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The Reflection of Human Difficulties in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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Abstract

Robert Frost has been considered as a great American poet chiefly because he has presented the scene of human dilemma. During his eighty eight years, Robert Frost became the most read and honoured American poet of the twentieth century. During his long poetic career Robert Frost composed poems and published them in the form of several volumes. Robert Frost's poetry can definitely be called the poetry of human beings. He reveals himself through his poems as a student of nature. His poems reveal the expression of human predicament- a human being in the grip of alienation, despair and disillusionment. Frost's people suffer in the hands of nature. They have their personal problems. A human being in the poems of Robert Frost has to face unpleasant situations. His first volume of poems shows the maturity of Robert Frost's powers about the expression of human predicament. It expresses the tone of disappointment. In *North of Boston*, he tells the story of conflict. His

third volume contains a wider variety of poems and deals with human difficulties. This volume represents Robert Frost's reflective mood. The poem "In the home stretch" is a story of a couple, moving in to an isolated farm. This paper focuses on the aspect that loneliness and fear of loneliness are always present in human heart. Man is alone, alienated and his alienation becomes the source of human predicament.

Keywords

Predicament; Loneliness; Unpleasant; Reflective; Conflict; Alienation.

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Just as Thomas Hardy was the novelist of human predicament. Robert Frost is the poet of the human predicament. The truth is that all good literature is an exercise of the artist to place before the world the sorry state of this world which is really not habitable but which, most helplessly, we have to face. Man is alone even amidst the crowd. The tragedy is that he is never properly understood. The greatest irony is that those who claim to have understood him have actually misunderstood him. Since the poet is a sensitive creature, he is capable of looking deep into the things. He knows that there is a great difference between the resemblance and the actual state but his problem is to exist and survive. He has to make adjustments with the forces quite contrary to his nature.

Robert Frost has been considered a great American poet chiefly because he has presented the scene of human dilemma. During his eighty eight years, Robert Frost became the most read and honoured American poet of the twentieth century. During his long poetic career Robert Frost composed poems and published them in the form of several volumes. These volumes are *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston*, *Mountain Interval*, *New Hampshire*, *West Running Brook* and *A Further Range*. He also wrote two plays *A Masque of Reason* and *A Masque of Mercy*.

Robert Frost's poetry can definitely be called the poetry of human beings. He reveals himself through his poems as a student of nature. His poems reveal the expression of human predicament- a human being in the grip of alienation, despair and disillusionment. Frost's people suffer in the hands of nature. They have their personal problems. A human being in the poems of Robert Frost has to face unpleasant situations. Robert Frost has offered a good many definitions of poetry. One of them shows the expression of predicament. "Every poem is an epitome of the great predicament; a figure of the will braving alien entanglements."

Robert Frost's first volume of verse, was published in London in 1913 and was entitled *A Boy's Will*. It shows the maturity of Robert Frost's powers about the expression of human predicament. It expresses the tone of disappointment. This volume represents the voice of Robert Frost through the medium of ordinary human being. *A Boy's Will* takes its title from Longfellow's "My Lost Youth", 'A Boy's will is the wind's will'; it echoes Shakespeare, John Keats, P.B. Shelley and Tennyson in vocabulary and diction.

A Boy's Will consisted of thirty two poems divided into three parts. Part 1 began with the theme of withdrawal from the world and ended on a note of one kind of return to it. Part 2 represented some areas of experience and part 3 represented the acceptance of a person's confrontation with life. *A Boy's Will* depicts the various stages of young man's outlook on life. It contains a number of poems that are counted among Robert Frost's best poems including "My November Guest", "Love and a Question", "The Vantage Point", "Reluctance" and "Mowing". They all deal with human predicament. "My November Guest" is the third poem of this volume. The guest is sorrow. Sorrow is personified in this poem. "My November Guest" gives the expression to the poet's love of bare November days, before the coming of snow. The poet talks about desolation, deserted trees and the faded earth. The poem is remarkable for its mixture of joy and sorrow. The paradox of joy in the scene of desolation is noteworthy.

“She is glad the birds are gone away,
She's glad her simple worsted gray
Is silver now with clinging mist.”

Loneliness and fear of loneliness are always present in human heart. Man is alone, alienated and his alienation becomes the source of human predicament. “Reluctance” is another Robert Frost's poem. He mainly dealt with nature poems but man is rarely absent. He is always present in his nature poems. He introduces a keen human emotion into a nature poem. Robert Frost also admitted that only one or two poems are without man.

Robert Frost deals with a lot of common men who suffer from unpleasant situations on this earth. Human destiny is confronted with a hostile universe. Robert Frost presents man in a state of alienation from other men. Frost treats man as an integral part of the universe. But there are difficulties which a human being has to face in his life. Robert Frost's volume *A Boy's Will* presents the ordinary joys and sorrows of man's life.

