

# The Bard of New England: Robert Frost

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Robert Frost is best known to the public as the poet of New England. He stands forth as both the interpreter and the representative of a particular regional culture. 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'. There have been many fine studies of the poet's relation of his Yankee environment. Frost's New England is an accurate picture of the real place. He will want to discover how the poet has recreated this region within the medium of language. More important, he will be interested to see how he uses New England as a means of revealing what is universal rather than merely local. In the end, Frost's rural world is interesting because it symbolizes the world known to all. One's main concern must be to discover how he has shaped his world as an image of every man's experience.

Biographically, Robert Frost was a New Englander not by birth but by adoption-or rather readoption. The first canonical writer to return from the New England diasporas to his parental region and claim it as his literary home. By the same token, artistically Frost's tastes were cosmopolitan, not strictly regional. His first favorite poet was Poe; he was an able and zealous student of the classics, especially Virgil's Eclogues; he once described himself as caring most for Shakespearean and Wordsworthian Sonnets; the one significant fellow poet to whom he dedicated a poem was the English Georgian, Edward Thomas; and in the formation of his mature poetic style none of the writers of the New England Renaissance era were more important to him than Matthew Arnold and Robert Browning. Yet Frost was also acutely conscious of his relation to his New England precursors. Sometimes he showed it in explicit claim or allusion, more often obliquely, by imitation, repossession, echo, or parody—and not just by means of the written word. The particular region which he has selected for his purpose is New England and he has represented and interpreted this region, accurately and precisely, in one poem after another. Its physical features, its people, its ways and manner, its habits, traditions, custom beliefs, and codes of conduct, appear and reappear in one poem after another. He deals only with that part of it which lies to the north of Boston.

The other parts of New England such as Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maine appear only rarely in his poems. Further, the industrial sites and fishing villages are ignored by him. There is no mention of railway trains and automobiles and factories giving out smoke and gas, or of radios, or of large scale migration to the cities. He is not a poet of skyscrapers, factories, machines, mechanics and truck-drivers, but of field and brooks, and of farmers at their humble tasks. His subject is the region north of Boston and from that region also, only the rural areas and farms and villages. He takes one particular kind of locality to stand for the New England people.

J.F. Lynen points out "he chooses not simply what is real in the region, what is there, but what is to his mind the most essential, what is representative. The delimiting of rural New England is only the first step. Even within the area we still find the great mass of detail suppressed in favour of a few significant local traits. Now it should be clear that this process of representing the locality as a whole through a limited set of visual images and portraying the culture and mentality of the region through a particular kind of character is really a mode of symbolism. What emerges from Frost's scrupulous selection is not reality itself, but a symbolic picture expressing the essence of that reality. Frost's regionalism is both symbolism and creative." It is the region which lies north of Boston which forms the background to the poems of Frost, "It is a landscape, pearly in tone, and lonely to those who do not recognise its friendliness. It is a landscape broken in outline, with views but not giant views, mountains but not too high ones, pastures, swamps, farms deserted and farms occupied." According to Malcolm Cowley, Frost is the poet 'neither of the mountains nor of the woods, although he lives among both, but rather of the hill pastures, the intervals, the dooryard in autumn with the leaves swirling, the closed house shaking in the winter storms.' In the same way, he is not the poet of New England in its great days, or in its late nineteenth-century decline; he is rather a poet who celebrates the diminished but prosperous and self-respecting New England of the tourist home and the antique shop. It is a region where people have lived long enough to build

granite defenses for themselves. Nowhere else in America can the people have as a saying. 'Good fences make good neighbours.' Everything that he describes is true. The broken walls, the wood pile that, 'warmed the frozen swamp as best as it could', the white tailed bird whose suspicion was that of, 'one who takes everything said as personal to himself' all these, and many others, can easily be recognized by anyone who travels through that part of the country. The scenery he describes, the people and their occupations which he presents and the language which he uses, are all peculiar to this select region. The massive birches swinging in fierce winter storms is a common sight in New England and Frost has immortalized it in his famous poem, 'The Birches'. Blueberries bring out the skill and vividness of New England berry pickers. Similarly true, is Frost's picture in 'After Apple-Picking' of the tired farmer going home for rest after the day's labour of picking apples:

