



An Assessment on images in the early Poems of Robert Frost

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Abstract: While examining the development of Frost's creative experience, we have come to know about the variegated texture of his poetry as well as his conscious endeavour to be a poet of a sensibility different from the preceding generations of American poets. To compose a poem, elements like words, syntax, metre and the knowledge of sounds and punctuation are not enough; for, they are aspects of the linguistic structure of a poem; and a real poem must be a statement about a context, which gives it a meaning and significance. Even the context is also inadequate, as it can steady us down. For Frost, as for all great poets, a poem 'begins in delight and ends in wisdom.'**Key words:** creative experience, sensibility

Introduction

Robert Lee Frost (1874 - 1963), member of a New England family, was born in San Francisco and at the age of ten, he was taken to the New England farm country which is the seat of his creative experience so much so that his poetry is identified with it. In his early schooling at Dartmouth, he disliked the academic attitude and worked as a bobbin boy in a Massachusetts Mill. He was at Harvard for a short period, which was followed by further work, like making shoes, editing a continuous newspaper, teaching at a school, and finally he turned to farming. The early years in this manner, were far from being happy. As these details confirmed, he emerged stage by stage from his isolation, gaining confidence in his creativity with the passage of hard times.

While examining the development of Frost's creative experience, we have come to know about the variegated texture of his poetry as

well as his conscious endeavour to be a poet of a sensibility different from the preceding generations of American poets. To compose a poem, elements like words, syntax, metre and the knowledge of sounds and punctuation are not enough; for, they are aspects of the linguistic structure of a poem; and a real poem must be a statement about a context, which gives it a meaning and significance. Even the context is also inadequate, as it can steady us down. For Frost, as for all great poets, a poem 'begins in delight and ends in wisdom'. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and standstill in one place' [CPRF VI]. Frost believes that the figure that a poem makes is shaped by 'the first image of the original mood' [CPRF VI]. It is the first poetic image that gets enlarged as the poet progresses. If the image is considered as the most vital aspect of a poem, it is necessary to know how it is formed.



Image Formation

The term 'imagery' suggests the ideas of images taken collectively; it is the most commonly used term in literary criticism of the twentieth century. The image is 'a relict of sensation and are intellectual and emotional response to it

depends for more upon its being; through this fact, a representative of a sensation, then upon its sensory resemblance to one' [Richards 120]¹. Richards is not happy with the prevalent view that an image 'is a picture made out of words' circulated by C. Day Lewis in his book, *The Poetic Image*, [1947]:

What do we understand, then, by the *poetic image*?

In its simplest terms, it is a picture made out of words.

An epithet, a metaphor, a simile may create an image; or an image may be presented to us in a phrase or passage, on the fact of it purely descriptive, but conveying to our imagination something more than the accurate reflection of an external reality.

Every poetic image, therefore, is to some degree metaphorical [Lewis 18]².

The image is a representative of a sensation. So far this view of image is forwarded by most psychologists, it is, however, important to note that 'for every possible kind of sensation there is a corresponding possible image'. [Richards 121, 122]. It is argued that different kinds of images may have the same effect. It means that images may represent one particular effect in spite of their different sensory qualities. They may not at times resemble their sensory qualities; Eliot shares this view in his doctrine of 'Objective Correlative'. The external facts mentioned in a poem provide the foundation of a group of images, which direct thought and arouse a particular emotion. A poem's initial experience is always in terms of image. But it should not be considered mere a picture:

To judge the image as a picture is judged, would, as we have seen, be absurd; and what is sought in poetry by those painters and others whose interest in the world is primarily visual is not pictures but records of

observation, or stimuli of emotion [Richards 123]³.

The visual aspect is sometimes over-emphasized at the expense of other mental states or qualities. Even the visual effect terminates in a particular emotion, hence it is incumbent upon the reader of a poem to explore the other mental states generated by a poem. Summarising the views of Richards, M.H. Abrams makes the following observation:

The term 'Image' should not be taken to imply a visual reproduction of the object referred to; some readers of the passage experience visual images and some do not; and among those who do, the explicitness and details of the pictures vary greatly. Also, 'imagery' in this usage includes not only visual sense qualities, but also qualities that are auditory, tactile [touch], thermal [heat and cold], olfactory [smell], gustatory [taste] and kinesthetic [sensations of movement] [Abrams 121]³.



