



THE LOCAL AS UNIVERSAL: FACETS SEEN IN ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Robert Frost is best known to the public as the poet of New England. He achieved great popularity as a poet both in his own country America and in other countries. Robert Frost deals with the simple, rural New Englanders. He was a great lover of nature, and his love is local and regional. Local milieu is so well reflected in the poetry of Robert Frost that it finds instant recognition and gratification in the reader. Frost's conversational language is regional. He has, in his poetry, portrayed the actual life of people living in New England and New Hampshire. Frost used the speech of common people in expressing his thoughts through poetry. It is therefore quite natural that his poetry has been most valued for the precision with which it portrays the rural world 'north of Boston'. Frost's New England or so concerned to see the local landscape as a reflection of the poet's own experience that one forgets to notice the art through which the regional world is presented. Therefore, Frost's New England is an accurate picture of the real place. His rural world is interesting because it symbolizes the world known to all. So far, Frost is a regional poet, and has dealt with the themes related to the rustic life of New England and used the speech of common people in expressing his thoughts through poetry.

Key Words: Country life, Local milieu, Macrocosm, Microcosm, Robert Frost, Yankee manner

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The local milieu in Frost's poetry is just a means to address the general populace all over the world to give them a peep into his beloved New England, to familiarize them with the Yankee temper and speech. In no way can it be called on overvaluation of the local flavour in his poetry. Robert Frost is one of the greatest of American poets, one whose name is well familiar in India because his poetry was a source of comfort and inspiration to no less a person than Jawahar Lal Nehru, the idol of the people, during the last years of his life. He has been

the most widely known and perhaps the most fully appreciated American poet of the twentieth century. Local milieu is so well reflected in the poetry of Robert Frost that it finds instant recognition and gratification in the reader. The New England depicted by Frost may have changed today after more than four decades, yet the old world charm still lingers on and creates a nostalgia and emotional rapport with the reader whenever he reads the poems written by Frost. Pictures depicted by him of a horse carriage in the woods, or a swinger of birches

or a wood cutter or tramps roaming the countryside spring alive in the mind's eye as soon as one thinks of the environs of New England. No American can remain unaffected by it and readers in faraway lands like us can vividly imagine and visit the beautiful sights that he recaptures through words. It is this knack that gives Frost the unique distinction of having created such life-like images in his poems of the area that he loved and enjoyed being in. There can be no better tribute to the poet than a poem in which he brought the sights and sounds of a rustic activity so alive to the readers that one seems a part of it.

Frost is a great regional poet. The region north of Boston forms the background to his poetry. Its people, its scenes and sights, appear and reappear in successive poems, and impart a rare continuity and unity to his works. It is this particular region that Frost has made his own. Above all, Frost is the poet of the rural New England. He knew every part of this limited world, and he renders it in words with a brilliant, off-hand ease. His characters are all New-Englanders, and he has succeeded in capturing the very tone, diction, idiom, and rhythm of Yankee speech. He writes of a particular region, but from the particular he constantly rises to the universal and the general. He writes of the joys and sorrows, loves and hatreds, of the simple Yankees, but he also shows that such joys and sorrows, loves and hatred are common to all humanity. Lynen (1960) remarks, "Because Frost draws upon the environmentalistic and primitivistic tendencies in modern thought, his poems enlist literal acceptance of myth."

Frost depicts in this poetry the vision of a country life. It seems that there are two ideas that constantly work in the mind of Frost. The first denotes a strong tie between the mind of an individual and the land. One of the characteristics of his poetry that it seems to have derived from the Romantics. The second dominant idea; Yankee mind reflects the landscape; this type of mentality seems to be closely related to the landscape. This sense is present in every Yankee character of Frost. Frost assumes that a sound literature must essentially

depict the suffering. He shows pessimistic tendencies in many respects and seems to believe that sorrow is an unavoidable part of human experience. But the experiences that he shows are of the people that inhabit that particular area that he was familiar with. It is in this that Frost presents the local milieu to the maximum applying the microcosm to the macrocosm the local to the universal and his depiction of the Yankee comes out as a masterly portrayal of the true American son of the soil. The Yankee manner, for which Frost has been so often and so deservedly praised, is something more than a mere technical achievement. His Yankee manner is not only a way of speaking; it is the symbol of a mode of thought by representing the thought process of his Yankee speaker, it becomes a means of picturing the regional world itself. Lynen has remarked on this "Frost's achievement as a stylist is due to his ability to transform the style itself into a symbol. His Yankee manner is not only a medium of expressing regional attitudes; it has also an image of them."

