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## THE COLOURS OF PASTORALISM IN ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

The most commonly held view about Robert Frost's poetry is that it is primarily pastoral. It has the spirit of the pastoral world and it deals primarily with rural life. Frost's characters are rural people and his language is simple and colloquial. There is no doubt that much of it has a rural background including country-folks, rural occupation and other activities. Frost is chiefly concerned with the rural people and their world. His poetry, directly or indirectly, deals with the beliefs, ideals, traditions, customs and habits of the rural folk. He indicates that life in the countryside and in the town has its own features or values. Frost has explored wide and manifold ranges of being by viewing reality within the mirror of the natural and unchanging world of rural life. Pastoralism is a technique with Frost to illuminate the universal ramifications of a particular scene and incident, and to illustrate the eternal longings in the heart of man in a particularized situation. In this way he was able to create a unique though difficult synthesis between farming and academic life that is between the pastoral and the urban side of his personality. The various shades of pastoralism are brought together with traditional and modern. He takes up some parts of the old conventions and merges them with the rural scenario all around him thereby creating a wonderful twentieth century pastoral world that was unique in its own way and had the hurls of a multicoloured rainbow.

**Key Words:** Native, New England, Pastoralism elements, Robert Frost, Rural people

Robert Frost is best known to the public as the poet of New England and the representative of a particular regional culture. It is quite natural that his poetry has been most valued for the precision with which it portrays the rural world 'north of Boston'. His subject is the region north of Boston and from that region also, only the rural areas and farms and villages. Frost's regionalism is both symbolism and creative." Frost's poetry has the spirit of the pastoral if we take into consideration the fact that it deals primarily with rural life. The countryside to the north of Boston, a part of New England, provides its proper setting. In most of Frost's poetry, the rural setting is obvious. But nature, as in all pastorals, remains in the

background. As John F. Lynen (1930) says, "The pastoralist does not write about nature; he uses nature as his scene, and it is important only in that it defines the swain's point of view." In 'Stopping by Woods on a Snow Evening', there is an obvious spirit of the pastoral. The scene is beautifully depicted: the woods are lovely dark and deep; the tufts of snow are gently falling; a light breeze is blowing; and there is an almost total calm and quiet. But this scene helps project the point of view of the Yankee traveler. Like all rural people, he cannot stay for long in idle contemplation.

Frost's nature poetry is akin to the pastoral. In the manner of the pastoralist, he uses nature to illustrate and define a particular

viewpoint. In 'The Onset', the unharvested and 'Evening in Sugar Orchard' we have beautiful pictures of landscape, but the Yankee point of view projected through the scene is as much important, if not more than the scene itself. Often he may say something having a universal appeal and application; but mostly he expresses his views that have a tinge of the American standpoint. He deals with American life-especially as found in rural and pastoral areas and sings of the glory of American cultural tradition.

The most commonly held view about Robert Frost's poetry is that it is primarily pastoral. There is no doubt that much of it has a rural background, country-folks, rural occupation and other activities. There are poems which deal with apple-picking, gum-gathering, birch-swinging, mowing, hay-collecting and other rural activities. Frost's characters are rural people and his language is simple and colloquial. His poetic world is noticeable for the absence of city folks and city life, factories, trains, buses and human traits which are essentially urban. In his poetry, there is a faithful portrayal of the life lived in New England, the region in which he lived and was intimately familiar with. No wonder, he is called a regional poet. Pastoral poetry, in the traditional sense, deals with the simple life of shepherds and other rural folk in a natural setting. In any study of the pastoral, the rural setting and the rural people cannot be ignored. In most of Frost's poetry, the rural setting is obvious. But nature, as in all pastorals, remains in the background (Edmund Chambers).