His best poem “Love and a Question” is totally an expression of human predicament. The reader is left to guess what actually happens in this poem. A man and his young wife are disturbed suddenly. They face an unpleasant situation at their marriage eve. They are unable to think, what they should do or not in this situation. What is the situation? The situation is that a stranger asks for a shelter for the night. The situation is unusual for them because it is the time of their marriage eve. The bride groom has been waiting to spend time with his bride, but there is an obstacle between them.

It is the expression of human predicament. Should he keep the stranger in the bridal house or should he say ‘no’ and send the stranger back? The bride, who is inside the room, is waiting for her husband.

“Within, the bride in the dusk alone
bent over the open fire,
Her face rose-red with the glowing coal

And the thought of her heart's desire.”

This poem shows a clear picture of human predicament in the life of bride and bride groom.

“The Trial by Existence”, when it appeared in *A Boy's Will* would be the longest poem in this volume. It gives a point that death is not the end of life but the beginning of another life. It tells the circle of life. In another life the same struggle will go on. Man will have to face difficulties. After serving in the last struggle, man is transported to a paradise. Newly assembled souls are gathered together and instructed by God in a trial. In writing “The Trial by Existence” Robert Frost tried to build in to some of the attitudes and recommendations he had met in James's essay “Will to Believe”. Robert Frost said about *A Boy's Will*-“An expression of my life for the ten years from eighteen on when I thought I greatly preferred stocks and stone to people.”

This remark would refer to the years 1892-1901, his years of different employments, his courtship and marriage with Elinor White, ending more or less with the death of his mother and his first child. Robert Frost had to face sufferings in his life. “The Trial by Existence” insists that the essence of life is to choose greatly and then to get 'what we somehow chose'. Robert Frost had written a letter to Sussan Hayes Ward in May, 1913 with reference to poems from his first volume *A Boy's Will*. “A Boy's Will” itself, it is worth a moment's pause to ask how those poems are “the expression of a life was forced to live”.

Robert Frost's other poem “Reluctance” is a description of human complexities of desire and responsibility. The natural scene reveals a keen human emotion in this poem. And “My Butterfly” is composed due to the most disturbing episode in Robert Frost's courtship. It deals with human predicament in the life of an ordinary human being. Other poems in this volume include “Star”, “The Vantage Point”, “Mowing”, “Revelation”, “The Tuft of Flowers”, “The Demiurge's Laugh” are strong in expression of unpleasant situation. In all the poems of *A Boy's Will*, it would be too simple to see a

human being as a sentimental victim of circumstances. Human being is forced by domestic situations and social difficulties. They all deal with human difficulties.

Robert Frost's second volume *North of Boston* (1914) was published by David Nutt; London. It tells the story of conflict. In *North of Boston*, he has presented the bleak picture and depressing view of life. The poems "Home Burial", "The Fear", "The Death of the Hired Man" deal with alienation. The poems he was writing for *North of Boston* have subjects like the death of an old man or the presence of the dead child in the mind of living parents as in "Home Burial". He used the subtitle "The Book of People" for *North of Boston*. The subtitle is crucial and quite popular. Robert Frost wrote to Sidney Cox about *North of Boston*- "No Book of verse has had as much space given it for a good while".

Robert Frost presents a picture in "Home Burial", what happens when a human being cannot accept the fact of his conditions. The young wife in this poem is unable to reconcile with the death of her child. She clutches her grief. Robert Frost took the story from his personal experience. His sister Jeanie was unable to face the coarseness and brutality of existence. Jeanie's ideal word could never be reconciled with the actual word. She became alienated from the world. In this poem, there is a conflict between real facts of life and the imagined view of young wife. The people in *North of Boston* are depicted in their conflict with the problem of existence in this world.

"You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
of the fresh earth from whom your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns
I can repeat the very words you were saying".

"The Black Cottage" is a story about an old lady whose husband served and died in Union Army. Her son left her alone after the death of the father. It is a bitter truth of life that parents teach their children everything about evil

and good. They think that their children will look after them in the old age. But it is life's reality that at the time of old age, they leave their parents in loneliness. In "The Black Cottage" Robert Frost has repeated the same bitter truth and life's reality. He imagines himself to be "Monarch of a Desert Land".

Robert Frost declared to Louis Untermeyer soon after *North of Boston* was published- "it begins as a lump in a throat, a sense wrong, a homesickness, a lovesickness. It is never a thought to begin with ... A poem particularly must not begin with thought first."

"A Servant to Servants" is the tale of the uncle. He went mad from intolerable disappointment in love. The poem involves the psychological self-revelation of a person. A farmer's wife is tired of cooking meals and housekeeping for the hired man. It seems to her that she is a servant to servants. The poet offers a shock when mad man's niece discloses between her husband and herself that gives a sense of isolation. In a sense she reveals that she has once stayed in mental asylum and goes on to narrate the story of his mad uncle. It is a story of absolute horror. It is a story of conflict due to her loneliness, fear and purposelessness.