In a similar way, the farmer, in *Mending Wall*, who would say no more than, 'Good fences make good neighbours', is not being silly or adamant, but is merely trying to make secure for himself the land he has acquired, the garden he has reared, through hard work and dedication. The swinger of birches too has the New England spirit of adjustment in him. He lives far away from the city where alone he could learn to play baseball. The idea of adjustment to situations and determination in the face of adversities is again the key-note of *Mowing*. *Two Tramps in Mud Time* illustrates the resourcefulness-the Yankee ingenuity of the tramps in making theirs what others have a right to. In 'The Code', the hired man will not be taught how best he should work and drives a severe lesson into his master for having attempted to teach him. *The Vanishing Red* studies a situation where the farm hand is a Red Indian. It is Yankee speech that we constantly hear in Frost's poetry. He has succeeded in capturing the very tone, accent, and rhythm, idiom and phraseology, of the conversation of New Englanders. The very spirit of the place is enshrined in his pages.

Another important aspect of Frost's regionalism is the fact that he shows the environment, the region, and acting on the mind of his people, and determining their natures and attitudes. Thus a strong link is established between the individual mind and the land itself. He constantly associates aspects of landscape and psychological traits. The clear, frank gaze of the Yankee persona is related to the chill air of New England and his strength of mind to its rugged terrain, in the same subtle way that Michael's courage and dignity are related to the grandeur of the Lake County Mountains. Since the Yankee mind reflects the landscape, the whole sense of values which forms the centre of this mentality seems to have an organic relation to the land. In other words, Frost's regionalism is thoroughly 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. Not that the community and

the individual are opposed: the speaking voice of Frost's lyrics is certainly that of a particular person, but this person is also the spokesman for a community.

Robert Frost, one of the distinguished poets of America, was born on 26<sup>th</sup> March, 1874 in San Francisco. His father, a New Englander, was an editor of a newspaper whereas his mother, a Scot, was a school teacher. His full name was Robert Lee Frost. He was a sickly and neurotic child. When he was just eleven, his father died. So he and his mother had to settle with their relatives in Massachusetts. His mother remained busy in teaching in the Grammar school of the village of Salem. The boy Robert showed no particular interest in studies except during a brief period of four years at the Lawrence High School. He was just sixteen when his first poem on the subject of Cortez in Mexico appeared in the high school newspaper. During the next few years, he engaged himself in earning a living. He shifted from one profession to another, from working in mills to newspaper reporting; and then to teaching in school. In 1895 he married his school-fellow Elinor White. After having failed to lead a settled life as a school teacher, he spent two years at Harvard College to prepare himself for college teaching. But as usual, he opted out, feeling that the academic atmosphere did not suit him. Frost was twenty five but he had made no headway in life. Disappointed with his progress, his grandfather gave him a farm in Derry, New Hampshire, on the condition that he would keep it for ten years. For some time he did farming and took to poultry business. He was warned against tuberculosis because of his recurrent illness. As farming did not prove to be lucrative, he supplemented his income by teaching in a school at Plymouth. During his farming period, he continued writing poetry. At the end of ten years, he sold his property, and migrated with his family to England in September 1912. In England he came into contact with Ezra Pound and many other distinguished expatriate American poets. But he was attracted most by the British poets, Edward Thomas, Lascelles Abercrombie, Wilfred Gibson, who often treated rural subjects in their poetry. It was in England that his first volume of books *A Boy's Will* (1913) was published. Just a year later his second volume *North of Boston* appeared.