Frost is chiefly concerned with the rural people and their world. His poetry, directly or indirectly, deals with the beliefs, ideals, traditions, customs and habits of the rural folk. The Yankee people believe in such virtues as honesty, simplicity, reticence, realism, optimism and the capacity to work hard. In 'Mowing', we find that the typical Yankee farmer advocates the idea of sweet labour - 'the fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows'. He does not want undeserved wealth. He is of the opinion that a labourer finds the greatest pleasure in doing work. In 'Mending Wall', the reticent farmer who believes - 'Good

walls make good neighbours' - projects the Yankee's belief in privacy, the sense of possession and individualism. The farmer in 'Blueberries' is thrifty as he feeds his entire family on blueberries. 'The Death of the Hired Man' records the fact that the rural folk give much importance to self-respect. It is the pride and self-respect of Silas, the old farmer and that alienates him from his rich brother, and finally costs him his life. In 'Home Burial', we find a Yankee farmer who is extremely realistic and practical. He takes the death of his son as another inevitable fact of nature, unlike his wife who hates him for his indifference. In 'The Code', we learn that the rural workers do not like to be taught how to work as they know their work and do it with complete dedication and honesty.

It is in the rural setting and the use of the rural world that we may think of Frost as a Pastoral poet. But there are some essential features of the pastoral that are missing in his poetry such as harmony between man and nature, unqualified glorification of rural life, and the proper attitude towards work. In the traditional pastoral, the shepherds and the other rural folk do not look upon nature as something remote and inanimate. They consider nature as a benevolent force. Nature rejoices in their joys, and grieves in their griefs, Animals grow gentle as they listen to the sounds of their flutes. In the Yankee countryside as portrayed by Frost, however no such harmony between man and nature exists. In 'The Most of It', for instance, the speaker wants an original response from nature, and not the reflection of his own love. But the thing which comes out from the world of nature, a buck, is all that he gets. He comes to the conclusion that nature is incapable of giving any intimate and personal response. Nature is remote and impersonal.

In the traditional pastoral, the rural people hardly do any real work on the farm, their real occupations being singing and love-making. This is not so in the rural world portrayed by Frost in his poetry. Here the Yankees take pleasure in doing work. The farmer in 'Mowing' believes in, and does hard work which is its own reward. The rider in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', too, prefers work to rest. Frost's pastoralism is highly

individual and unique. This uniqueness of his pastoral art arises from his ability to write of rural life from the point of view of an actual New England farmer. He sets his rural world apart by stressing its distinctly local traits and portraying Yankee life as quite different from that in the cosmopolitan urban society. And, as in the old pastoral, awareness of differences leads to a recognition of parallels.

Traditionally, pastoral poetry deals with the life of rustic folk like shepherds etc. living in a rural setting. The pastoral genre can best be defined as a particular synthesis of attitudes toward the rural world. It has an important place in American ideology. The puritan pursuit of renewal through rebellion against ecclesiastical corruption often invokes the pastoral longing of perfection through simplicity. Frost affirmed the relationship of his poetry to a fundamental pastoral idea, the praise of rustic over urban life. Pastoral has been recognized as a mode that encompasses many genres including poetry. Its mythic contents have been shown to include the search for a peaceful and beautiful landscape, the dialogue and singing of shepherds, and the praise of contemplation over work. The pastoral in Frost represents the power of the social to save the individual from the excesses of isolation as well as the power of the individual will to resist what he called 'alien entanglements'.

The depiction of 'country things' in Frost often involves both experiences and observation as well as literary and scientific feats of association. Pastoral and geographic tradition merges in Frost's imagination. Frost's pastoralism was different from conventional pastoralism, it was neither Arcadian on the one hand nor was it a simple descriptive type of pastoralism as indulged in by English poets from the eighteenth century down to A.E. Houseman. Frost abandoned old traditions and conventions of pastoral poetry and discovered a new and realistic basis for examining the rural ways of life. Whatever he achieved as a pastoral poet adds one more feather to his cap. John F. Lynen says that, "Frost discovered a new myth of rural life. As a poet, Frost matured late, his early verses reveal a constant searching for an idiom and a subject."

The structure of Frost's most representative and important work is essentially

that of the pastoral. The concept of pastoral reveals the unity in the diverse elements of Frost's art; it should also enable the reader to look beneath the simple surface of the poems. Frost is casually referred to as a pastoral poet and his poems are likened to eclogues. As a matter of fact one of Frost's earliest poems shows very clearly how remote the conventions of pastoral were from his own interest. In 'Pan With Us' he uses the imagery of Arcadia to symbolize all the genteel poetic styles which were dying out during the period of his literary apprenticeship.

