



An analysis of the melancholy in Robert Frost's poetry

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Abstract

Robert Frost is one of the most popular American poets in the 20th century. Frost was honored frequently during his lifetime, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry. Robert Frost is considered by many critics as an optimistic poet. There are many studies on him and on his poetry. However, the paper analyzes him and his poetry from a newly melancholy perspective. This paper consists of five parts. The first part gives a brief introduction of Robert Frost and his poetry. The second part explores the uncertainty in Frost's poetry. The third part focuses on analyzing the melancholy themes in Frost's poetry, especially, the melancholy themes of death and loneliness. The last part comes to a conclusion that melancholy plays a significant role in Frost's poetry.

Keywords: Robert Frost, uncertainty, melancholy, poetry

Introduction

As one of the greatest modern America poets, Robert Frost (1874-1963) achieved great success in the 20th century America. Robert frost was honored frequently during his lifetime, receiving four Pulitzer Prize, the Bollinger Prize and a Congressional Medal. He was named Poet Laureate of Vermont and he was the only honored poet to be invited to recite at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy in 1961. Besides, Frost awards dozens of honorary degrees, such as the doctoral degrees from both Cambridge and Oxford universities. For the American public, "Frost is one of the notable craftsmen of the 20th century." (Manorama 2)

His work was initially published in England before it was published in America, which frequently employed settings from rural life in New England in the early twentieth century, using them to examine complex social and philosophical themes. He is highly regarded for his depictions of rural life and his command of colloquial speech. Just as Pound once said: "This man (Robert Frost) has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing, the thing as he sees it..." (Lynen 24) Although he didn't join any literary movement and school in his whole life, Robert Frost formed a unique and traditional style such as the blank verse and plain language. "Many of Frost's poems take the form of dramatic monologues or dialogues, using and transforming the New Englander's patterns of speech which he heard each day on his farm." (Zuo 246)

As a poet, Frost had obvious affinities with romantic writers, Wordsworth and Emerson. He considers nature as a way of analogy and symbol, which reflect deep moral uncertainties. Frost understands not only the beauty of nature but also the terror and tragedy. His poetry often explores mysteries of darkness and irrationality in the bleak and chaotic landscapes of an indifferent world, in which people are alone, bereft,

unaided, perplexed and seeking to figure out it. Frost's poems reflect his internal perception to the outside and inside world, and "in Frost's poetry, he builds a self-world which is full of darkness" (Fan 76), that is, the melancholy is presented in Frost's poetry; meanwhile, "In his works, his deep reflections can be seen everywhere..." (Dan 1), especially the melancholy aspects. Just as Emerson claims that he is "a perceiver and dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul and in matter." (Brown 352) In order to make sense of it, this paper will focus on exploring and analyzing the melancholy parts of Frost's poetry.

Melancholy uncertainty in robert frost's poetry

Robert Frost is good at depiction of philosophy, using them to examine complex and philosophical themes. Most of Frost's poems are about lives of rural people living in the open landscape and living "far away from madding crowd". So readers can find different pictures and in his poems. And to some readers and scholars, Frost's rural world becomes a metaphor for a kind of forces and challenges that examine the limits and balance of human freedom and equality. "Frost saw poetry as a way of psychological survival in a chaotic universe." His poetry represents a dialogue between control and chaos, and "he saw poetry as creating a momentary stay against confusion, a something facing the nothing." (Faggen 4) For Frost, the poetic act provides order and form set somewhat heroically against chaos. However, there still exists uncertainty at the end of his poems which leave melancholy impression for readers.

