

Robert Frost

Rachel Hasbun

ENC 1102
November 25, 2003

Professor: Dr. Ellingham

Rachel Hasbun

Dr Ellingham

ENC 1102

November 25, 2003

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Robert Frost is considered to be a prominent American poet of the twentieth century due to his unconventional style of writing and use of connotations. Although his work exhibited his simplistic and direct style of writing, Frost was considered a profound thinker. Frost himself said, "I should like to be so subtle at this game as to seem to a casual person altogether obvious" (Poirier x). Although Frost endured many hardships and pains, he proved successful at his talent. Even though his works portrayed his life's emotions in a subtle but clear way, many critics and readers have tried to dig deeper into his work, and in so doing, miss Frost's interpretations and explanations. However, beyond their thoughts and conclusions, only the author can unlock the true meaning behind his creations. Frost has used his simplistic technique in his poems to reflect upon his personal experiences and to share his emotions, but it has also served as a channel of escape for him from his realities of life's tragedies. This style of writing can be easily misinterpreted with its different moods and emotions and, as such, Frost's message in his writings can be completely missed by his critics and readers.

To understand and appreciate Robert Frost's literary work, one must be introduced to the life of this Poet. Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California, in 1874 to Isabelle Moody and William Prescott Frost Jr. His father was an editor and his mother a teacher. At the age of 11 years old, he became the product of a single parent household, after the death of his father. During his early years of learning, Frost struggled through elementary school but later graduated from high school at the head of his class in 1889. A year later, in 1890, Frost began writing poetry and received his first publication when one of his poems was published in the Lawrence High School Bulletin. He then attended Dartmouth College, for a brief period of time, but in spite of his short-lived college experience, he was elected as chief editor of the Bulletin for the 1891-92 school year. After several proposals, Frost, in 1895 finally wed his classmate and friend, Elinor Miriam White, with whom he had six children. In 1897, Frost

published and sponsored his first collection of poems in a New York magazine called *Independent*. His second attempt to finish his schooling at Harvard College failed due to a struggle with tuberculosis (Poirier1-2). Frost, like many others, had a life filled with joys and sorrows, but he was unique in that he could effectively translate those feelings into words. Frost later experienced the several tragedies in his life: the death of two of his children, the death of his mother, and the depression of his wife. During this period of time, Frost continued to write poems as he tried to provide for his family. After selling his farm, he moved his entire family to England in 1912. And, in England, he met literary figures such as Ezra Pound who wrote the first review of Frost's first major collection in 1913, *A Boy's Will*, which later appeared in the *American Literary Journal*. He also met Edward Thomas, a young English poet, who later became one of his close friends. In 1914, his second collection, *North of Boston*, was published in Great Britain. It was after this success that Frost returned to New Hampshire, in the United States, where his first two volumes won critical acclaim. Frost's writing career and fame grew after winning the 1924 Pulitzer Prize with another collection called *New Hampshire*. Frost also won the Pulitzer Prizes for *West-Running Brook* in 1931 and *A Witness Tree* in 1943 (Poirier and Richardson 4-5). Frost's reputation grew with each new accolade, and he was honored with various titles, degrees and invitations, such as the invitation he received to the White House by Presidents Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy. At age 89 years old, Robert Lee Frost had gained more recognition than his contemporary counterparts of his time. His legacy was materialized with an anonymous contribution of \$3.5 million, which went into the construction of a library in his honor. In 1963, he was awarded with the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, and in his final days he was able to bask in the successes of his writings. Unfortunately, on January 7th 1963, Robert Frost suffered an embolism and died at the ripe age of 89 (Poirier and Richardson 6-7).