Frost indicates that life in the countryside and in the town has its own features or values. In his treatment of the pastoral Frost displays a classicist's devotion to form and a realist's interest in experience. He uses the pastoral scene for viewing reality. Frost as a realist does not let his pastorals become idylls. There is no glorification or idealization of rural life in his pastoral poems, for he believes that the natural world is not necessarily better than the human world. Regarding the pastoral lyric, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost, Lynen has aptly remarked that "Stopping by the Woods is one of his first pastoral lyrics. The great value of New Hampshire is that it illustrates the pastoral design of Frost's poetry. It shows us that his rural New England is a world of symbol and that his method as a regional poet is that of exploring the other words of experience through this word." Frost's poetry about rural life is significant beyond the realistic presentation of realities in other areas of experience. A pastoral poem of Frost can suggest different levels of values and ideals, as in the case of *Mending Wall*. The poem apparently refers to repairing the wall as a physical barrier between two farms. On a higher plane it refers by implication, to the significant theme of all kinds of barriers between man and man—racial, religious, political, national economic etc.

Frost is a synecdochist because the particular fact in his poem has universal implications and is related to essential human predicament. The pastoral scene in Frost has always a corresponding human situation. Nature in his poetry represents the whole world of

circumstances. He is a metaphysical poet too since the simple fact in a Frost poem entails a mystery. The simple facts of a man stopping between the woods and the lake in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* become emblematic of the charm and mystery of life and the world, its effect on man, and man's determination to keep his promise of performance. *The Road Not Taken*, beginning with a reference to two roads in a yellow wood, ultimately shows man vexed by the problem of choice and taking a conscious choice. Frost as a pastoral poet may seem to be a regional poet because he presents the people the climate and the topography of New England in his poems. In *Two Tramps in Mud Time* he presents the vagaries of weather in New England. A title like *North of Boston* contains an obvious regional reference. On a wider scale Frost may be called an American regionalist, for he displays an American way of expressing attitudes.

In a Frost poem, nature itself is not a moral phenomenon. Frost brings out the reality of life and the moral has a relevance to the reality. Frost's pastoral can suggest spiritual elevation. Pastoralism is very closely related to romanticism. In Pastoralism, the poet idealizes and glorifies everything. Even the ordinary scenes appear to be tintured with imagination. Frost was a realist and he based his poetry on realism. The pastoral element of Frost is full of suggestiveness. From the very beginning of Frost's poetic career, his critics and commentators have spoken of him as a pastoral poet. They have commented on his verse in terms of pastoral poetry. 'Mending Wall', the first poem in *North of Boston's* table of contents, is linked to 'The Tuft of Flowers' by the epigraph. The narrator of 'The Tuft of Flowers' spoke with considerable authority about fellowship. The love of nature and of beauty is everywhere threatened in Frost by the demands of environment and economy. 'Rose Pogonias' from 'A Boy's Will' gives praise to this colorful but rare and delicate bog orchid. Frost's conception of himself as an 'Old Testament Christian' also gives us an insight into the Biblical aspects of Frost's pastoral thought. 'After Apple-Picking' is the only lyric or poem that 'intones', as Frost said, in *North of Boston*. Stories

from the Old and New Testaments merge in this pastoral lyric of penetration into matter and acceptance of limitations and of labor. Elegiac in tone, it seems quite overtly to address the virtues of work in the orchard. It is obvious, then, that Frost's poetry has the spirit of the pastoral, though it lacks some essential features of the classical pastoral. It depicts in vivid detail the rural scene and the rural world of the north of Boston where the poet lived himself as a farmer for many years. It is not in the depiction of the rural scene but in its treatment that we find the real greatness of Frost as a poet.

