ABSTRACT

Robert Frost (1874-1963) is an American poet who won the Pulitzer Prize four times. His direct style incorporates profound thought which reveals his experience in the rural region of New England.

In an age of technological progression, economic and social disturbances, more moral and spiritual tensions marked human experience. Consequently varied barriers emerged to separate man from his fellowmen, from nature and from his Creator. Hence Frost sets his journey of strife. His keen eye of contemplating and sympathizing with man reflected his intensely felt need for the spirit of brotherhood to prove his quarrel to be that of a lover of humanity.
Break silence now or be forever silent
Let him say why it should not be dictated so
The melancholy of having to count souls
Where they grow fewer and fewer every year
Is extreme where they shrink to none at all
It must be I want life to go on living.

Robert Frost, "The Census –Taker"

In a poem entitled The Lesson for Today Robert Frost (P.871) says "I had a lover's quarrel with the world". Throughout his poetry there are evidences of this view of man's existence of barriers which Frost considers a continuous challenge.

When Frost came to New England to settle there, the region was caught between a decaying agrarianism and a growing industrialism. More people were migrating to the cities which generated stress as people were confined to technological progression and industrialized development. An age of anxiety which is marked by loss of human faith, social and financial disturbances which rendered life more chaotic and generated more tensions. Consequently, the theme of barriers conditioned Frost's views of life results in man's alienation from nature, from his fellowmen, and from God. This theme is reflected in a variety of rural New England responses to the human predicament.

Though Frost's attitude towards nature is one of respect, yet he conceives it as separate and, more precisely, hostile to those
who love it. In "Our Hold on the Planet "he says:"There is much in nature against us. But we forget:/Take nature altogether since time began"(P.961)

Frost's view of nature is more comprehensive than Wordsworth: while Wordsworth emotionally displays the harmony between the soul of man and that of nature, Frost has a keen eye for the beautiful and the barren.

He is dissatisfied with showing the natural beauty without the indifference of the physical World which he takes as two aspects of the same view, rather than being opposite

the war between man and nature does exist, unlike wordsworth's transcendental approach which denies such war in an attempt to become one with the moving spirit, the soul of the world.

The bleak and the barren are constantly lurking beneath the calm and the kindly mother nature. In Two Tramps in Mud Time the fear of hidden dangers interrupts the joyful April weather:

Be glad of water, but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun set
And shows in the water its crystal teeth."(P.853)

Even when nature takes a sympathetic interest in man one should not expect much .Thus in Two Look at Two the lovers
do feel that there is an affinity between themselves and the buck and the doe that stare at them
Still they stood
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favour
Sad made them certain earth returned their love

(P. 382)

But that is all. They run away for there is the man-made fence" a tumbled wall/ With a barbed wire binding"(P. 382) which separate man from deer nature. Hence in order to survive in a hostile environment in which man is an alien, he must constantly struggle to survive:"I'd hate to be a runaway from nature"(P. 112), says Frost in New Hampshire.

In the Snow the "tough "preacher accepts nature's challenge and insists on going into the heart of the blizzard to conquer it:
Well, there's the storm. That says I must go on.
That wants me as a war might if it came.
Ask any man.
(P. 981)

While on the other side stand those who accepts the challenge and go down in defeat, as in the Census-Taker. He came to a deserted village which he describes as "waste", an evidence of the failure:
I came as a census – taker to the waste
To count the people in it and found none,
An emptiness flayed to the very stone.
I found no people that dared show themselves,

The time was autumn, but how anyone
Could tell the time of year when every tree
That could have dropped a leaf was down itself

(P.614)

But sometimes nature stands as a challenge for some who
donot attempt to conquer as does the character in The
Mountain. He is impressed by its grandeur and wants to climb
it, but never does. he says:

I've always meant yo go
And look myself, but you know how it is:
It doesn't seem so much to climb a mountain

(P.91)

He is not interested to see its brook," a curious thing/...It's
always cold in summer, warm in winter"(P.91). The mountain
for him is merely a huge barrier that prevents the village from
growing:

I felt it like a wall
Behind which I was sheltered from a wind.