Robert Faggen once said in his essay *Frost and the Questions of Pastoral* that "Frost often lures readers to read nature as an edifying scripture but leave us only with suggestions of uncertainty." (55) Readers often cannot find an answer for the question the writer gave until they reach the end of Frost's

poems. After a careful reading from beginning to end, they will find a divergence in his poem. Taking *The Road Not Taken* for example, we will find melancholy in this short poem.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveler, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth;
 Then took the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim,
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
 Though as for that the passing there
 Had worn them really about the same,
 And both that morning equally lay
 In leaves no step had trodden black.
 Oh, I kept the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 I doubted if I should ever come back.
 I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference. (Ehrenpreis 1117)

The poem depicts that the walker meets two different roads and it is difficult for him to choose one of them. He stands long time, "And looked down one as far as I could" and hesitates. Once he makes a choice, it is impossible to return and restart, because life is too short to resume. Apparently, wrong choice will result regret. After a deliberate thinking, the walker chooses another road, "Because it was grassy and wanted wear". From this line, we can see that the walker chooses a road "less traveled by", and it also reveals Frost's attitude toward choice and life. However, the last stanza reveals that the road he chooses altered his life and he dissatisfied his choice. "I shall be telling this with a sigh", this line even reveal that he laments his choice and regrets. Perhaps he will also regret if he chooses the first road, for he is uncertain about the life each road lead to.

The depiction of "two roads" makes people perplexed. The two roads nearly identical and they look almost same before the walker starts his journey. However, the possibilities they contain are totally different. Even though the walker realizes that the two roads have different ending, he never knows which one is right. The poet leaves an open ending for readers to imagine, instead of giving a better choice. Meanwhile, it gives an impression of melancholy uncertainty to the readers. That is what Frost wants to convey.

Melancholy themes in robert frost's poetry

Robert Frost's work is mainly concerned about the meaning of life and death and the sense of loneliness, which is full of melancholy color. This kind of melancholy affected his whole life as well as his writing. Just as Richard Poirier said in his book that "to define him as a tragic philosophical poet of man and nature could be more constricting, because more painfully meaningful to him, than the simpler definitions they were

designed to correct." (Poirier 50) Frost never shows his melancholy in his poems directly. Instead, he uses his simple language style which is combined with beautiful nature to convey this kind of melancholy, that is, to convey the meaning of life and death and the sense of loneliness. On the following pages, there will be a further illustration.

The theme of death

Death is an indispensable part of melancholy and it is also the most influential part. Especially, when death is combined with beautiful nature, it is attractive. *After Apple Picking* is a poem concerned about the theme of death. The poem was published in *North of Boston*, Frost's second poetry collection. This poem describes a pastoral scene of New England life in autumn, characteristic of Frost's early work. The poem depicts a farmer's dilemma after apple-picking and the narrator is recalling his day spent picking apples on a ladder as he falls asleep. Actually, it is a perplexity between real world and ideal world.

Picking apple is a forbidden thing in Bible. It brings human punishment and torture after the apple is picked by Eva. The title that Frost chooses from Bible creates a melancholy atmosphere at the beginning. In the lines "My long two pointed ladder's sticking through a tree/Toward heaven still", the "ladder" is the symbol of endless labor. Frost wants to show it is a toilsome work for farmer. Picking apple is a task. Only when he fulfills it, can he step into heaven. The lines "Apples I didn't pick upon some bough. /But I am done with apple-picking now. /Essence of winter sleep is on the night" show that the farmer is tired before he finished his task. And "winter sleep" and "night" are the symbol of death. "Magnified apples appear and disappear" presents that he wants to finish his task and pick a large apple. "My instep arch not only keeps the ache,/It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round./I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend./.../of load on load of apples coming in" show that the old farmer is afraid. He suffers not only physical toil but also spiritual fear. The last several lines "This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is. /Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,/Or just some human sleep." present that the farmer is confusion and he doesn't know what is real world and what is ideal world.

Life is apple-picking, and harvest is goal. To the farmer, harvest means he can get more apples. But a sense of loss is hanging over him, instead of a sense of fulfillment. The perplexity between real world and ideal world appears frequently in frost poetry. It is a kind confusion what in between--between the end of life and the beginning of death. Just this kind of perplexity or confusion provides the melancholy feeling to readers.