Glorification of rural life has been a leading characteristic of the pastoral. The swain (the rustic) is pictured as leading not only a life of idyllic happiness, but also as being ideally pure and innocent. Frost's treatment of rural life, on the other hand, is characterized by down-to-earth realism. He does not idealize the rustic and his life. Frost depiction of the rural and pastoral life is quite realistic. He recaptures the tone of rustic speech, portrays rustic characters, brings out the vicissitudes of rural life, represents the manners and morals of the country folk, and paints a faithful picture of the life and activities going on in the rural areas of New England. He does not adopt a romantic view of pastoral life or depict the rural world in a romanticized manner. He paints rural life as he has seen it actually exists, without giving it an excessive colouring of imagination. His realistic pictures of rural life may be found in poems like 'Birches', 'Home Burial', 'The Black Cottage', 'Blueberries' and others. In *Birches*, he shows the village boy playing alone the game of swinging birches, because he does not have the facility for games like baseball that are played by boys in the cities. The tramps in 'Two Tramps in Mud Time' are realistically portrayed too. 'Mending Wall' and 'An Old Man's Winter Night' are based on real situations too. Frost presents the rural life as it is with all its joys and sorrows, enjoyments and struggles, productivity and starvation, domestic life and isolation of individual, natural beauty and social obligations. He has shown man living in a hostile universe and struggling against inimical forces of nature and society. Silas in 'The Death of Hired Man' suffers much and dies of old age as well as the insensitiveness of his master.

Frost's descriptions and portrayal of rural life is quite authentic, real and individual because it is based on his actual personal observation and is not merely a matter of the adherence to some convention. Frost owed much of his poetic reputation to his identification with farming. His mannerisms and the years he had spent farming in New Hampshire seemed to guarantee that his poems were a uniquely authentic vision of a pastoral existence in which man is 'closer to reality' and 'independent of complicated social structure' of urban society, because he 'earns his living from the soil.'

Frost's pastoralism is highly individual and unique. This uniqueness of his pastoral art arises from his ability to write of rural life from the point of view of an actual New England farmer. Thus in *The Pasture*, the poet establishes a comparison between the pasture and the outside world. Frost's interest in and treatment of the pastoral world may often be taken to be a sign of his escapist tendency or of his desire to find an escape from the materialistic trends of the modern urbanized and industrialized world. Frost seems to prefer the calm and rustic life to noisy and complex urban life. He does not present the life of big cities, as T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden have done. He concentrates on the life in the rural areas of a particular region (New England) which he knew so well, because of having himself lived in its pastoral surroundings. However, his aim in presenting this life is not merely to fulfill his desire for an escape from the urban world. Moreover, he finds in rural life a vantage point from which to observe and examine human life as a whole.

Poems like *Mending Wall* and *The Road Not Taken* deal respectively with the modern themes of human barriers and human choice. The oblique art of Frost brings out the complexities in his poetry. Frost's use of the epithet 'synecdochist' for himself also suggests his modernity. In *Birches*, Frost uses the modern image of 'heaps of broken glass to sweep away' for the shattered crystal of ice. The simplicity in a Frost poem is deceptive and suggests various levels of meanings, as in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. The poem refers to a New England traveler and his promises and on a higher scale it refers to man, life and the world. The language of Frost's pastorals is realistic and

suggestive. Frost's pastoralism is that of a normal person's interpretation of his environs and its inhabitants as he saw it. He represents the New England pastoral way of life reduced to its lowest, barest essentials (Rose C. Feld, 1926). His repeated use of woods in his poems and plays was indicative of an alternative way of life of loneliness of isolation. His play 'A Way Out' written in 1917 was Frost's harshest portrayal of how limited and limiting New England moral life could be.

In this way he was able to create a unique though difficult synthesis between farming and academic life that is between the pastoral and the urban side of his personality. Yet in the end, it is his pastoralism that remains in the mind of the reader, his adherence to a particular region and his representation of the Yankee Character. The various shades of pastoralism are brought out by Frost as he combines the traditional with modern. He takes up some parts of the old conventions and merges them with the rural scenario all around him thereby creating a wonderful twentieth century pastoral world that was unique in its own way and had the hurls of a multicoloured rainbow.

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