We can't in nature grow to many more:
That thing takes all the room!

(P.91-92)
The complacency of this Yankee is contrasted to the traveler who wants to know all about the mountain to climb it some other time. 

Aside from describing the drama of man in nature, Frost is more concerned with man himself. The diversity of his human figures is limited to the Yankees of the countryside. He treats them with a particular a liveness, "as Louis Undermeyer describes it, saying: His poetry lives with a particular a liveness because it expresses living people, other poets have written about people. But...Frost's poems are the people; they work, and walk, and converse, and tell their tales with the freedom of common speech."

However, with the limitation of his regionalism Frost finds a free scope to deal with human experience. He says, "I talk about universals in terms of New England."

The barriers which separate man from man results in lack of understanding, social alienation, emotional isolation and intellectual tension. Man feels a lone and, mostly, frustrated. Sometimes his emotional imbalance verges on insanity.

In Home Burial the parents cannot share the grief over their dead child. While the mother's grief spoils her sense of life, the father is preoccupied with his "everyday concerns." For her he is the "blind creature" who seems unconscious of their big loss. She cannot forget that he dug the grave and buried their child:
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.
You can't because you don't know how.
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, likethat, likethat, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.

(P. 17)

The dark shadow of the dead child is turned to be the barrier
that alienated them from each other. Erecting this "barrier of
hatred," Raghukul Tilak asserts:
Depicts the disharmony and disintegration of modern life,
when each person holds a divergent view from the rest, there
is no common, basic approach to life, which is characteristic
of modern age. All human sympathy is gone and it has
replaced by selfishness. ¹

In The Death of the Hired Man Frost presents a socially
alienated old servant, Silas. He has to work in his old age to
support himself. He is not good enough to do anything. He
constantly changes masters and nobody wants him, even his
rich brother, a director in a bank:
Silas is what he is—we wouldn't mind him—
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anyone. He won't be made ashamed
To please his brother, worthless though he is.
I can’t think Si ever hurt anyone.

(P. 46)

In his attempt to keep his self – respect and pride he erects a barrier of alienation from others for he has:

Nothing to look backward to with pride,
And nothing to look forward to with hope,
So now and never any different.

(P. 47)

In the Hill Wife the young wife has a deep sense of fear of her "lonely house" once she has left it and has to return to it, "preferring the out-to the in-door night." The deserted house points to the "waste land" in the heart of the young woman, which she could not bear. She is completely misunderstood by her husband that he is confused by her sudden disappearance:

It was too lonely for her there,
And too wild,
And since there were but two of them,
And no child,
And work was little in the house,
She was free,

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She strayed so far she scarcely heard.
When he called her--
And didn't answer-- didn't speak—
Or return.

(P. 47)

Even the "OFT-REPEATED DREAM," she believes, makes fun of them:
Perhaps he mocked at us for being wed,
Or being very young (and he was pleased
To have a vision of us old and dead).

(P.161)

The cumulative sense of loneliness, fear and marital estrangement of a young wife are vividly seen in The Hill Wife. In a broader sense, the poem depicts the isolation of modern man who finds no comfort in old values that he mistrust.

In Mending Wall a picture of contradictions embodying far-reaching implications is portrayed. An old New England farmer believes in his father's saying: "Good fences make good neighbors." He represents the "conservatism" which keeps up the distinctions separating people. Man keeps the walls up because this is not a perfect world. Man is still too scared to trust others. If he lets them past his wall, he is letting them into his mind which certainly will leave him vulnerable. The speaker adheres to his neighbor though he sees no need for the wall:

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.

(P.87)

His attitude seems to express the spirit of nature which denies all boundaries:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down. I could say "elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself.
However, before raising any emotional barrier, Frost contemplates, to protect himself, or so he thinks, man should ask what he is missing:

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Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was to give offense.
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(P.84)

In a broader sense the poem exceeds the natural and emotional barriers between neighbours. It is a critique of the racial, ideological, and religious barriers which separate man from man.