Frost returned to America in 1915. The American edition of *North of Boston* had already appeared and got a favourable response. *A Boy's Will* appeared in an American edition. Frost was now accepted as a major poet. Though he settled on his farm in New Hampshire and then more permanently in Vermont, he remained on the move, giving lectures and public readings from his own poetry. Eight more volumes of his poetry were brought out in America. Honours and awards poured in. He was poet-in-residence at many colleges and universities like Amherst, Harvard, Michigan and Dartmouth. He won four Pulitzer Prizes for poetry, countless honorary degrees, membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters and in the American Academy, and many other honours, medals and awards. He

got formal felicitations from the United States Senate on his seventy fifth birthdays. In 1961, he was invited to recite his poem at the inauguration ceremony of the new President, John F. Kennedy. On January 29, 1963, he died of complications following a heart attack. Radio and television spoke of his death in the manner and tone reserved for figures of state. As Frost's poetry originates in the experiences of an 'original, ordinary man' it clings to the raft of existence and is not an account of the glorious possibilities of life. Hence it is essential to throw a backward glance over the long span of his life to know what made Frost, Frost. It is all the more indispensable because like many celebrated American writers, Frost made himself the centre of his poetic world. When he acknowledged to one of the correspondents—'I'm a mere selfish artist most of the time', he indirectly hinted at his essential presence in his work. It is, obviously, not an easy task to gather the biographical details from the poems of such a volatile and complex man, but one could roughly estimate that these poems were written by the same person, out of the same region, that is, New England, and convey the same spirit in the face of trials by existence. His poems on the surface seem deceptively simple but astute critics have managed to reach the bottom of the well as Quentin Anderson did when he remarked that it was, "his whole usable past was his own poems, which meant that it was also his present."<sup>3</sup> Thus, what he lived through—enjoyed or suffered—what he was, is what he created. Frost as a man of irresponsible, irritating moods has enjoyed encouraging many critics to neglect the best in him. It seems as if he played a trick only to 'keep off' the undeserving ones to estimate his real worth. When he died in 1963, Robert Frost had received more official and academic honors than any other poet who had lived and written in the United States. He had won four Pulitzer Prizes, received forty-four honorary degrees, been invited to read his poetry at a Presidential Inaugural, and been sent to Russia as a cultural ambassador. But despite these triumphs in the academic and literary world, 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 the complicated social structure" because he "earns his living from the soil."<sup>5</sup> As Professor George Whicher, who saw him give his first reading in Amherst in 1916, later recalled, "Frost was dead set not to appear either academic or literary. He was all farmer, when it came my turn to speak with him, we spent an animated ten minutes discussing the healthful properties of horse-manure."<sup>6</sup>

When he first began to try to earn his living as a poet in 1913, his dream was to start his literary career in London and then retire to a New England farm where he could write and live cheap. By November of the next year, his desire for recognition and financial security led him to amend this

dream significantly. He would like a quiet job in a small college, he decided, where he could receive some honor for what he had achieved as a reporter. He was a good teacher and a poor farmer, but he disliked teaching because it did not allow him time to write and because he hated, academic ways. A decade later—after he had taught at Amherst and Michigan—he complained half jokingly that college kept intruding on his pastoral serenity by offering him teaching jobs. "I want to farm", he said, "Amherst, Dartmouth, Bowdoin and Connecticut Wesleyan are going to give me a living next year for a couple of weeks in each of them. The rest of the time I shall be clear away from the academic, feeding pigeons, hens, dogs, or anything.....for the pleasure or profit of it." However, in 1930 when he was worried that his collected poems would not be well received and that his poetic career had been eclipsed by Robinson's, he complained to Louis Untermeyer: 'I don't want to raise sheep; I don't want to keep cows; I don't want to be called a farmer.....What am I then? Not a farmer-never was-never said I was.'<sup>7</sup> These letters as well as many incidents in Frost's life suggest that he needed both the simple, 'pastoral serenity' of farming and the more complex milieu which he inhabited as a professor or poet-in-residence. He needed both the relative isolation and the simplicity of rural life and the honors and financial security which academic appointments gave him. However, it was not easy for him to reconcile the very different values represented by these two ways of life.

During his fairly long poetic career Robert Frost composed poems abundantly, and published them in the form of several volumes. These volumes are 'A Boy's Will (1913), North of Boston (1914), Mountain Interval (1916), New Hampshire (1923), West-Running Brook (1928), A Further Range (1937), A Witness Tree (1942), A Masque of Reason (1945), Steeple Bush (1947), A Masque of Mercy (1947), and In the Clearing (1962). These volumes reveal a gradual and steady growth of Frost's poetic talent, and an increasing command over poetic skill and technique. Right from the beginning Frost wanted to establish himself as a poet and therefore had started composing poems steadily. During his years at the Derry Farm, side by side to farming, he was also writing poems that would be collected later on. When he felt that he could not carry one, he decided to leave New England and go to 'Old England'.

