



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

A Study of Pragmatism in Robert Frost's Select Poems

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Abstract

The poetry of Robert Frost deals not only with the pastoral elements but also with the problems of man living in the modern world dominated by science and technology. His poetry portrays the disintegration of values in modern life and the disillusionment of the modern man. This regret or frustration and disillusionment are due to the sufferings of the people which is the result of their loneliness. His masterly genius is well reflected in his works where he presents the concrete details that constitute the scenes and action from which his poems spring. The pictures and characters are introduced directly from life and they are burnt into his mind as though it were a sensitive plate. It is perhaps the autobiographical influence in his poetry that has made him so adept in the art. He too had a life of struggle and his confronting this harsh, horrible and hostile world made him a true philosopher of life. In his works, there is a reflection of pragmatism. Some of the poems of Robert Frost have been dealt with from his

poetry collection to show him nurturing the philosophy. The present paper aims at the study of pragmatism in some of the poems of Robert Frost.

Keywords

Robert Frost; Pragmatism; Philosophy.

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The poetry of Robert Frost reflects the deep and rich thought of the writer. The poetry of Robert Frost remains hidden underneath a seemingly simple surface. That is, the poet's thought and his profundity seems to lie buried under the active handling of his lulling meter and dry and mocking humour. His works frequently employed setting from rural life in New England in the early 20th century, using them to examine complex social and philosophical themes making him one of the most popular and critically respected American poets of the 20th century. Frost's strongest philosophical connection, perhaps was with William James, the American pragmatist. Poirier cites James's Pragmatism as a source of many of Frost's metaphors and of his general disposition. Pragmatism as a philosophical movement was concerned with the connection between thinking and acting. The pragmatic 'method' of consideration for any theory was to ask what difference in daily existence the acceptance or rejection of that set of ideas and facts would make. This concern for the outward manifestation of thought and feeling can be seen as the work of Frost's poetry throughout his corpus. He does not reconcile opposing forces, nor does he side with one end of the spectrum. Rather, he acknowledges the tension between ideas like emotion and rationality, the individual and the community, the morality and immorality, home and the outside world, existence and non-being, and sites himself in the midst of the creative tension that these paradoxes create. The Pragmatist philosophers found little value in modes of thought that did not have some value in daily existence and yet they placed the foundation of all action in thought

itself. Some of Frost's poems from his poetry collection have been analysed to show their nurturing of the philosophy by the poet himself.

The poem, "The Aim was Song", thus depicts that even the direst conditions prevailing on the earth can be turned into the most agreeable and praiseworthy if they are handled delicately and moulded properly. In other words, the poem "The Aim was Song" represents the civilizing action of human art which by dint of its craft tries to tame the wind's unruly blowing. Thus, the poem "The Aim was Song" can be said to be pragmatic as it puts forth the idea that man himself creates his own values through his activities. It is none other than man who moulds the situations and circumstances around him according to his own choice and pleasure and by doing so he comes to realize the true importance of the object in life as well as the fact that to an unascertainable extent, truths are man-made products.

"An Answer" by Robert Frost is just a single heroic couplet which also stresses on the doctrine of pragmatism. The poem deals with a subject of human happiness. This poem contains the ambiguous reply of a father to his son. In this poem, it seems as if the son has asked his father whether true happiness in his life is possible or not when he uses the word 'blessed' which literarily points to nothing other than 'happiness', 'satisfaction' or 'pleasure'. In other words, the son had actually asked his father for a bestowal of prosperity or happiness. Again, the use of the adversative 'but' focuses on the fact that the son is not satisfied in either case. Frost, uncertain in his own life about the answers to such philosophical questions once wrote a friend: "I am neither optimist nor pessimist. I never voted either ticket" (*The Robert Frost Encyclopedia* 9).

