

Still Water Runs Deep—On Robert Frost’s Poems

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As one of the most renowned poets in 20th-century America, Robert Frost captivated a wide readership with his unique poetic charm. His poems are written in plain, unadorned language yet carry profound and lasting meanings. This style often leads to misunderstanding—readers may assume his poetry is simple, straightforward, and devoid of depth. In reality, Frost’s work is like a tranquil pond: calm on the surface, yet concealing deep, swirling currents beneath. This article explores his creative world through various lenses, including his life experiences, multiple identities, and the diversity of imagery and themes in his poetry, unveiling the profound richness hidden within this seemingly serene verse.

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Robert Frost (1874-1963) was one of the most renowned American poets of the 20th century, celebrated for his vivid depictions of New England life and landscape. His poems are rich in imagery, written in simple yet elegant language, deeply meaningful, and highly rhythmic—possessing a powerful artistic appeal that has won him widespread admiration among readers. He received four Pulitzer Prizes during his lifetime and became America’s “unofficial poet laureate”. He was also invited to recite his own works at U.S. presidential inaugurations. These honors and achievements have earned him a distinguished place not only in American but also in world poetry, establishing him as a towering figure of great prestige throughout the literary world.

Robert Frost was a diligent and prolific poet throughout his life, publishing over 10 collections of poetry. Most scholars and critics regard him as a nature poet, a pastoral poet, or a New England poet. Indeed, Frost’s works depict rural people and natural landscapes of New England, making him a genuine American poet deeply rooted in local traditions. His themes primarily draw from the simple lives of ordinary people, characterized by sincerity, frankness, freshness, and plainness—qualities naturally bestowed by real-life experiences, free from any artificiality. Yet his poems are by no means merely straightforward depictions of everyday scenes, nor can they be reduced to shallow, casual verses. Ordinary readers may easily lose their way amid seemingly simple language and unadorned descriptions, unaware that they have already been misled by a deceptive simplicity.

Robert Frost’s poetry reveals depth in simplicity and genuine emotion in plainness. Readers must savor his poems carefully and patiently to grasp the poet’s true intentions and appreciate his profound care. His language is simple and unadorned, as if speaking intimately with the reader, reminding us of Bai Juyi, the great Tang Dynasty poet. It is said that Bai Juyi would read his new poems aloud to an elderly neighbor woman each time he completed a work—only those she could understand were kept. Some scholars have also compared Frost to Tao Yuanming, the renowned poet of China’s Jin Dynasty. They note that although Frost’s nature poems depict everyday scenes or events, he frequently employs metaphor and symbolism to embed deep thoughts or

philosophical insights into seemingly ordinary details. As a result, his nature poetry often leads readers into reflective contemplation, offering a sense of quiet beauty rich with wisdom. Thus, Robert Frost’s poetic world resembles a tranquil pond—calm on the surface, yet stirred by hidden currents, full of subtle depth. In this article, the author will explore his creative work from several perspectives: his life, the multiplicity of his identities, and the diversity of imagery and themes in his poetry, aiming to unravel the profound beauty.

A Turbulent Life Path

Robert Frost’s life was filled with hardship and adversity.

On a personal level, he endured numerous misfortunes: losing his father in childhood, experiencing marital discord after marriage, the suicide of his son, and the death of his daughter from illness. These successive blows were like a harsh winter, leaving deep, irreparable wounds within him. Although he made every effort to conceal them, the pain inevitably surfaced in his poetry—his lyrical works often carry a somber tone that reflects the melancholy aspects of his thoughts and character. On cold winter days when the north wind howls and snowflakes fall heavily, we seem still to hear his anguished groans.

