



THE THEME OF LONELINESS IN THE SELECTED POEMS OF ROBERT FROST

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ABSTRACT

Robert Frost is a well-known American poet. His poetry created a very distinguished place among the readers across the world. Frost focusses on the realities in life and his approach towards life seems to be practical and rational. The present research paper focusses on the element of loneliness that is vividly present in some selected poems of Frost. The personal life of the poet had made a great impact on his overall thinking resulting into its reflection in his poems. The selected poems especially focus on the theme of loneliness that the poet had suffered due to the periodic loss of his kith and keens.

Robert Frost has a very influential and significant contribution to the American literature. Though he is counted as one of the most popular poets in the world, his personal life was very painful and sad. He had lived a life of sufferings. Constant bodily ailments like consumption in the family resulting in the death of his father, the insanity of his daughter Marjorie and his sister Jeanie, the suicide of his only son Carol, the suffering of Carol's wife from consumption, the death of his daughter in childbirth, his difficulties with Elinor who died in 1938 leaving Frost to lead a lonely life for 25 years have left a lasting mark on the poetry of Frost. He has depicted not only outward events and conditions but the essential spirit of twentieth century isolation and loneliness. Throughout his poetry, the themes of loneliness and isolation emerge as a necessary part of his world. As a poet of isolation and communion, Frost thought that experiencing isolation and loneliness was a part of the human condition. "For him, the fear of loneliness and isolation is counter-balanced through man's persistent and metaphorical demonstration of difficulties overcome and through his attempts at reconciling himself with his physical surroundings, and the cosmos as a whole" (Mersch).

An Old Man's Winter Night is an excellent poem by Frost on the theme of loneliness. The main characters in all these poems are of the same age group. In Frost's poem, we notice the old man's lack of awareness. He has attained that stage when he finds himself incapable of making proper use of his senses.

The poem was begun in Derry during the winter 1906-1907, perhaps inspired, says Thompson, "by a famous local character named Charles Lambert who lived for years as a hermit" (Thompson P. 540). The picture of the old man depicted by Frost arouses pity for him and the pathos is caused when we learn that he is standing alone in a "creating room". He is neither able to see out of the windows nor able to remember the purpose of his stay in the room. Though "All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him" he cannot see beyond the frosted glass panes because of the lighted lamp in his hand. The light

represents consciousness which is fading out in a weak, lonely, and purposeless old age. The light inside the room goes out as he falls asleep and the light that remains is the concealed one of the wood stores and the pale moonlight outside. The old man seems to be the personification of the living death. His loss of life is his loss of awareness and what it involved is made clear by the poet at the end of the poem:

One aged man-one man-can't keep a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
It's thus he does it of a winter night.

The old man fails to 'keep' his house and his farm because he is too old to do so. What the writer means when he says that the old man fails to keep 'a countryside' becomes clear when we read the preceding lines where he tells us that he has consigned to the moon the job of taking care of "his snow upon the roof, His icicles along the wall to keep". The most vital symbol in the poem is that of the moon. The moon has been generally associated by poets with love, mutability, dreams, magic, and art, which are the qualities of imagination. The old man has consigned to the moon the duty of keeping "a house, A farm, a countryside" showing that he has lost imagination and that the moon symbolizes imagination. Though this power may die for an individual yet it does not die in itself. The portrayal of the old man is natural, inevitable, and right. We do not know if the old man was as industrious in his youth as Michael but the old age and the feeling of loneliness had killed his desire to work....'tis believed by all that many and many a day he thither went, And never lifted up a single stone."

In another poem dealing with the theme of loneliness, the central character, though he does not appear in the poem directly, is an old man. The poem is *The Death of the Hired Man*. What isolates men and women in the Frostian world is their lack of communication. The isolation sharpens the feeling of alienation between man and man, even between husband and wife. We have already noticed the different ways in which the



husband and the wife in the 'West-Running Brook' think. The problem studied in the poem is that of one man's concern for the sorrows and misfortunes of another. There are three characters in the poem- Mary, Warren and Silas- but, as the investigator has already pointed out, the central character, Silas, does not appear in the poem. The death of Silas is the centre of action. Mary, a woman as she is, is more emotional than Warren, her husband, who is more tied to practical considerations. As the poem opens, we find Mary, waiting for Warren, anxious enough to convey the news that "Silas is back". Silas is shiftless, unreliable and selfish yet also engaging and sometimes lovable. Mary and Warren feel no moral obligation towards him. Warren sees no reason why he should take back the man who again and again has hired himself to work on their farm only to leave them, for his betterment at the time of harvest, when his services were badly needed. Warren thinks that Silas had better go to his own brother instead of coming back to Warren and Mary.