The 'Islands of the Blessed', the perfect paradise of ancient Greek thought, suggests strongly that the father can neither bestow blessing upon his son nor say where happiness may be found. It is beyond us all. The poem gives stress on the fact that the real condition of the world is such that one is not likely to live an undisturbed, contented life. Thus, the 'Island of the Blessed' is a synecdoche

that is ironically used by Frost to deny the possibility of happiness. The biblical connotations of the poem stem from the phrase 'bless you, son', which echoes the Esau's sad plea to his father Isaac to give him a good bestowal of property and prosperity as he had already done to Esau's brother Jacob: "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father". But Isaac cannot reverse his pronouncement and so regretfully tells his son, "Your brother came deceitfully, and has taken away your blessing" (Gen. 27:38). Thus, in the poem, the father's reply to his son also reflects the poet's humanistic philosophy and realistic approach towards life that bestowal of ultimate happiness is beyond us all. It is man himself, who creates his own values in the course of activity. Thus, the poem deals with the reality of facts asserting that the truth of beliefs does not consist in their correspondence with reality, but in their usefulness and efficacy, thereby, bringing about a close resemblance to pragmatism.

The poem "After Apple Picking" may in some respect seem about the simple act of apple picking. After a hard day of work, the apple farmer is completely fatigued but is still unable to escape the mental act of picking apples: he still sees the apples in front of him, still feels the ache in his foot as if he, standing on a ladder, still bemoans the fate of the flawless apples that fall to the ground and must be consigned to the cider press. But, if noticed minutely, the poem illustrates implicitly the process of human life in the world. That is – the life began, lived through hardships and failures and eventually ended with death. In effect, "After Apple Picking" provides an alternative view about life and death, where death is preferred by the farmer than living, mainly because it is in the coming of death that the apple-picker had fully realized the true meaning of life for him. The primary things in the poem, namely life, failure and death are narrated and some meaningful interpretations are given by the act of apple-picking. When, in the poem, the speaker talks of how he desired a large harvest though ultimately, he got overtired of the great harvest, the poet has in his mind the philosophy of pragmatism. In accordance with this theory of philosophy,

Robert Frost through the poem, perhaps, wants to say that the concept, meaning and nature of life can be best viewed in terms of their practical uses and successors. When the farmer, at first, wishes of a big harvest, does not realize the amount of labour he would have to put forth to get his work done. It is only after his performing the task he comes to realize the weight of labour. That is, the practical consequence of the work done by him makes him feel the true value of that work. Through activities, a human being creates his own ideals and values. The philosophy of Pragmatism, thus, prevails in the poem as the poet has tried to convince his readers of the fact that ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ can be understood only by man’s own experiences. All the human activities can be evaluated only in terms of their consequences or results.

In the poem “The Census Taker”, Frost describes the activities and thoughts of a census-taker whose job is to count people. Upon arriving at an abandoned logging camp, the census-taker sees only an empty house. Through the description of the house, now fallen into ruin, and the description of the forest that surrounds it, Frost examines what Potter calls ‘the vulnerability of man in an empty universe. It is autumn, the season that represents loss but not death, and the speaker notes that no one would know that it is autumn since ‘every tree was down itself.’ The scene appears more like winter and in an odd way, it suggests that nature without humanity has no life instead of the other way round. The lack of leaves and branches to inhibit the wind makes the scene all the more forceful and causes the speaker to imagine the many ‘rude men’ who would have passed in and out of the doors of this house, which has been abandoned for only one year. He envisages ten men in total in his ‘dreamy unofficial counting’ and imagines them returning from a hard day’s work hungry, demanding supper. The closing line, “It must be I want life to go on living” (“The Census Taker” 64), expresses a universal desire and the speaker’s resolve. The poem suggests that if we live long enough we all become census takers of the dead, and it concludes by sharing that ultimately we want all lives, including our

own, to go on without end. Since both the house and the universe surrounding the logging camp are having only the memories of the past, the poem's conclusion is seen by critics to reflect the ineffectuality of humanity in an empty universe. This reflection of the poet's humanistic philosophy had been sought in its practical bearings that the function of thoughts is to guide action and that truth is pre-eminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief which is nothing but the doctrine of pragmatism.

The poem "A Servant of Servants" by Robert Frost is a poem which tells the story of a woman who tells of her daily ordeals to a visitor who is camping out near her house. The whole day she remains busy with cooking and cleaning and is tired from the load of the work. When she meets another individual, especially a person who can drop everything and come to live in the lap of nature, she is delighted. She relates her mental illness, the whole incident of her getting admitted and how she wants rest, not medicine to become better.