His literary career was also far from smooth. Although he published his first poem, “My Butterfly”, at the age of 19, he remained largely unknown for years afterward. It wasn’t until he released his first poetry collection, *A Boy’s Will*, at 39 that he began receiving widespread acclaim from readers and society at large, finally entering a springtime of creative success. The 20 years of obscurity before this breakthrough felt like an endless winter. Fortunately, through sheer perseverance and unyielding determination, he managed to overcome these trials. He maintained composure and continued writing diligently, observing nature, humanity, and even the universe itself with the profound insight and wisdom characteristic of a true poet. His poems reveal a mature, steady mindset in describing the world and expressing emotions, untouched by the lure of fame or fortune—a magnanimity and depth of spirit unmatched by most poets.

Throughout nearly 90 years of life, Frost experienced a rich variety of roles: teacher, textile mill worker, journalist, farmer, and professor at dozens of universities. This diverse background provided invaluable material for reflecting on the meaning of life and exploring the complex relationships between humans and nature, as well as among people themselves. His close contact with ordinary people, especially farmers, gave him deep familiarity with rural life and an understanding of their hardships. Moreover, he witnessed firsthand the devastation brought upon nations by two world wars, as well as the impact and challenges posed by industrialization and urbanization to traditional moral values. All these experiences prompted intense introspection, and the inner conflicts, struggles, and efforts are vividly reflected in his poetry. Some have jokingly remarked that the name “Frost”—which in English connotes cold weather, frost, and freezing temperatures—foreshadowed his particular fondness for themes such as winter and snow. Indeed, he wrote numerous poems centered on “winter”, “snow”, and “ice”. Undeniably, his extensive life experience contributed to the remarkable diversity of his poetic themes. This aspect will be discussed in greater detail in the section on the thematic richness of Frost’s poetry.

The Poet With Multiple Identities

In Robert Frost’s numerous poems, the author frequently assumes different roles, approaching themes from various perspectives and employing diverse techniques—whether through quiet narration or passionate declaration—to guide readers into a mysterious and remote poetic world.

The Unyielding Fighter

Despite his many hardships, Frost was never overwhelmed by temporary adversity. In his works, we see images of resilience and perseverance, as well as an indomitable spirit. “The wood-pile” is a prime example.

At the beginning of the poem, the author deliberately creates an atmosphere of desolation and melancholy: a gloomy sky, marshlands, and accumulated snow. Between the lines lies an inexplicable sorrow and depression, evoking a scene that seems to mirror the poet’s personal experience—talented yet unrecognized, burdened with inner turmoil as he walks through this dark marsh, gazing around at an endless expanse. Where is the way out? Without lofty aspirations and extraordinary perseverance, only despair and hopelessness await him.

In this dull and oppressive atmosphere, the little bird the author encounters breaks the silence and leads to the introduction of the firewood pile—the central theme. Here, the wood pile, itself in a pitiful state, disregards its own safety and is determined to warm the swamp, which is in an even more dire condition. For the firewood, burning means consuming itself, signifies loss of life, and represents sacrificing one’s existence for others. Yet it is precisely this firewood pile—burning silently, without flame or smoke—that becomes an object of praise in the author’s eyes. Isn’t this also a reflection of the author’s own inner journey? It is only through long-term quiet perseverance, unwavering dedication, acceptance of solitude, and a spirit of selfless giving that Frost was able to create his later masterpieces.

Frost’s indomitable spirit is also vividly expressed in his other poem, “Birches”.

I’d like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to ti and begin over.
 May no fate willfully misunderstand me
 And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
 Not to return.

Perhaps in the real world there have been moments of confusion, struggle, disappointment, and even weariness, yet the resilient author still chooses to believe that “That would be good both going and coming back”. With few words, the author profoundly expresses love for this world—“Earth’s the right place for love: I don’t know where it’s likely to go better”.

The Wise Elder

In Frost’s poetry, he often assumes the role of a kind and wise elder, guiding readers in exploring the mysteries of life, nature, and even the universe. Even in a short poem, his wisdom shines through. “Spring Pools” is brief in length, yet concise and rich with meaning, inviting deep reflection.

