet’s ultimate response to this time of nature, which otherwise is the time of maturity and happiness, ends with “So Eden sank to grief”. His cosmology of nature always culminates with the note of dejection, grief and having darkest aspects. His dark instincts are even more evident in “Home Burial”, nothing could be the saddest than “the Child’s mound”.

Trilling’s “poet of horror”, objectively sees death in nature. But somewhere down in his heart he has thriving desire of getting rid of dark feelings – tangible result of his experiences. The same is expressed in “In My Own”, “One of my wishes is that those dark trees, So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze, were not, as ‘twere, the merest mask of gloom.” (Frost) The deeper we traverse into wintry nights the more horror struck are we. He seems to infer in every flower there is a sigh, that dim eye heralding the approaching end. His poems are thus categorized, “pessimistic and menacing undertones which often are, not recognized, not analyzed.” (Khan)

The word “Death” can be otherwise a “continuation of another life.” (Lakshmi) Frost conveys it in his poem “Something for Hope”. “Don’t think Brown ever gave up hope, of getting home again.” (Frost) The superiority of death cannot be challenged, but there remains hope for a new beginning. “Brown” is not one fictional character, but could be Frost himself, or any man. Running away from the harshest nature, there still is hope, that after death, there will be life better than this one, with “hum drum” and evil susceptibilities. Frost himself thinks better to “bow with grace to natural law”, (Frost) and hope the best is coming his way, even after death. The word “Hope” appears with afresh connotation in his poetry despite “fears of fire and loss.” (Frost)

Horrors of death are not akin to Frost only; we have similar impression in the poetical expressions of John Keats. “When I have fears That I may cease to be”, (Keats) is one such with similar undertones. Keats as his counterpart Romantic poets, wrote about natural environment and adorned his poetry with vivid imagination and “rational Thoughts”. “When I have fears that I may cease to be, before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain, ... Till love and faith to nothingness do sink.” (Keats) Keats expresses his fear that one day he will be suddenly pronounced dead. “Before”, he had finished his work. For him life is enigmatic, it has “magic hand of chance”. Although Keatsean fear is like the present fear of Frost but both have different angles of perception. Keats had genuine reason to fear, as he had disease – tuberculosis. His approaching death is more fearing and imminent for him. Nevertheless, his fear is not being dead but for the loss of all his energies and ideas he had in him, which he would not be able to convert into written form. The reader will be deprived of his writings. Also, there is sense of loss that he would lose the touch of nature, “a thing of beauty.” (Keats)

In comparison, Frost's sense of death is the product of his personal experiences. His family faced death frequently, his own children died very young and in infancy. But "Element of Uncertainty" is same in both. Frost's "The Road Not Taken," symbolizes the choices he has in life. But how far he is allowed to take the road he is willing to, this authority is very limited. Again "yellow wood" (Frost) confirms his doubts about the waning years of life. Two roads in front, one suggests immortality and the other mortality. After much contemplation he has to choose one direction to travel and that leads to the end of life. The immortality – road is not suggested for him, he can never take that one, though it has "better claim." (Frost) After taking the less trodden road, he doubts he would ever come back to explore the other grassy path. It would always be a mystery for him, "I doubted if I should ever come back." (Frost) "And that has made all the difference" (Frost) for him.

### **Man and Nature – Cohort reaction**

"Don't trust me too far.." (Stafford) Frost once said. He liked mysteries and secrets and "Thought of questions that have no reply" (Frost, Tuft of Flowers). This aspect is resplendent in his cohort relation of man and nature. These mysteries are covert in dark niches of nature, whence the relations with humans strike. "Frost has his moods, his enemies, the things that set him off." (Schuessler) Out from his mood swings we have unique combination of man and nature. In this relation we cannot say nature is always harsh.

Rather this terror is stemming from human conditions. Man suffers death, he is diseased, alienated and lonely. Hence archetypally the inner colors of moods are reflected in the surroundings too. Naturally if a person is happy, the nature sings songs to elate him, but if he is sad and somber inside, his sadness is reflected in nature too. In happy moments even the harshest winter would be enjoyable. Joseph Warren says Frost, "fully realizes that nature is indifferent to man, often even seemingly hostile to us." (Beach)

Viewing from this angle Frost's nature is impersonally hostile. It is so immense and intense that man feels so insignificant in the face of it. Hence man's presence is empirically related to the description of Nature. Nature is so deep and vast, it corresponds to the inner moods of man, enough to hurt him more. "Bereft" and "Sad Dunes" second this point. In "Bereft" the speaker is lonely and has a sour heart. In this state he feels the surroundings all up against him. Loneliness is accentuated further. "Something sinister in the tone, Told me my secret must be known" (Frost). The universe seems to be conspiring against him, and planning an attack on him when he is sitting all alone in his porch. The winds gushing forward warn him of something potent coming his way. Nature seems ominous to him. Colloquially nature becomes a medium of expressing his feelings. In the same way man's free will is described so symbolically, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall." (Frost, Mending Walls). Man doesn't not love boundaries and walls, because he loves to be unrestricted.