Frost's first major experience with tragedy occurred with the death of his first-born son, Elliott, to cholera in 1900. He had married Elinor White just five years prior, and they were both young newly weds with high hopes of starting a family. His wife was greatly affected by the death of their son and went into a severe depression. This same year, Frost struggled with his own health and at the end of the year he also lost his mother to cancer (Poirier and Richardson 2). These difficult experiences, especially the death of his son, motivated Frost to write one of his well-known poems "Home Burial in which a

couple experience deep emotional conflicts over their different manners of grieving for their dead child” (Young 190-191). “Home Burial is not about the couple’s tragic failure to communicate, about their not finding the right words, but ‘a tragedy of communication,’ in which each would like to imprint their understanding on the other, and each has words to bludgeon the other” (Calder 373). Frost invites his readers to enter his house of turmoil and empathize with the grief he and his wife would have to cope with.

“But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child’s mound——
“Don’t, don’t, don’t,” she cried.
She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the banister, and slid downstairs,
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
“Can’t a man speak of his own child he’s lost?” (Ketzle1)

Frost does not hold back the rawness of his wounds but explicitly paints the pain of his grief to his readers. His readers are privileged to enter the privacy of his home and to share the experience of losing a child and the frustrations of losing the comfort of being understood by a spouse.

Throughout Frost’s life, he strived to endure life’s difficult circumstances. His father died from over consumption after a long struggle with alcoholism when he was a teenager. His father’s death created a life of instability and economical hardship for his family, which made them dependent on the care of his paternal grandparents who were strict disciplinarians. Even after the death of his grandfather in 1901, he continued to suffer financially because his grandfather chose to transfer ownership of his farm to Frost under certain terms and conditions. Apparently, the grandfather still strived to cause Frost to work the farm for ten years before owning with the possibility of forgetting about writing (Poirier and Richardson 1-2). It was that experience that inspired Frost to write the poem “In Neglect.” Ezra Pound, an American poet, said, “There is perhaps as much of Frost’s personal tone in the following catch, which is short enough to quote, as in anything else. It is to his wife, written when his grandfather

and his uncle had disinherited him of a comfortable fortune and left him in poverty because he was a useless poet instead of a money-getter” (Ezra 192). Frost writes in a simple but photographic style that captures the mood of his circumstances.

“In Neglect”

They leave us so to the way we took,
As two in whom they were proved mistaken,
That we sit in a wayside nook,
With mischievous, vagrant, seraphic look,
And try if we cannot feel forsaken. (Ketzle2)

His readers need not think too deeply to understand his feelings of abandonment, his frustrations of not being understood, and his helplessness in changing the situation he might have been facing. Ezra Pound states, “He is without sham and without affectation” (Ezra 192). This statement explains the sincerity and simplicity of Frost’s writing in sharing his own personal experiences with his readers.

Frost published *New Hampshire* in 1923 and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1924 (Poirier and Richardson 4). “Perhaps no poem of Robert Frost is more anthologized than *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*” (Hochman 277). This poem has caused many critics to create their own interpretations and conclusions of Frost’s meanings. For example, a freelance writer by the name of Steven Monte said, “It is hard to say what the woods represent for the man—rest, death, nature, beauty, solitude, oblivion—but it is clear that he feels he should not allow himself to give in to his desire to stay there” (Monte 279). No one says it better than the writer himself. Arthur Bleau, in his interview with Frost in 1947 in Brunswick, Maine, persisted in asking Frost to tell which of his poems was his favorite. To Bleau’s astonishment, Frost indulged him his questions and shared that “*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*” was indeed his favorite poem (Bleau 282). Frost started his account of the poem by explaining the darkest evening, “Well—the darkest evening of the year is on December twenty-second—which is the shortest day of the year—just before Christmas” (Bleau 282). Frost went on to explain his reason for choosing the words in the statement, “The family was living on a farm. It was a bleak time both weather wise and financially. Times were hard, and Christmas was coming. It wasn’t going to be