In this poem, the author explores the cyclical nature of life, revealing harmony and unity within seemingly contradictory phenomena. Trees drinking up water does not mean the disappearance of water; on the contrary, water nurtures life within trees, reemerging in new forms and continuing its cycle. This is why we encounter phrases like “these flowery waters and these watery flowers”—statements that may seem puzzling at first but are actually rich with hidden meaning.

In another poem titled “Neither out Far Nor in Deep” the author leads readers in a reflection on human cognitive limits.

The people along the sand
 All turn and look one way.

They turn their back on the land.

They look at the sea all day.

...

They cannot look out far.

They cannot look in deep.

But when was that ever a bar

To any watch the keep?

Although some scientists argue that humans originated in the ocean, it is evident that our current understanding of the sea remains far less than that of the land—especially during Frost’s time. Thus, it is natural for the poem to depict people gazing uncertainly at the distant sea. Perhaps human comprehension of truth is indeed limited, but with the aid of science and technology, our vision can extend further. Hence, at the end of the poem, the author still expresses hope, believing that the eye of inquiry cannot be stopped by anything.

The Worried Sage

The era in which Frost lived was not always one of peace and prosperity. The distortions of human nature brought about by world wars and the development of capitalism, along with various dark forces, left deep imprints on his works.

In describing a scene of standing by the seaside, “Once by the Pacific” presents readers with a terrifying image: turbulent waves crashing violently against the rocks, heavy clouds suffocating the sky. Readers strongly sense an oppressive force, as if “the wind fills the tower before the storm”, inevitably sharing the author’s anxiety over the fate of human society.

“An Old Man’s Winter Night” portrays a scene in which, on a bitterly cold night covered with frost, an elderly man—childless and alone—has only a wooden bucket for company, his twilight years filled with desolation. This vividly reflects the lack of basic care and compassion among people in Western society driven by materialism: While one can rely on personal strength to survive during prime age, once old age arrives, it is as if one is surrounded by winter’s harsh grip, with death being the only inevitable fate.

In the poem “Desert Places”, the poet feels inexplicably melancholy, his spirit utterly despondent.

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast

In a field I looked into going past,

And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,

But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

Facing setbacks in life and overwhelmed by inner despair with no one to confide in, he is moved by the scene that “all animals are smothered in their lairs”. Although hope within him has not yet completely vanished, he still feels loneliness.

And lonely as it is that loneliness

Will be more lonely ere it will be less—

A blanker whiteness of benighted snow

With no expression, nothing to express.

In the following two poems, hope becomes even more distant. In “Reluctance” the poet looks up on frozen snow and asks, “Whither?” Yet faced with the collapse of traditional moral values across Western society and the loss of faith, the poet feels utterly helpless—despite his unwillingness, he can only go with the flow.

To go with the drift of things,
 To yield with a grace to reason,
 And bow and accept the end
 Of a love or a season?

In “Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter”, he states more directly: “The West is getting out of gold”. This indicates that the spiritual world of the West has lost its former brilliance. The once “birds with an angelic gift” are no longer seen, leaving only “a single leaf was on a bough”. The poem profoundly expresses the inner turmoil of witnessing humanity adrift in a spiritual desert—though one harbors aspirations to save the world, the path forward remains unclear and uncertain.

Yet Frost was also actively seeking ways to resolve social conflicts, including some highly destructive “violent” methods. This approach reaches its peak in “Fire and Ice”, where the poet actually favors ice over fire as the agent of destruction—because such destruction is more thorough. When the poet had witnessed the aftermath of World War I, he deeply understood the endless disasters brought by human desire and hatred. In his eyes, the world at that time resembled a garbage heap, already rotten and beyond redemption. Thus, he calls for destruction. Destruction serves rebirth, precisely because fire’s destruction is incomplete. As the force carrying out the noble task of destroying the old world, ice clearly bears a progressive and positive connotation in its destructiveness.