In such portraits one gets insight into what had gone wrong in New England. The prevailing sense of helplessness and loss reflect the disintegration of values of modern man. More obviously, Frost describes the ache of life in Birches as:

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A pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig’s having lashed across it open.
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(P.351)

To overcome his hard lot, man needs courage, Frost suggests in "Courage to be New":

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They will tell you more as soon as
You tell them what to do
With their ever breaking newness
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(P.88)
And their courage to be new
(P.68)

This is part of Frost's deep belief in the individualism, affirming the importance of the independence of mind and self-reliance.

Aside from Nature and Man, the greatest barrier is found between Man and his Creator. Man's reason alienates him from God. It deprives him from the blissful communion with Him. In The Bear man's rational bias to understand the mysterious ways of God imprisons him as "a bear in a cage." He is turned to be a "pathetic," "baggy figure":

The world has room to make a bear feel free;
The universe seems cramped to you and me.
Man acts more like a bear in a cage
That all day fights a nervous rage-
His mood rejecting all his mind suggests.
He paces back and forth and never rests
(P.74)

Furthermore, in A Masque of Reason Frost shows in a dialogue between God and Job about his suffering that faith is needed to accept God's ways and makes him worthy of His mercy. So what the Mind sees as confusion is an orderly form. He says:

What I get
Is almost less than I can understand.
But I don't mind. Let's leave it as it stood.
The point was it was none of my concern.
I stick to that. But talk about confusion!

……………………………………………
Yet I suppose what seems to us confusion
Is not confusion, but the form of forms,

(PP. 006 - 011)

Hence man should not seek an explanation for his suffering in life for it is a trial implicit in his constitution. The purpose of life, Frost sees, is to test the heroism of the human soul. Only "devoted souls" stand "heroic" and "daring" to the end, as he shows in The Trial by Existence:

Even the bravest that are slain
Shall not dissemble their surprise

To find the utmost reward
Of daring should be still to dare.

The speeding of devoted souls
Which God makes his special care.

Some spirit to stand simply forth,
Heroic in its nakedness,

(PP. 082 - 091)

To conclude, Frost sees Man a stranger in a world of barriers which separate him from nature and from his fellowmen, and more importantly from his Maker.

As a realist he differs from other modern poets for he is not concerned with outward events of urban life. Rather he depicts the most terrifying facts of the twentieth-century experience. The challenge of the
difficult circumstances brought about a deep sense of loneliness, intellectual tensions, loss and uncertainty which are seen in the boundaries that loom large in his poetry.

Despite the fact that Frost is "acquainted with the night" of experience, yet the light inevitably persists. The poet does not advocate any nihilist view toward life, rather an acceptance of all its limitations. He is happy to face and understand the essential truth about life since his end is "clarification of life". He is even happier in being a meliorate by suggesting means to improve human lot. Man, he suggests, should struggle to overthrow all boundaries which is his way to salvation. As he grows to understand himself more, he would accept the world as it is and would love nature and his fellowmen. Hence his concern with the alienation of modern man is an intensely felt need for sympathy and brotherhood to prove his quarrel to be that of a lover of humanity.

NOTES

1 All line references to Frost's poems are taken from COMPLETE POEMS OF ROBERT FROST (New York: holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964)

See also "Spring Pools" and "a minor Bird"

See also "The Most of It."

See "Brown's Descent" and "Generation of Men"

See "Stars", "star Splitter" and "Lessons for Today" in which the great natural barrier for man is the space. In his attempt to bridge the gap between himself and the stars man becomes more conscious of his being littleness.


Ibid., p.24.

See also "A Servant to Servants" where the young woman lost her sanity because of loneliness.


Tilak, p.67. See "Blind Soil" where Frost advocates 'keep off each other and keep each other off.'
See "Masque of Mercy" where frost says:

I can see that the uncertainty  
In which we act is a severity  
A cruelty amounting to injustice  
That nothing but God's mercy can assuage

Lawrence Thompson, Robert Frost (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 41.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