Critics after the 1930s, particularly the New Critics, considered imagery as the essential component in poetry. It is certainly a major factor in determining poetic meaning. An author's imagery points out, T.S. Eliot, only partly comes from his reading. It comes from the whole of his sensitive life since early childhood, why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a life time, do certain images recur, charged with emotion rather than others? [UPUC 148]⁴.

It is worth pointing out that as readers and critics of poetry what we should consider 'is not so much the meaning of the images but the reverse process, that which led a man having an idea to express it in images' [Eliot, S.E. 242]⁵.

From these discussions, it follows that the expression of an emotion or idea

in a poem is possible only by a corresponding image adding a new direction to the poetic image. Prof. S. B. Srivastava observes that 'the poet must surrender his will to the calls of creation which must begin in faith and end in faith'. [Srivastava 38]

Professor Srivastava points out that "a direct expression of emotion does not meet the demands of a classicist who prefers precision and order to a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'" [Srivastava 34]. It follows from this that the poetic image with its objective precision enables the writer to move towards classicism of precision in the cast of images is preferred to vagueness of symbolic imagery. Further the poet's point of view is latent in his imagery. Analysing the views of some leading theorists of the poetic image, Prof. Srivastava writes as under:

Pound's idea of the 'presented image' is incorporated when Eliot mentions 'the few meagre arbitrarily chosen set of snapshots'. This is what Hulme meant by his hard and precise images. All the impressions and experiences cannot be converted into image. The mind of the poet, acting as a catalyst, transforms only those which have symbolic value, the rest remain there till they are called on. We notice that Titchener's view of the 'memory-image', along with Freud's theory of repression are also suggested here. Finally the selection of images is indubitably based on the 'point of view' that the poet has to express in his poem. [Srivastava 40].

In order to analyse Frost's imagery, we may concentrate on [i] the images drawn from nature, such as flowers, gardens, fog, water and snow images, forests, hills, mountains etc.; [ii] images of time such as months, seasons, days, week, year, day and night etc.; [iii] images of the inorganic bodies like the sun, moon, stars, rainbow etc.; [iv] images of the parts of the human body – especially arms, hands, fingers, leg, feet etc.; [v] images of man-made objects like

roads, buildings, furniture etc.; [vii] images those of sounds, smell, taste, touch and music that tend to create a realistic atmosphere. It will be quiet interesting to examine the images occurring in the early poems of Frost. In the perspective of these categories what is aimed at is to discover Frost's point of view latent in these images. It is hoped that this investigation may unravel the secret power of Frost's creativity – the beauty and ecstasy that his poems contain.



Frost's Ideas about Nature

Frost is saturated in the varied aspects of nature in New England. He holds the view that a new poet begins 'as a cloud of all the other poets he ever read' and 'a poem is best read in the light of all the other poems ever written'.

Frost was exposed to the new skepticism regarding the rightness of the universal order. Apart from absorbing this new spirit of unbelief, Frost also drew upon the older tradition in American Literature, which had presented nature in both bright and sombre hues. Frost refused to be overwhelmed by Emerson's transcendentalism or Wordsworth's pantheism. His own experience was not unlike the earlier American perception of nature as an ally and an enemy at the same time. Darwinism further helped Frost to distance himself from the idea of nature's unalloyed benevolence celebrated in romantic poetry.

In American nature poetry in general, the poet's desire to mould his life in harmony with nature is counter-balanced by the knowledge of his distinct human identity. By assimilating this emotional legacy, Frost keeps aloof from contemporary nature poetry in America. It lacked genuine inspiration and vigour. Frost resented the labels 'romantic' and 'nature poet', for they had become associated with a namby-pamby kind of

versifying. He reacted against the artificial sentiments of a nature cult and the false sonority of conventional poetry. Wordsworth had rebelled against an excess of reason, whereas Frost turned against a surfeit of sentiments. The common stock of romantic poetry is the themes of Frost's poetry. Nature is his chief subject, but as he insists, with 'man in it'. Like the romantics, he is wary of the exclusive claims of pure intellect, but he does not give himself entirely over to feeling or imagination. He shares their love of landscape, but he does not follow them in their exuberant eulogy of nature.