Diversity of Imagery and Themes in Poetry

Diversity of Imagery

The term “imagery” originally came from psychology and was later adopted in literary creation. Initially, imagery referred to sensory and perceptual experiences of external objects through human senses, which then evoke mental reappearances and memories. The American Imagist poet Ezra Pound defined imagery in literature as a complex fusion of intellect and emotion presented in an instant. Thus, simply put, imagery refers to concrete images—such as scenes or objects—used by writers to emotionally or intellectually move readers.

The firewood, birds, ponds, oceans, birch trees, ice, and fire mentioned earlier in Frost’s poems are all images used by the poet to convey certain emotions and ideas. It is worth noting that because Frost’s language is simple, unadorned, and easily accessible, many readers devoted to modernists like Pound and Eliot tend to regard his poetry as overly simplistic and less “profound” than more obscure and difficult works. This is a misunderstanding of Frost’s poetry. In his poems, every flower, leaf, insect, and blade of grass carry deep meaning—though it requires the reader’s patience to uncover.

A common example is the butterfly, often seen in rural labor. In Frost’s first published poem, “My Butterfly”, the poet reflects on the unknown elements of life through a dead butterfly lying among the grass. Here, an ordinary butterfly becomes a victim of God. From this image, the poet explores the mysterious forces of the universe: Why would such a powerful being strike down something so weak and powerless? Why does a supposedly merciful God act so cruelly?

Throughout his long literary career following the debut of this first work, Frost consistently drew inspiration from everyday life, carefully observing the world around him, discovering the extraordinary within the ordinary, and thus stimulating readers’ reflections.

Diversity of Themes

Robert Frost, known as a poet of New England, was deeply devoted to the natural landscapes, rural scenery, and local customs of the region, presenting readers with vivid and beautiful depictions of its charm. He personally participated in labor, observing, reflecting, and creating through his daily work. As a result, he produced numerous poems about farming life, among which “Mending Wall” stands as a classic. In winter, frost causes the ground to heave, damaging the stone wall between his property and that of his neighbor. The speaker then arranges to repair the wall together with his neighbor. However, in the poet’s view, the “wall” symbolizes barriers to honest communication between people—hindering interaction and suppressing the desire for connection and understanding—making the act of mending it unnecessary.

There where it is we do not need the wall:
 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

Yet the rigid-minded neighbor insisted that “Good fence makes good neighbors” and the author truly could not understand the reason. Although the author longed to break down barriers and yearned for understanding, his intellectual reserve and the constraints of traditional morality led him to join in building the wall. Yet deep down, his subconscious still whispered, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, That wants it down”. What was once an ordinary, commonplace incident in rural life becomes profoundly thought-provoking under Frost’s pen—so much so that one cannot help but marvel at the author’s keen observation and depth of insight.

“After Apple Picking” depicts the author’s dream following the autumn apple harvest. In the dream, the apples are within sight but out of reach, leaving one with aching feet and restless heart. Perhaps it’s better to stay grounded in real life—this lesson from the author may offer some insight to readers who tend to aim too high.

People often compare life to a journey, and Frost’s poetry similarly reflects the confusion, struggles, and choices faced by travelers. “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” explores themes of responsibility and escape through the experience of a traveler. Although “the woods are lovely, dark and deep”, the speaker resists the temptation, for “I have promises to keep”.

In “The Road Not Taken” Frost presents readers with a profound dilemma: Just as the speaker faces a choice in the poem, the poet himself encountered a similar decision in real life—should he write obscure and complex poetry like Pound or Eliot, or should he stay true to his own path, conveying depth through simplicity and clarity? The outcome is clear: Frost remained faithful to his distinctive style, leaving us with numerous fresh, lucid poems that nevertheless require careful interpretation.

Conclusion

Robert Frost’s poetry is simple in language yet profound in meaning, like a tranquil pool of clear water—calm and remote on the surface, yet beneath lies swift current and hidden waves. Only bold and discerning readers can dive into its depths to uncover the true essence concealed within his verses.

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