This mysterious kinship with nature is symbolically the pet project of Frost poetry. Unlike Romantics he does not give spiritual significance to nature; Frost is not pantheist. Nature is not one with human soul, it is rather, impersonal manifestation of man's soulfully changing moods. The same wind seems friendly to Shelley, "The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind, If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?" (Shelley) and is a herald of new hope. Nature of Frost in "Bereft" is much the same like "Storm" in King Lear, accentuating diseased mental condition of King Lear. And Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break", where the poet's state of mind is intensified by the roaring sea. "But the tender grace of a day that is dead, Will never come back to me". (Tennyson).

Frost's characters also experience horrors and fears erupting their own sense of guilt. Like in "The Witch of Coos" and "She Fear". There is sense of insecurity amidst the nature. Frost's characters are the night travelers. They revel in the darkened nature and feel nature mysteriously at work. Certainly nature replicates dark side of man. This touch divulges another characteristic of Frost poetry. Sound portrayal of modern man, anguished as well as ruthless in actions. Cleanth Brooks comments, "Frost's best poetry exhibits the structure of symbolist metaphysical poetry. Much more clearly than does of many a modern poet." (Brooks) The factor of disintegration, disillusion and loneliness is quite obviously the characteristic of modern man. When the same appears in natural surroundings his inner self is echoed. Nature is reflected back with the same hostility, confused and with steeping loneliness.

In "An old man's Winter night" (Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost), age of protagonist is not mentioned in figures but metaphysically "old age" is articulated. The stars are not clustered but the loneliness of the man is reflected back even from up above: "separate stars" and "empty rooms" suggest man is unaccompanied. Similarly, Modern man is at a loss amid the forest of technology and advancements. Material race has gained on him, bereaving human sensitivities and emotions, hence the image, "he stood with barrels round him – at a loss." "A light he was to no one but himself." (Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost).

His man is fatigued in this intriguing new world. He has to work hard to keep pace with life, but in this running race he gets tired. His desire for rest and continuous struggle is obvious mark of modernity. "For I have too much of Apple picking; I am over tired of great harvest I myself desired." (Frost, "After Apple Picking"). Modern man is desirous of "big harvest" which means getting huge expected profits. But altogether he is inwardly not satisfied with the tiring efforts of earning livelihood.

Some of the critics like Alvarez never accept Frost as a pastoral poet. For them he is the poet of "countryside" with "agrarian bias". "Woods are lovely" but simultaneously "dark" as well. Thus the juxtaposition of two sides of man's world. It is "lovely" but it is "dark".

Modernity is Frost's mighty power. It should not be taken as "contemporaneity" (Tiwari). In the "Mending Walls" one of his characters is having modern thinking. "Something there is that does not love a wall."

### **Inference At the End**

"Then an end?"

End is a gloomy word." (Frost, "In the Home Stretch")

Enigmatically the pastoral as well as modern poet, Robert Frost appears to be at logger's head throughout his life. He portrayed man as he is, as he could be feeling inside. The nihilism is present all along. But the way that nihilism is presented, it does not seem to be nihilism any more. The dark mysteries are in every nook and corner of the pastoral world, yet these mysteries are charming to the perceiving eyes.

The element of terror is there, but this terror is not literally or figuratively present in the nature itself. Rather it is a metaphysical presentation of man's inner self. The terror – myth is the reflection of man's attitude towards himself and towards the surroundings. This aspect is better explained by Ernest Holmes, "Life is a mirror, and will reflect back to the thinker what he puts into it." (Holmes).



Metaphorically speaking man's problems do not originate from the outer world, rather these are the product of his own concoction. Same belief is expressed by Charlene Belitz and Meg Lundstrom, "External conditions mirror internal conditions, so straightening your room settles internal disorder." (Meg Lundstrom). Man knowingly or unknowingly is shaping up the world around. The reality is that this tangible world is the product of that intangible, which lies in the subconscious of man. The ultimate choice is of man himself, he can view the world as he wants to a "bed of roses", or "leading to the hole of despair."

Frost's Nature, is not harsh, morbid or cruel, it is man's self that makes it so. The paragon of modernity is visible in every touching line and phrase of Frost's poetry. Very true of Albert Einstein, "we cannot solve our problems, with the same level of thought that created it." Consequently, Nature is capable of offering solace to man, but he is not ready to accept it. Relatively Nature in its response is seen negatively by him. It is conspiring against him. The winds are ominous, and winters rigid for him. Life has a destined limit, which according to Frost must be reached at. It is our choice how we look at it. With morbid eye or clandestine heart.

"The question that he frames in all but words

Is what to make of a diminished thing." (Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost)

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