Mary continually persuades Warren to be more kind to Silas though he is nothing to them "any more, than was the hound that came a stranger to us, out of the woods, worn out upon the trail". Silas feels that he must come to Warren and Mary or there is nowhere. Warren says, "Have is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in". Silas has come to, what he thinks, his 'home' and expects that Mary and Warren must take him in because they are good human beings and cannot refuse another human being in need. On the basis of his actions, Silas does not deserve consideration. Thus, Mary and Warren, without asking for it, have had to accept and help solve the problems of others. The end of the poem leaves a lasting impression on us where we learn that Silas is no longer alive, and that it is his death-state that has occasioned the exchange of opinions between Mary and Warren. 'The self-respect of Silas has been the essence of his life and he comes back to Mary and Warren, in place of going to his brother, to preserve his self-respect. William G. O'Donnell had rightly remarked:

In Frost's poetry the radical isolation of the individual has always been taken as a basic experience, something that everyone must face in one form or another ... 'North of Boston', the turning point in Frost's career broke the general pattern established in 'A Boy's Will' by making the tragic discovery of isolation. Throughout each poem in that great collection, Frost insistently projected the theme of man's alienation from his fellow man. (O' Donnell p. 277)

In *Home & Trial*, we find the drama lying in the conflict of two minds- a man's and a woman's mind. Though Frost insisted repeatedly that the inspiration for the poem was the crucial situation of his wife's sister and her husband, Nathaniel and Leona Harvey, who became estranged after the death of their own first-born child in Epping, New Hampshire, in 1895, the possibility is always there that the writing of it could not have been separated from the grief shared by him and his wife following the death of their first-born child, Elliott, in 1900. This conviction strengthens further when we learn that Frost

never read it in his hundreds of public and private readings because it was 'too sad' for him to read aloud and when we notice the similarity in the expression of Elinor's grief, following the loss of Elliott, "The world's evil", with that of the wife in the poem who says, "But the world's evil". The poem may have been inspired by these occasions but it is Frost's broader experience that reveals in the poem how a pair of married lovers may be pulled apart by the shared hurt consciousness that a man and his wife suffer. As the poem begins, we find the young wife looking at the little graveyard where her first-born infant is buried. She refuses to accept the love of her husband who has been indifferent to the death of their child. When he refers to his child's mound, she cries, "Don't, don't, don't, don't" thus restraining him from referring to it again and when he asks "Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?" She says that he can't because he doesn't know how to speak:

"You can't because you don't know how to speak,
 If you had any feelings, you that dug
 With your own hand-how could you? His little
 grave;
 I saw you from that very window there,
 Making the gravel leap and leap in air,
 Leap up! like that, like that, and land so lightly
 And roll back down the mound beside the hole..."

She fails to understand how he could have hurried the child himself. She is horrified to think that after burrying the child, he came into the kitchen with his boots muddy from the earth of the grave and left his spade in the kitchen entry and talked of everyday matters- "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day/ Will rot the best birch fence a man can build". It was not the proper time for such talk but he talked as if he didn't care for the death of the child. She finds suffocation in the house and thinks that she must go somewhere out of that house to relax herself. Her husband is of the view that though she still suffers from excessive grief yet the crisis is now past. He is not in a mood to allow her to be lost in grief and go somewhere out of his house:

"Where do you mean to go, First tell me that
 I'll follow and bring you back by force. I will..."

And we can anticipate the husband bringing his wife back to life. The husband seems to be realistic in the acceptance of his child's death, perhaps realizing...

That no life lives for ever
 That dead men rise up never;
 That even the weariest river
 Winds somewhere safe to sea." (Swinburne p. 747)

Dealing with the realities in the human life, in this way, Frost tries to touch the heart of the readers. His sadness, loneliness and a glimpse of pessimism could easily be traced from his poems. With the help of the poems under study, the same attempt has been honestly made here.

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