

Symbolic Significance in "After Apple Picking" by Robert Lee Frost

By Rawaa Jawad Kadhim

English Department ,University of Babylon, College of Basic Education

Rawaa441@gmail.com

Abstract:

Robert Lee Frost (1874-1963) is regarded as pioneer modern poet . He has been a matter of controversy among critics and readers as well. Though he has been influenced by the works of William Wordsworth, John Keats and other romantic poets his treatment of nature and style remain unique, in other words what he has derived from tradition is adapted in his quite different purposes.

Forest's dramatic persona, symbolism, objective realization of human nature, and philosophical thoughts, together take him to the position of great modern poets. Most of his poems are symbolic and reveal layers within layers of meaning. The aim of this research is to give a new reading for his "After Apple Picking" ,through analyzing the symbols in his selected poem.

Key words: Robert Lee Frost, symbols , *After Apple Picking*, romanticism.

الخلاصة:

يعد روبرت لي فروست (1874-1963) شاعرًا حديثًا رائدًا ,حيث كان موضع جدل بين النقاد والقراء .وعلى الرغم من تأثره بالشعراء الرومانسيين امثال وليم وردرز ورت وجون كيتس الا ان طريقة واسلوبه في معاملته للطبيعة بقية فريدة من نوعها ، وبعبارة أخرى فإن ما استمدته من التقاليد كيفها مع أغراضه التي قد تكون مختلفة تمامًا.

تأخذ شخصية فورست الدرامية والرمزية والإدراك الموضوعي للطبيعة البشرية و ما حولها طابع فلسفي وفكري معاً هذا الشيء جعله يتبوء موقع الشعراء المعاصرين العظماء .معظم قصائده رمزية وتكشف عن طبقات داخل طبقات من المعنى. الهدف من هذا البحث هو إعطاء قراءة جديدة لقصيدته "بعد التقاط التفاح" ، من خلال تحليل الرموز في قصيدته المختارة .

1-Introduction :

Poetry in America has raised in the nineteenth century as a simple attempt to become a dynamic and an active form of cultural expression in the twentieth century. American poets remove the limits of poetic composition, demanding new forms, structure and ideas. This demand in

its turn leads to a new fundamental change as the emergence of free verse which suits the directness, concreteness of modern American poetry .

The first generation of American poets to respond to this modern world include , Walt Whitman ,Ezra Pound, [Emily Dickinson](#) ,T. S. Eliot, E. E, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and many others. Among those poets, is Robert Frost (1874 -1963) one of the American poets born in 1874,to a new England family in san Francisco (starker ,2017 : 28).In a very young age , he has written a poem entitled "My Butterfly" that soon appears in the New York Independent ,then followed by a collection of six lyrics which he has published in a booklet under the heading of Twilight¹.

With the publication of *A Boy's Will* in 1913, Frost becomes a considerable poet , Ezra Pound, for instance, says that Frost is an outstanding literary man².He won the Pulitzer Prize four times. He is well known for his simple, realistic and direct poetic style. Louise Bogan describes him saying, "in North of Boston Frost briefly possessed himself of a humane realism and-insight which he was never quite able to repeat"(Jennings,1906,p105). His writings are highly skilled in the art of poetry and the mechanism of its process ,slogans and easy solutions has never attracted him. He appears when modern poetry has not been shaped yet . Therefore, he has witnessed the old and the modern styles. James M. Cox who believes that Frost's

**"Poetic strategy of returning to the wilderness
of abandoned experience—all serve to indicate ...
[his] ambiguous position in relation to what we
call modern literature"(Cox,1962,p2)**

Frost has been influenced by both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, two modern American poets .He has many common things with them such as transcendentalism ideas and the sense of innocence and brotherhood, as well as the belief in the American aspirations for love and honor (Brown,1957,p61). Frost clearly declares that his first model in writing poetry without doubt is Emerson. (Richardson, 2007: 200).