The theme of loneliness

Robert Frost is a solitary poet. He doesn't follow the mainstream but set his own fashion. Besides, he bestows the alienation between nature and man and between man and man. Frost doesn't throw himself into any literary movement and schools; he persists in extracting elite from others but keeping his own style. "More than any other quality in Frost, his individuality stood out. He spurned what he called 'the necessary group'. As in other areas of life, he believed 'there

are too many gangs, cliques, or coteries in poetry. Maybe that's one of the ways they have to manage it. But I'm a lone wolf.'" (Plimpton 47) The melancholy color of his poetry also attributes to the shadow of Frost's own loneliness. For a further illustration, the poem *Acquainted with the Night* will be taken for instance.

I have been one acquainted with the night.
 I have walked out in rain --and back in rain.
 I have out walked the furthest city light.
 I have looked down the saddest city lane.
 I have passed by the watchman on his beat
 And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.
 I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
 When far away an interrupted cry
 Came over houses from another street,
 But not to call me back or say good-bye;
 And further still at an unearthly height,
 One luminary clock against the sky
 Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
 I have been one acquainted with the night. (Ehrenpreis 1120)

The poem is most often read as the poet's admission of having experienced depression and a vivid description of what that experience feels like. In this particular reading of the poem, "the night" is the depression itself, and the narrator describes how he views the world around him in this state of mind. He feels completely isolated from everything around him despite the fact that he is in a city. And as he aimlessly roams the city streets, he speaks of walking back and forth in the rain and of having "out walked the furthest city light" to remain in darkness. He doesn't want to see anything, because everything he sees saddens him: "the city lane" and "the watchman on his beat." Even time itself, as represented by "the luminary clock against the sky" loses its meaning for the narrator who says that time is "neither wrong nor right."

This short poem has 7 lines beginning with "I", which suggests that this poem is full of strong feeling of isolation and loneliness. The first stanza shows that the speaker frequently walked in the night all by himself. Perhaps the night has been his friend, because he is accompanied by nothing but the dark night. The second stanza presents that the speaker knew something others didn't know which happened only at the night. Moreover, the lines cast sadness on his loneliness. The next two stanzas give a suggestion that the speaker is too sad or too distressed to speak with others. At last, he repeats "I have been one acquainted with the night", which implies the loneliness of the speaker and the alienation from the outside world.

Except the short poem, this kind of loneliness is frequently used to other poems. Frost considers universe as a whole which is made of individual. Even though loneliness is inevitable for individual, Frost combines simple words with nature which gives it a new meaning and understanding.

Conclusion

Robert Frost's whole life is full of tragedy, but speaking of his achievement in literature, he is a successful and fruitful poet.

Frost is also a representative of New England poet. Nature is the most important part of his poetry, which make his poetry more beautiful and attractive.

Frost, being determined to ground himself in the living tradition in his own country, wrote about the landscape and people of America's far North-east in many moods. Frost took no part in the literary movements of 20th century. He didn't experiment with forms, as many poets did in the 1920s, but used traditional forms. In his poetry, there is a steady tone of rumor and a virtually inexhaustible verbal grace. He used symbols from everyday country life to express his deep ideas. As a whole, Frost's art is an act of clarification, which, without simplifying the truth, renders it in some degree accessible to everyone.

Frost's life is not smooth, and his family is a tragedy for him. So the melancholy color is a significant part in his poetry. But he is not a totally pessimistic poet. Just as a writer said in his essay, "melancholy does not mean a temporary grief or sorrow, but a kind of psychology of a person when he/she is immersed in the pain or misfortune the human race is suffering". (Zhu 146) The confusion or perplexity of the outside world and the inner of human beings is main cause of Robert Frost's melancholy. And Frost seldom say his feeling directly, he is good at statement and understatement. Only after a further reading, can the readers discover his true meaning beneath the beautiful nature and colloquial words.

The paper is concerned about discovering the different part in Frost's poetry by analyzing the melancholy uncertainty and melancholy themes in his poems. During the process of exploring, modern people's helpless and isolation are presented, meanwhile, his own loneliness also be presented. From the above analysis, a conclusion can be arrived at that melancholy themes play an indispensable role in Frost's poetry, which provides a new perspective for his poetry's study.

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