Robert Frost is a regional poet. He has, in his poetry, portrayed the actual life of people living in New England and New Hampshire. Rapid growth of industry had completely changed the complexion of the life in the villages. Industrialization had a great impact on the life and attitude of the village folk. Frost depicted their bleak life in his poetry. He sympathetically understands the psychology of the village folk. He tries to enter the innermost recesses of the heart and mind of village folk and like a realist he depicts their sentiments and feelings. By doing so he does not only depict the village folk living in the area of New England but embraces the entire humanity. He points to different types of characters, characters leading a life of frustration, isolation and loneliness and the characters who in spite of their bleak life possess sweetness of temper and vigour. There is no romantic flavour in the portrayal of Frost's characters. He studies village life with accuracy and precision. The characters of Robert Frost face many problems e.g. defeat and frustration. Frost, while talking about the defeat and frustration of his characters, gives another picture of

these characters. He shows despite their ill-luck, these characters have the courage to tackle the problems in their own way and they fight with them as best as they can. Robert Frost sympathizes with these men and admires them. He extends a hand of friendship to them and does not consider them inferior. He treats them on an equal level. Though Frost's characters belong to the rural area of New England, and are gifted with many regional traits and characteristics, Frost portrays their fundamental traits and by doing so he touches on the permanent and universal values of life. He has shown how these characters have fought against their hard life. Through these characters, Frost has built up a picture of entire humanity. Frost has not only dealt with the people of New England, but through them he has portrayed the entire humanity's struggle for existence (Malcolm Cowley, 1944).

Frost shows a rare psychological insight and sympathetic understanding in the portrayal of his rustic characters. He presents their essential features without letting their rough exterior conceal what lies inside. Frost reveals the significance of the psychological states in *Tree at My Window*, although the poem refers to an object of nature. This is done by drawing an implied parallel between the outer and the inner. Lyric appeal is marked in the monologues and dialogues of this volume. His objective characterizations of those rural New Hampshire men and women, whom he had learned to know and love during years of living among them, quite naturally grew out of his search for the most satisfactory subject matter which might enable him to practice his principles concerning the posture and the sound of sense. How could he better apply those theories than by giving poetic form to the epigrammatic and idiomatic thoughts and emotions of those down-to-earth and unaffected country folk who Emerson had referred to as 'rude poets of the tavern hearth.

Robert Frost deals with the simple, rural New Englanders. The intellectuals and other complex characters do not come within the preview of his art. He deals exclusively with people living in a particular

region. He depicts realistically their peculiar, regional characteristic, but he also reveals their basic humanity. From the particular and the individual, he rises to the permanent and the universal. He uses his regionalism to look at life beyond and depicts the universal traits of human nature. His Yankees face the problems of farmers everywhere: adverse weather, shifting prices, loneliness isolation. They may wear American-made overalls and speak with a downcast accent, but they are fundamentally ordinary men and women, confronted with the need to make a living and to adjust to conditions which sometimes seem intolerable. Frost captures their peculiar idiom, their folk-lore. Many of Frost's New England poems after 1915 involve a 'wise person', directly or indirectly, in the guise of a Yankee sage ('Birches' and 'Christmas Trees', are the earliest of such poems); but 'Mending Wall' does not encourage the reader to regard either the speaker or his neighbor as a source of absolute wisdom. Frost's unassuming comment that the poem simply contrasts two types of people demonstrates his awareness that the strength of the piece lie in its dramatic conflict (Reginald L. Cook, 1948) (and in the characterization, requisite for such conflict) rather than its philosophy. The reader of 'Christmas Trees' soon learns that the poem expresses the experience and sentiments of an unmistakably rural figure. It is the Yankee farmer both in voice and manner who says:

.....there drove
A stranger to our yard who looked the city,
Yet did in country fashion in that there
He sat and waited till he drew us out,
A-buttoning coats, to ask him who he was.

Frost's imagery is typically Yankee in character. It is provided from personal observation of the world around. For example, the vapourising from a stream is likened to an ox's breath:

'One of the great sights going is to see
Is steam in winter, like on ox's breath.
And the houses at the bottom of the
mountain are said to look;
'Like boulders broken off from upper cliff,

Rolled out a little farther than the rest.'

His attitudes, his moral sense and, indeed, his whole mentality dramatizes the regional world and therefore functions as symbols to represent it. His personality is revealed through his manner of speaking and since it is he who utters the poem, his manner of speaking is the poem's style. In his character we can see the union of style and content. Here the Yankee manner can be recognized as a vital part, not only of the poem's meaning, but of its pastoral structure. For it is to a large extent through style that Frost represents the Yankee point of view and thus establishes the contrast between the rural world and common experience. But the process is reciprocal. Just as the Yankee manner defines the regional theme the theme in turn infuses the style with a distinctly local flavour.