Frost has been truthful and objective in his poems, he gives dramatic voice to intensify the poetic experience as he distances himself from the subjective stands of the entire atmosphere which he creates in his poetry. He intentionally uses simple language and style , as well as using colloquial

¹ Robert Grave, in K. B. Saradhi, *Robert Frost; Selected Poems* (N.P. :Lakshmi, N.D.),7

² Ibid. 6.

words , that is why he has been characterized by simplicity and avoidance of complex and sophisticated expression. Christopher Beach says that, "Frost dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above." (Beach, 2003, p. 15).

Though he adopt simplicity of words and style in his writings, he still manages to be a symbolist and that is manifested in his poems as, "After apple-picking, "Mending Wall" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," etc., which can be considered as a fine examples of Frost's symbolism and allegory .He treats nature as a source of symbols ,this point distinguish him from romantics who celebrates the beauty of nature and bound themselves with subjectivity(Ibid, p19).

Frost's ideas and themes in fact are not original because many poets before him have dealt with nature and human ,but what makes his writings becomes unique is his realistic treatment for themes and ideas in its turn reflects a new understanding for things around us. Instance, Frost's "After Apple Picking," and Keats's "Ode to Autumn" have same ideas that are taken from nature ,but what is different is Frost treatment ,he considers nature as a source of philosophical reflections, a mirror of man's experience, a mine of wisdom, and finally a symbol of both destructive and constructive forces that may accompany the course of the development of man's stand in actual life not like Keats who considers nature as a source of beauty and inspiration. Therefore, Frost's treatment of nature is both particular and universal. Frost's presentation of his themes and ideas turn to be greatly dramatic, which is same like Robert Browning's dramatic monologue technique. Frost's interest in nature and natural objects is to present an ethical lesson , every image he used is related to human in some way. It is likely to say that nature for him has been a medium to convey his convictions and ideas .

Frost has been characterized for being scepticism and despair that is because his dark expressing attitude in some of his poems (Elsanosi,2017:p5). William H. Pritchard argues in 'Witness to Dark Circumstances' that Frost's dark imagery can be a result of many painful incidents in his life including the deaths of his wife and children (Pritchard,1984). His writings in some cases are indirect and strange which create a pessimism mood. He describes evil as something which is unescapable in the world , Jarrell says that his writings in some cases are complex and obscure , his poetic device deflect from and obfuscate the poet's true intent (Jarrell, 1953: 40). In fact, his ambiguity is resulted from his faithful presentation of life, he writes about situations as they are . He uses a unique technique, through asking questions challenging the reader to find answers for them .

Frost's realism is very much connected to symbolism, despite the fact that, symbolism and realism are completely two different trends of writing. But in dealing with Frost there is nothing impossible because his realistic issues are expressed symbolically through a wide range of colorful pictures taken from the visible world, his dominant symbols are the dark wood and the mortal decay. He uses his symbols to emphasize man's sense of weakness. The human response to this condition is treated symbolically in the poems like "West-Running Brook." "The black stream" and "After Apple Picking" " symbolizing the universal course of mortal decay.

2-Critical analysis of "After Apple Picking":

Frost believes that poetry is "a clarification of life"(Mishra,1992,p89). In his poems he represents scenes from life to provide his readers moral lessons ,his mode of expression sometimes is symbolic and indirect as it is in "After Apple Picking".

The American writings especially in the middle of the 19th century adopted symbolism and made it not only a key to their literature but also a bridge that connected their method of writing to modern literature (Fiedleson,1955, p5).

Clarence Hugh Holman believes that, a symbol should be distinguished from "image", "allegory" and "metaphor", according to him "a symbol is an image which evokes an objective concrete reality and has that reality suggest another level of meaning, it evokes an object which suggests the meaning." (Holman ,1969,p478). That means "image" is an actual representation of an object, while the "symbol" stands for an object, and adds a meaning to it, images can be felt and in such a case it makes us live and sense different impressions (Cocklreas and Logan,1971,p10). In fact images can become symbols when they are repeated more than once, the repetition of images gives

symbolic function (Wellek and Austen, 1956,p189).