a good Christmas unless he did something. So— he hitched up the wagon filled with produce from the farm and started the long trek into town” (Bleau 282). Frost continued, explaining his failure to sell his produce; “There would be no exchange for him to get a few simple presents for his children” (Bleau 282). He continued to say that it was the jingling of bells from the horse close by that brought him back to the reality of having to face his family. Fortunately, he was consoled and convinced that his family had an “abundance of love which would see them through that Christmas and the rest of those hard times” (Bleau 282). Frost then confessed to Bleau that it was under those circumstances that he was inspired to write this poem later in his life (Bleau 282). Frost has once again proven his ability to share his personal experiences with his reader. He has transported his readers into his world, causing them to feel his sadness and despair. He has successfully given his readers a picturesque view of gloom, loneliness, and darkness and invites them to wake up and face his reality, as companions with him. This excerpt from the poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” “The woods are lovely, dark and deep” shows the character’s fascination with wanting to stay within the safety and protection of the woods and away from his reality. And, from Frost’s explanation, ‘ “I just sat there and bawled like a baby” until there were no more tears,’ allows the readers to understand the inner turmoil resulting from his inability to adequately provide for his family during this festive and celebrated time of the year, Christmas. However, no matter how dark the woods or gray the day, the character somehow receives the courage and is inspired to transition back to reality. Frost seems to use poetry as an outlet from his own personal experiences. He expresses himself in a subtle but plain manner. He does not sell his story’s punch line but he gives enough information to paint the mood and feelings he wants his readers to experience.

Throughout Frost’s career, he strived to write his poems with simplistic uniqueness, but such simplicity has proven to be profound in meaning. He has shown his readers how simple words, expressions, sentences, and statements can be used to reflect more complex issues such as a person’s state of mind, being and beliefs. He has also demonstrated that words assembled in poetic form can be used as a means of escape from life’s difficult situations as is evident from the research presented. The readers have learned to interpret and understand the writer’s artistry of words in order to experience the exact feelings the author intended to create. Frost teaches his readers to do this by entering his creations

with an objective point of view. Robert Littell states,

Whatever Mr. Frost says, he means. Even his prosaic lines are intended so to be... His matter of factness is in saying just what he means is a part of his virtue of never trying to say more than he means. If he doesn't use as much precious stone as we would like him to, if he uses too many plain ordinary boulders to fill in the chinks, it is because he knows that's the proper way to build his kind of a wall.... (Roberts 240).

Critics and readers may find it difficult not to make speculations from their own subjective experiences but to understand Frost's work is to see it for what it is at face value. "In a 1932 letter to Sydney Cox, he explained that, the objective is all I ever cared about. Most of my ideas occur in verse.... To be subjective with what an artist has managed to make objective is to come on him presumptuously and render ungraceful what he in pain of his life had faith he had made graceful" (Ryan 1091). This can be summarized as Frost's plea to his readers, to engage his writings from an objective point of view and to experience what he as the writer intends; nothing less nothing more, because to do otherwise would be to take away from the very essence of the writer's intent. Frost has proven this point by sharing with his readers his personal experiences infused with poetic flavor.

Work Cited

- Gunton, Harris, eds.: Contemporary Literary Criticism. Vol. 15 Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1980.
- Ketzle, Jeff. "Robert Frost: America's Poet." World Wide Web. Oct. 2003.
<http://www.ketzle.com/frost/>
- Napierkowski, Marie and Ruby, Mary eds.: Poetry for Students. Vol. 1. Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1998.
- Poirier, Richard and Richardson, Mark eds.: "Robert Frost Biographical Information." World Wide Web. Oct. 1995. <http://www.ketzle.com/frost/frostbio.htm>
- Poirier, Richard. "Frost Comments on his Poetry." World Wide Web. Summer 2000
http://www.etsu.edu/writing/amlit_sum00/papers/deb/COMFROST.HTM
- Roberts, Neil, ed.: "Robert Frost." A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry. 2001 ed.
- Young, Robyn, ed.: Poetry Criticism. Vol. 1 Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1991.