Like Wordsworth, Frost underscores nature's vital role in human life. Frost also seeks direct encounters with nature, setting of either an imaginative seesaw of action and reaction or a train of introspective thoughts. He is a true Wordsworthian in tradition depicting the joys and sorrows of rural life and in endowing his characters with rugged strength and sturdy stoicism, qualities rarely found in urban milieus.

Frost was inspired by Wordsworth in his early poetry, but he has an individual voice. In 'To the Thawing Wind', he figures nature as a liberator and a harbinger of happy change. The poet hails the Southwester with all its playful disorder. The beginning of a new life is signalled through the coming wind. The poet urges the wind thus:

Burst into my narrow stall;
Swing the picture on the wall;
Run the rattling pages over;
Scatter poems on the floor;
Turn the poet out of door. [CPRF 16]

Frost describes the burgeoning life in nature in 'A Prayer in Spring', relating it to a divine order:

For this is love and nothing else is love,



The which it is reserved for God above
 To sanctify to what far ends He will,
 But which it only needs that we fulfill [CPRF 17].

Frost wishes to share vicariously in the reawakening of life in nature at the advent of spring. The poet's feeling of joy comes from a sense of universal love. To sanctify this love, God may have some other ends in mind, but man does best by fulfilling it humanly. In 'The Pasture', Frost gently coaxes his beloved to enjoy nature's pure delights:

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
 I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
 [And wait to watch the water clear, I may]:
 I sha'n't be gone long – You come too. [CPRF 1]

His 'Going for Water' glows with human love consummated by nature's beauty and solitude. The couples' joy mingles with a sense of awe and wonder, when they hear the brook they have been looking for. Through the images of sound and colour, the lover recounts the magic moment:

*A note as from a single place,
 A slender tinkling fall that made
 Now drops that floated on the pool
 Like pearls, and now a silver blade.
 [CPRF 26]*

Frost tenders a certain ritualistic obeisance to nature in his 'Rose Pogonias'. His delight at the beauty of the orchises is tinged with sadness at the thought of their untimely end.

Nature often offers genial company to Frost, bringing about a sense of kinship with the non-human world. His 'Into My Own' deals with the poet's exploration of self in Nature's friendly territory. Poems like, 'A Tuft of Flowers', 'Mowing', and 'Putting in the Seed' show in the midst of nature, how the work is transformed by love. There is a fine study of compassion for a forsaken animal in 'The Runaway'.

Like Mary, a compassionate character, acts intuitively in unison with nature's inherent harmony in 'The Death of the Hired Man'. This easy relationship is revealed through the following passage:

Part of a moon was falling down the west,
 Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills.
 Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw it
 And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand
 Among the harp-like morning-glory strings,
 Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves,
 As if she played unheard some tenderness



That wrought on him beside her in the night [CPRF 52].

The same sense of kinship between man and nature finds expression at the end of the poem:

Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud and she [CPRF 55].

Many of his poems express a spirit of reverence and wonder in regard to natural beauty. The poet makes unaware that this beauty will soon disappear either by nature's own process or man's invasion.

Frost resembles Wordsworth only on the fringes. Differences run wider and deeper than similarities. Wordsworth perceives an organic bond and an essential fellowship between a man and nature. He describes the omnipresent power that holds man and nature together through the following lines of "Tintern Abbey":

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things [LL 96-104].

If Frost visualizes any universal principle in nature, it is generally negative and antithetical to man. He unfolds nature as an embodiment of cruelty of the malice. He watches fascinated the weird conjunction of the symbols of innocence and evil. He is not carried away, even when he feels a strong sense of sympathy flowing between man and nature. Nature illuminates for him fragments of experience occurring at isolated times and places. But there is no surrender of his identity as a separate, cogitating creature. In many of his nature lyrics, there is a tension between the impressionable idealist and the sceptical pragmatist. Occasionally, there comes a surging of emotional fervour; more

frequently emotion bends in the direction of down-to-earth caution. He is mostly conscious of the exclusively personal dimensions of his experience and of its circumscription in time and space.

Frost speaks about his voluntary isolation from society in the interior of the woods with the purpose of confronting his true self, in one of his early poems, "Into My Own". Thematically the poem recalls Thoreau's retreat to Walden. He rarely rejects society completely. Society, whether in the form of a sense of reality or an apprehension of truth, often breaks into his contemplation of nature and creates a dramatic tension in the mind.