Frost's regionalism, like the old pastoral, is thoroughly the social. It is concerned more with the rural way of life than with its scenery, more with the sense of values shared by the local society than with the intuitions of a single mind. Very often Frost deals with the theme having a social implication and related it to the social situation around him. In 'Mowing', he deals with the theme of the dignity and importance of labour in life. In 'Mending Wall' he seems to point to the futility of boundaries or barriers between one man and another or one country and another. In 'The Vanishing Red' he treats the theme of racial discrimination and conflict. 'A Hundred Collars' presents a contrast between rural and urban manners. 'The Death of a Hired Man' hints at the need for social security for old working people. In 'A Servant to Servants', he deals with the servants as well as the master of the household. In 'Two Tramps in Mud Time', he stresses the need to adopt an attitude of kindness towards tramps who are often treated harshly. In 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' the need to heed and fulfill social obligations is stressed. The social values reiterated by Frost were those he found all around him, in the villages and farms and the country folk living there. It is these that he describes with full sincerity. 'Two Tramps In Mud Time' was first published in 1934.

This malevolence in man seems to exist on a basic personal level, but in some poems, such as 'Build Soil', Frost makes it clear that if men are not careful, these natural personal reactions within an unfeeling universe can become systematized in social, economic, and political terms.

In your sense of the word ambition has
Been socialized-the first propensity
To be attempted. Greed may well come
next.
But the worst one of all to leave uncurbed,
Unsocialized, is ingenuity:

The emphasis here is on the greed that is potential in human nature and which Frost believed socialization or social planning of any kind would be likely to encourage. We may be struck by the similarity between the greed suggested here and the cruelty evinced in 'A Brook in the City', for the life of the brook was sacrificed to man's commercial desires. Both poems represent-as do many others-what can happen when man stands alone, independent of his environment: He feels that there is nothing meaningful to him in the universe to which he can respond directly. Even in this weak position, man reacts by trying to organize his life and experience in social terms, the assumption evidently being that if the personal strength is lacking, there is safety in numbers. Frost sees these attempts, however, as futile and ridiculous. 'Departmental' presents us with a clear picture of this societal organization. Any society which is organized mechanically, relegating a concern with God to a committee, is intellectually and emotionally dead, and when considered at a sufficient distance, ridiculous. The same basic human situation is described and attacked more intensely in 'Build Soil'. There Frost says, 'long before I'm interpersona/Away' way down inside I'm personal. It is this personal touch that gave him the awareness that human greed was eroding everything. The arcadian blissful area that he was so devoted to could not remain so for long in the face of encroaching waves of materialism and thirst for acquisition. Thereby it gave rise to Frost's constant

reiteration on the value of human labor, the need to love work and to consider the rights of each and everyone. Even the simple rustic folk had a basic, intrinsic wisdom that guided them throughout their lives.

Frost is a regional poet, and has dealt with the themes related to the rustic life of New England. Rustic people, the vicissitudes of their life, the tragic aspects of the life of the poor and the old, the drudgery, despair, loneliness of the unprivileged farmers are all depicted by him frequently. Frost is not concerned with urban life, and does not deal with the themes or situations related to life in big cities. He focuses his attention on the condition of life in the countryside, and that too of a particular region. However, he does not ignore human life as a whole or the life and struggles of human beings in general. Like 'The Pasture' in 'North of Boston', 'The Road not Taken' is italicized and set apart from the rest of the poems in *Mountain Interval* as an introductory piece. It was originally intended as an ironic 'genteel joke' on Edward Thomas. But Frost's decision to use it as an introductory poem, and to follow it with the overtly regional 'Christmas Trees', is perhaps best explained as an attempt to link his new book with *North of Boston*. The hiker in 'The Wood-Pile' and 'Good Hours' was uncertain about where he was headed and why. In 'The Road Not Taken' he apparently decides-or, more accurately, he tries to convince himself-that by taking a 'less traveled' road, he has provided his life with a direction 'that has made all the difference'. That direction, the structure of *Mountain Interval* suggests, is toward the countryside, toward the rustic self-reliance and the Yankee shrewdness displayed, even flaunted, in 'Christmas Trees'. Indeed, the first two lines of this poem take on a special significance at the start of such a regionally oriented collection. They evoke a rural world free of pernicious urban influences: 'The city and withdrawn into itself/And left at last the country to the country'. It is significant that in creating his mythical background Frost always glossed over the distance between country life and the social position his

family had attained by the end of the nineteenth century. The Frosts were well established townsmen by then, and their cultivation was not of the soil.