She also talks of how mental illness runs in her family as she describes her brother's condition as she was growing up. She also talks about the pressure on her every day as she has to cook for and clean after the various men who work with her husband. Finally, the call of her work is too strong for her and she ends the conversation telling the visitor that she wished that he would not leave unless he had to. The reader may find that she views life like a pragmatist as she considers that the meaning of life can be judged in terms of their practical uses and success rather than in terms of representative accuracy. When she was proposed by her husband to marry him, she gladly accepted that with the hope of finding a better life. But, the present life led by her has made her realize that life is only hardships and labour and one cannot stay away from it. It is the realization that she has acquired from her experiences in life. Thus, through this poem, the need for meaningful labour is stressed on to view it not as a preparation for life but as life itself. This conception is fully understood through its practical consequences which is a pragmatic maxim.

In the poem “The Armful”, the speaker has gone to get groceries, probably without help, over-shopped and is having a difficult time with all the bags he must carry. The packages slip from the speaker’s hands and he tries to catch them with his knees all the while still trying to balance the rest of his packages. In the end, he is forced to drop the groceries and find the best way of packing them back in the bags. Although the tone from the onset is that of frustration, by the end it changes to something more positive. It can then be inferred that the theme of this poem is one of hope. The poem reveals Frost’s tendency to hint at moral lessons learned from common human experiences. The philosophy of pragmatism can be seen present in this poem as the poem deals with the truth of believing as a result of their correspondence with reality. In the poem the persona is walking along while attempting to balance a number of objects in his arms. But, when one object slips away, the futile attempt to recover it leads to further slippage. The poet finally has to drop the in the road and reorder them into a manageable load. This context infers the reflection of the ordeal in the life of Frost which brought about a frustration in him of balancing diverse personal responsibilities in his family life both as father and husband. The lesson of the poem illustrates that it is sometimes better to stop and build anew than to adjust constantly and re-adjust a situation that resists balance. This is a fact of life and the narrator here, has felt the truth in it.

Frost saw poetry as a way of psychological survivor in a chaotic universe. His poetry represents a continual dialogue between control and chaos, and he saw poetry as creating ‘a momentary stay against confusion’, a something facing the nothing. The struggles of ordinary men, to develop individual identities in an essentially hostile world, were his most persistent themes. The poet has once said, in an interview with Harvey Breit: “One thing I care about, and wish young people could care about, is taking poetry as the first form of understanding. If poetry isn’t understanding all, the whole world, then isn’t worth anything” (“Robert Frost’s Fire and Ice” 2). Time and again Frost has said that there is a

striking analogy between the course of a true poem and true love. Each begins with an impulse, a disturbing excitement to which the individual surrenders himself. The ecstasy that works as an impulse to the poem nowhere remains static. The movement of the poem reveals a healthy growth from delight to wisdom. And in most of the cases the denouement heads towards the clarification.

In spite of facing a lot of turmoil in his life Frost never lost his patience in life. Most of his poems have reflected this trait of his outlook where even in the midst of failures and sufferings he, it seems, gathers up his strength to start anew. He believed that if one accepts them bravely, one would be rewarded in the long run. These ideas can get a clear cut reflection in the poetry of Frost, if his poems are considered from the angle of philosophy. Frost being a popular twentieth century American poet, the prevalent contemporary philosophy, Pragmatism is identified in some of his poems. The poetry of Robert Frost presents his readers not only the scope of philosophizing the deep and underneath truth and essence of life, but also the delight and significance in his large body of poetry. Thus, Robert Frost was not only the most popular poet of his time but also was considered to be America's finest poet. He was a leading figure in the Modernist movement; however unlike his contemporary such as Eliot or Pound, Robert Frost favoured more traditional metrics and forms of poetry. His masterly genius in the field of poetry, adds much to his contribution in the field of English literature, leaving him shine brighter than any other poet of his time.

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Biswas, Debashis. "A Study of Pragmatism in Robert Frost's Select Poems."
Literary Quest 1.7 (2014): 17-25. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.