Therefore, Frost's interest in nature is rooted in the duality of man-nature relationship. Frost's contemplation of nature is always preceded and conditioned by



action. He interacts with nature. A cursory look at the titles of many of his poems will reveal this, e.g. 'Mending Wall', 'Mowing', 'Going for Water', 'Two Tramps in Mud Time'.

Frost shuns the trance-like state. Even he is captivated by nature's beauty or awed by its mystery, he steps back on the threshold of protective reason, in order not to be swept away by an onrush or feelings. His nature poems are vignettes of particular mood and moments framed by a clearly defined situation.

Conclusion

Frost displays a greater variety of shades and textures in his perception of nature. His method is economical and his tone is much less impassioned. He often feels a close kinship with nature verging on warm friendliness. He is not overwhelmed though he is aware of the magic pull of nature. He tests his courage and human worth when nature poses a challenge to his manhood. He is conscious of the tensions not only between man and nature, but also between natural objects themselves, tensions which constitute the very process of nature.

References:

¹I.A. Richards, Principles of literary Criticism [London; Routledge Kegan Paul Limited: first published, 1924, fourteenth impression, 1955] 120. Richards cease the image as a mental event, as a picture in the mind's eye. In chapter XVI of his work he discusses the nature and scope of images under two broad heads – "Tide Imagery" and "Free Imagery".

²C. Day Lewis, The Poetic Image [London: Jonathan Cape, first published 1947, 9th impression, 1958] 18. Lewis defines an

image as a picture made out of words and say that the "commonest type of image is a visual one; and many more images which may seen un-sensuous" [18].

³M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms [New York: Har Court Brace College Publishers, 1999] 121. A narrow view of imagery is to read it "to signify only specific descriptions of visible objects and scenes, specially if the description is vivid and particularised". [GLT 121].

⁴T.S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, [London; Faber and Faber Limited, first published, 1933; reprinted, 1955] 148. Images for Eliot, are of very great consequence and they carry with them a symbolic value.

⁵ – –, Selected Essays [London : Faber and Faber Ltd. first published, 1932; Reprinted 1958] Eliot follows the connection that the image is always related to an idea experienced in the part.

⁶S.B. Srivastava, Imagery in Eliot's Poetry [New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Limited, 1984] 38 Professor Srivastava differentiates between the figurative image, i.e. resulting from the use of figures and the meaning image which is not created by figures. He observes that, "Images are equations chosen after the theory will carry maximum intensity" [31].

⁷S.H. Burton, The Criticism of Poetry [Harlow: Longman Group U.K.



Limited, First Published, 1950; 11th Impression, 1987] 97. In criticising a poem, Burton stresses the view that 'we avoid abstraction' [98].

⁸Mohan Singh Kark, Robert Frost : Theory and Practice of the Colloquial and Sound of Sense [Aligarh: Navyug Press, 1979] 39. Prof. Karki thinks that the speech sounds in Frost's poems terminate in auditory images.

⁹B.P. Sandilya, The Current and the Sources [New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1994] 67. Prof. Sandilya is interested in the difference between the English Romantics and Robert Frost from the view point of their attitude to nature. He feels that "Frost reacts to the destructive powers to nature in three ways: [i] when nature appears to be violent and overwhelming . . . [ii] when the threat from nature is looming and slow acting . . . [iii] when the sees in nature itself, a counter point to destructive forces". [67].

¹⁰Elizabeth Jennings, Frost [London: Oliver and Boyd, 1964] Jennings thinks that Frost's use of personifications do not result in any philosophizing [12].

¹¹Quoted in American Poetry and Prose, ed., Norman Foerster and Robert Falk [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960] 910. Frost creates an ambiguity in the poems and it is helpful in keeping the neighbour who wants a wall and the other forces who do not want a wall in balance.

¹²Richard Thorm, ed., Recognition Robert Frost [New York: Henry Holt, 1937] 302. Thorm interviews with such formers who are remarkable in that the idea of real details is stressed again and again. When the former says that there is no fooling in the poem of Frost, he is sure of their reality.

¹³Quoted in Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise [New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960].