In many poems, Frost has used the peculiar Yankee character. In 'The Mountain', the Yankee farmer reveals his rugged practical sense of wisdom and realism when he tells the speaker, an outsider, that he has never thought of climbing the mountain to see the magnificent brook. He considers the mountain as an obstruction to the growth of the village. In 'Home Burial', the Yankee reveals a calm acceptance of death, in spite of his wife's protestation that he is cruelly indifferent and shows no grief over the death of his own child. In 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', the traveller, though momentarily goes into speculative and

expansive mood, prefers fulfilling his promises to watching the bewitching snowy woodscape. Like all New Englanders, he gives precedence to duty over rest and pleasure.

Then Frost has used peculiar Yankee phrases such as 'To get it any where that I can see' and 'Has nothing any more to do with me'. His image is also closely related to the rustic life of New England. For instance, in describing the brook, the Yankee farmer employs a familiar, homely image from the common rustic life in the 'The Mountain'—'It steam in winter, like an ox's breath', the image of the ice on birches as the ice reflects the sunlight, cracks and falls on the earth like the broken pieces of glass in 'Birches' is not an uncommon sight in the New England country side. It is the symbolic treatment of New England which makes Frost's poetry universal, in spite of its surface regionalism. The local is raised to the level of the universal and the timeless symbolically; New England becomes the whole human world. The tensions and the conflicts, sorrow and suffering of New Englanders are those of everyman. The conflict between duty and pleasure in the mind of the Yankee person in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', the reasonableness of foolishness of creating walls in 'Mending Wall', the contentment felt by the Yankee farmer in 'After Apple-Picking', the anguish of the mother in 'Home Burial' the euphoria of swinging birches in 'Birches' are some of the universal issues, longing and feelings, not solely related to the rustic Yankees.

In 'Stopping by Woods on a Snow Evening', there is an obvious spirit of the pastoral. The scene is beautiful 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 traveller. Like all rural people, he can not stay for long in idle contemplation. As a practical man, he wants to do his assigned work before taking rest. In poems like this, the setting and the point of view are both important. In 'Birches', nature is mainly used as a scene. There is a beautiful description of birches 'loaded with ice' that cracks in the warmth of the sun and falls on the ground like heaps of broken glass. But the swinging of birches is used to portray the Yankee farmer's wish to go 'upward' in search of noble ideals and then again to come back, as 'Earth's the right place for love'.

Frost is chiefly concerned with the rural people and their world. His poetry, directly, 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 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 farm-hand 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.

Frost's view of nature is unique. Though he has some affinity with the great Romantics like Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, his attitude towards and treatment of nature is different from theirs. It is interesting to compare Frost's nature poetry to that of Wordsworth, the acknowledged high-priest of nature. Wordsworth considers nature as a living entity, and asserts the close affinity between man and nature. He looks upon nature as a benevolent force, a great educator, as he shows it to be in his Lucy poems, and as a guide, friend and philosopher, as he calls her in his famous poem 'Tintern Abbey'. On the other hand, Frost's attitude towards nature is marked by a rugged realism and a sense of practical utility. He finds no harmony between man and nature. What he sees are essential barriers between the two which must be recognized and respected. In 'Two Look and Two', there is a man-made fence that separates the lovers from the world of nature represented by a doe and a buck. This barrier between man and nature is not merely physical; it is mental as well, because there is an absence of any communion between the two. In 'The Mountain', nature represented by the mountain is just an obstacle in the growth of the human colony. In the poetic world of Frost, nature is often looked upon as an impersonal, insensitive and even hostile and sinister force. In 'The Most of It', the buck that comes out of the lake represents the remoteness of nature. In 'The Onset', nature represented by snow is an evil and sinister force, and is likened to death. Some of his passages depicting nature reveals his, keen observation and love for the landscape. In 'Birches', there are lines depicting natural phenomenon which are a sheer delight. We are told how the birches bend down with the load of 'ice', and keep bending for long. A striking feature of Frost's nature poetry is the use of personification. The device is quite common in the Romantics. The modern reader may take an unfavourable view of it as it suggests sentimental pantheism of over simple allegorization. But while personification remains a brief metaphor in the Romantics, it is a sustained comparison in Frost. This sustained comparison is possible only because of Frost's view of nature and man as distinct entities operating on different planes. No doubt, Frost's poetic world is inhabited mainly by the rural folk belonging to the countryside to the north of Boston in New England. One hardly finds the city people going in and out of it. But