North of Boston portrays the darker aspects of life in New England. Robert Frost's interest in many of these poems is psychological. He was concerned with the motives and hidden nature of men and women, particularly of women. When Randall Jarell interviewed him at the Library of Congress in 1959, he said that he had tried to write poems for *North of Boston* without villains. "In tragic life no villain need be".

In a sense of tragic scene he is not like William Shakespeare because Shakespeare could not write without villains in his dramas. No one is to blame as in "Home Burial" as Husband is not blamed by his wife on the death of their young children. Robert Frost's efforts were to attempt a truly represented life and conflict in the life of human being.

"A Hundred Collars" dramatizes a familiar human conflict. It deals with

fear of unfamiliar. A timid professor is forced to share a room with a stranger in a one hotel town. It seems to the professor that the other person may be a murderer and a robber. His nervousness makes clear to stranger that the professor is fearful due to his presence in the room. He is broad-minded and tries to ignore his insult. He reassures the professor that he himself has more money than other has. The stranger is angered to learn that the fear is motivated by thorough mistrust. After all, he has in his own wallet ninety dollars compared to the professor's five dollars. Now who has the right to suspicion? He advises the professor-

“You'd better tuck your money under you
And sleep on it the way I always do
When I am with people I don't trust at Night”

Later, he unpacks his whisky bottle and goes out. He leaves the professor quaking on his pillow. Man must have companionship, but he is afraid. The professor's condition is the expression of human predicament in which he was unable to think, what to do in this unpleasant situation especially, when he had to share his room with a stranger whom he was thinking to be a robber and murderer.

At least one critic, Louise Bogan, agreed and in her brief survey of American poetry, she took a similar line by saying that Robert Frost in *North of Boston*- “Briefly possessed himself of a human realism and insight which he was never quite able to repeat”.

Robert Frost has presented the terrible actualities of life in a new way. The poem like “Mending Wall” puts up a question 'Do men work together or apart?' Robert Frost says that they do both. But in actual way, they stand so far apart from each other that even the simplest communication proves futile. Miss Lowell declares that- “*North of Boston* is a very sad book ... which in spite of its author's sympathetic touch ... reveals a disease that is eating in to the vitals of our New England life, at least in its rural communities”.

Robert Frost's another poem like "After Apple-Picking" is a dramatic monologue of an exhausted apple-picker. The scent of apple makes him lazy so that the world looks strange to him. It embodies a universal experience and conflict in the mind of speaker about the task of apple-picking. In his another poem "The Fear" he shows the feeling of guilt in young woman who has left one man and has been living with her lover on a lonely farm. She always fears with the feeling of guilt. Robert Frost represents it as a story of conflict in woman and her fear.

Robert Frost's other poems from this volume are also the expression of human predicament. It included such as poems, "The Code", "The Mountain", "Blueberries", "The Housekeeper" and "The Wood Pile" etc. Robert Frost has represented these poems as the story of conflict.

Robert Frost's third volume of poems *Mountain Interval* was published in 1916. This volume contains a wider variety of poems and deals with human difficulties. The interval in the title means lower land between hills, usually with some kind of stream. Robert Frost made clear that he was using the word 'interval' for its double meaning to recall to Elinor as the dedication. The volume had particular significance for Elinor, as well as Robert Frost, with good reason. "It contains thirty two poems. Twenty four of the thirty two poems were written on one of the Frost's farms. Eleven were written from Derry. Thirteen came from Bethlehem and Franconia".

This volume represents Robert Frost's reflective mood. The poem "In the Home Stretch" is a story of a couple, moving in to an isolated farm. They must derive directly from Robert Frost and Elinor's experience. The book "Mountain Interval" includes both rhymed lyrics and dramatic narrative in blank verse, along with a ballad and three poems for children. Robert Frost's characteristic theme of isolation, loneliness and fear are expressed in "An Old Man's Winter Night" and "The Hill Wife" which must have reminded him of how hard and lovely his years as a New England farmer had been. He has treated the theme

of death in “The Vanishing Red” and “Out, Out”.

In his great poem “An Old Man's Winter Night” Robert Frost represents that the human insecurity is clear. He emphasizes on man's alienation continually. It clears the condition of man in an empty universe and affects man's feeling deeply. He does not realize how helpless he is. The poem is both a reflection on the state of being old and a lender. It reveals the portrait of a particular character. Robert Frost represents an old man who is alone in the farm house on a winter night. The poet describes his sleep as a living death in which physical organs continue to function. The poem is a definition of death itself.

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

Thus all the volumes, *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston*, *Mountain Interval*, *New Hampshire*, *A Further Range* are the expression of human problems which he has to face in his life.

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