Frost's conversational language is regional. He has succeeded in capturing the distinctive flavour and tone of Yankee speech. This regional touch is not imparted by the use of dialectic words. There is few dialectic or regional words in his poetry. The impression of regionalism is also created by the fact that Frost's idiom and phrasing grows out from the meaning and emotion which the poem conveys. The style is not distinct but a part of the content of poetry. The meaning is, 'reflected in, and symbolized by, the details of language.' In *The Code*, there is a perfect fusion of style and content, and so the style acquires a peculiar local flavour. The Yankee pride and sense of self-respect are expressed through the reticence and understatement peculiar to the rural dwellers in the region north of Boston. In *Fire and Ice*, 'the more one listens to the nuances of tone, the more one hears the Yankee qualities of the speaker voice.' As a record of colloquial English, the poem is a tour de force. It acquires much of its intensity from the Yankee habit of understatement and reticence. Furthermore, the understatement dramatizes the special character of the Yankee concerned. His ironic, casual manner manifests a more than normal sensitivity of thought. He is speaking of things in human nature which arouses the deepest terror, but he will not yield to emotional outbursts. Instead he holds back, pretending to be amused and indifferent because only by reining in his own feelings can he be free to face the brutal results of man's emotions realistically or recognizes their full destructiveness. Most serious ideas are here expressed, through humble, everyday phrase. In such poems, Frost's style acquires a symbolic significance and essential nature of the Yankee mind. So far as Frost's language is concerned, it may be safely said that his poetry speaks and unfolds itself. He uses simple words and uses common speech in his verse. His words are the words that are commonly used in every day talk and they form the plain language. The language used in the poems in 'A Boy's Will' is the language of the

genteel poets. But the language used in North of Boston is the language used in north of Boston. Frost has created his own idiom keeping in view the dignity of a literary language. He did not employ the vulgarities and crudeness of the common speech he rather decanted them and refined vernacular so as to make it suitable for poetry. In this process he did not tarnish the shape of this form of speech and he also did not steal the flavour and savour of it. In doing so Frost achieved something that Wordsworth could not despite his best efforts. Frost fully and successfully satisfied the theory of Wordsworth's poetic diction.

Frost used the speech of common people in expressing his thoughts through poetry. In this respect he followed Wordsworth. Frost's poetic concerns are similar to those which led Wordsworth to choose incident and situations from common life and then to present them in a language actually used by common man. Frost, like Wordsworth and like many other poets before and after him has emphasized his concern for catching within the lines of his poems the rhythms and cadences and tones of human speech. He is one among those modern poets who have emphasized the capturing of 'the sound sense' or sound pasturing' as repeatedly referred to by Frost in order to enrich the underlying metrical rhythm. Frost, universally regarded as synonymous with New England, is even praised for bringing into literature the New England tongue. But his verse actually is not regional at all. The myth of dialect has been systematically demolished in John F. Lynen's close study of Frost's poetic diction. In his through analysis Lynen locates only 'five or six localisms' in the whole of Frost's output. He cites the use of 'ile' for 'oil' in the last stanza of 'Brown's Descent' and the rhyming of 'ira' with 'inquiry' in 'Of the Stones of the Place'. One must hunt diligently to find even these examples. It may be that one is so attuned to meeting in print only the more formal written language that one really fails to hear his own spoken words, with their more casual air, even when they are presented to him. One tends instead to regard them as a picturesque dialect peculiar to some

distant locality. Frost's language, when coupled with his infinitely observed and deeply understood regional characters, becomes an integral part of the dramatic situation in a poem. Such a goal might have taken him into the arms of the 'local color' enthusiasts who were having their little day when North of Boston was first published. But his characterizations were not concerned with the quaint, the picturesque, the peculiar. Instead they disclosed and elaborated in subtle and indirect fashion new aspects of the ageless varieties: the sorrowful conflicts between good and good, the persistence of loneliness even in love, the power of the failure of love to make recompense for the difference between man and woman. These are but a few of the themes which are unfolded and clarified anew in the homely scenes of his dramatic narratives and characterizations. With them may be found occasional delineation of emotions and thoughts which have been psychologically twisted by fear, hate, pride, jealousy, fatigue. And always there are the subtle indirections of Frost's dramatic method. So much more is suggested than is stated. Somehow the thoughts and emotions are embodied in a context of words which suggest not only a physical setting – a room, a road, a garden, a farm, a grove, a hill – but also a psychological setting.

Frost had the knack of taking the mundane to the extraordinary, the local to the universal and thereby he was able to create a macrocosm from a small microcosm. Generations have studied and the coming generation will read his works and find nuances of meaning in them far beyond what he might have intended. It goes to define his greatness as a poet and the universality of his message that given him the status of a sage poet who passed wisdom into his poem.

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