the rural people depicted by Frost reveal a wide range of feeling and thoughts, moods and whims, likes and dislikes. Either they are healthy normal and well-adjusted people, or they are neurotic, abnormal and frustrated. The picture is complete. Together these neurotic, abnormal, and frustrated people portray various facets of humanity. In 'Apple-picking', 'Mowing', and 'The Pasture', we have normal and well adjusted human beings. The persona in each of these poems is hard working, normal and contented. He has no grudge against the world, and derives pleasure from whatever he does, and in whatever position he is.

Frost's personal life had been comparatively harmonious and without tremendous disruption, but he suffered hugely during the 1930's when three of his closest and dearest were lost. The first, in 1934, was his daughter Marjorie. For some time she had been a source of concern to her parents, having contracted tuberculosis and been sent for treatment in the mountain air of Boulder, Colorado, where the Frosts had visited her in 1932. She recovered her health and married. Only to die of an infection following childbirth. The elder Frosts had done everything possible to save Marjorie, including flying her to the Mayo clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, for treatment. They took this blow hard, but after a normal period of recuperation they seemed to be reconciled. Each winter the Frosts traveled South or Southwest to escape the hard snowbound winter of the northeast. Apparently Frost preferred writing about snow to tramping through it. In 1938 they were settled in Gainesville, Florida, accompanied by Coral Frost and his family. There, on March 20, Elinor Frost suffered a sudden heart attack. Without warning, the poet's greatest and most dependable bulwark was gone. Frost used a special technique for leading his soldier-students to a face-to-face confrontation with the larger question. For example, he might quote from Shakespeare's Sonnet, "Let, Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds". When he reached the description of the star 'whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken; he would pause knowingly. 'Science measures height, but can't measure worth; he would tell his boys. Science will never know."

Robert Frost is typically an American poet in that he presents in his poems the American life, scene, customs, traditions, beliefs, people and activities. 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. Frost achieved great popularity as a poet both in his own country America and in other countries, especially England which was the first country to recognise his poetmerit. The initial neglect of his worth shown by critics and publishers in America was more than compensated for by the numerous awards and honours bestowed on him by way of the recognition of his greatness as a poet. Frost has earned international recognition for his

poetry. All lovers of poetry fell under the spell of his poems. The first prime-minister of India, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru was so influenced by him that the day he died the last lines from 'Stopping by Woods' were found written in his own hand on his table. Prime Minister Khrushchev of Russia was one of his keenest admirers and had welcomed him heartily when he visited Moscow in 1962. Frost has been an immensely popular poet right from the publication of his second volume North of Boston in 1914. The common people have read his poetry with interest and admiration and learned critics have recognized his merit as a poet. The numerous awards, honors and degrees bestowed on him are marks of this recognition. About 44 institutions of higher learning have conferred honorary degrees on him. He was honoured by being elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and was twice felicitated by the American Senate for his exceptional contribution to poetry. He was invited to recite a poem on the occasion of the inauguration of President Kennedy in 1962. He had the unique distinction of winning the coveted Pulitzer Prize four times. Few poets have won so much recognition and honour in their life. It seems highly astonishing that an ordinary man like him, working on farms with his own hands, should make such a distinct mark in the field of poetry. He must have known by this time that he was the best poet produced in the twentieth century by either America or England, for this is what critics of both countries were saying in loud, clear voices.

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