Forts uses symbols to assert the role of imagination in his poetry to create an inner world that every symbolist is belong to. His writings seem easy and simple, but they are heavy with symbols . His wide use of symbols makes him a very complex and intricate poet ,this fact lead the readers to think whether his apparent simplicity is misleading. His poem "After Apple Picking" is a fine example of what has been said above .The poem in its literal level describes an occasion that occurs yearly (apple harvest) . But in deep symbolic reading, readers can notice other meaning .For instance the harvest that can symbolize a recorder for humans attitude towards life in general. Symbols that are used in the poem are drawn from the most common and familiar object of nature to express a sophisticated idea about human issue and at the same time to depict a natural landscape of the poet's personal experience .

He covers the five senses starting with sight sense ,saying "And every fleck of russet showing clear" and " apples appear and reappear" .Than to the smell sense in "the scent of apples" and " I am drowsing off ". and sound as, "the rumbling sound of load on load of apples coming in " and " And I keep hearing from the cellar – bin” .Finally touching sense , "I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough " , " There were ten thousand fruit to touch" " my instep arch not only keeps the ache ,it keeps the pressure of a ladder – round . These images which are related to natural objects and phenomena do not only excite the reader's imagination only ,but also they help explaining the poet's own philosophy and attitude towards life and death.

The poem starts with an apple harvest, which usually takes place in autumn. Autumn symbolizes the retirement stage of man , also it can symbolize a final stage for something “ [autumn] mourns the death of the year " (Ferber,1999, p.17) ,while harvest symbolizes maturity and mindfulness .In the first two lines the poet portrays a ladder sticking on an apple tree. Trees in most of Frost's poems have a concrete expression and embodiment of a spiritual realm , They possess “what Frost describes as ‘ulteriority’, a precedence that is powerful and propulsive, driving matter and spirit simultaneously toward a higher state of being” (Elsanosi ,2003,p102). The image of climbing a tree by ladder which is headed to heaven may show the intention of climber .The ladder symbolizes the connection between life and heaven (eternal life), it can also symbolizes stages of life: childhood, manhood and old age.

The act of Apple-picking is shown as a natural activity that provides a wisdom :the more you work hard, the more you earn. Frost tries to "enhance the subject with insight and wisdom"(Brown,1975, p61).

The barrel of apples in the poem is not because the speaker is not able anymore to act .Half fill barrel can be his unfulfilled attainments or achievements(lack of completion) .The poet shows his ambition to pick more apples, saying that there are still three apples in the tree. The tree that can be a symbol of life provides opportunities to human which are represented through apples , while the act of harvesting itself represents the daily work in life (Elsanosi , 2017 ,p84). It can also be suggested that the act of apple-picking somehow may represent his writing career (Ferrandino, cited in Serafin & Bendixen, 2003: 407).

The speaker says that it is becoming night and winter is close , he is done of picking apples as he does not feel well , he is losing strength and consciousness. In the poem “night “ and “winter” symbolize the final stage or the last level. The speaker feels sleepy since morning, when he goes to the water trough and picks a piece of ice it falls from his hand . The melted

fallen ice and the unclear view gives a hint that speaker has something wrong ,but he does not know how to express his feelings. He is powerless and dizzy not able to "rub" away the "strangeness" in his eyes this images emphasizes the speaker's weakness in this exhausted state, as if the man is losing his senses step by step. The shifting in tenses makes it confusing to the reader to determine whether the speaker is at home or in harvest , reality and memory are mixed together in a complex way. This also reflect the speaker's state.

The speaker says that he can predict his dream that will be about apples, according to Poe "dreamers enter a deeper or truer reality than the world of consciousness..."(p65).That means a dream is a message from a deep source of wisdom and understanding within the speaker himself ,it reflects a psychological aspects of the poet . It may also represents a wish to return back to a certain time or a need to move on and leave with some unfinished part of one's life. The apples in his dream appear and disappear and the sound of the rolling apples into the bin in the cellar shows the man's connection with his environment.

The speaker continues saying that arch of his foot is aching and he feels the pressure of a ladder rung another symbol for losing strength . The speaker is not only tired , but he is over tried, his body is no more helping him even though he is the one who wants this harvest. He continues saying that there are thousands of apples he can have gently pick and make sure not spoil one of them. Even the apple that touches ground will be suitable for cider, he does not spoil anything. Apples symbolizes his opportunities, the reader understands how the poet has been cautious and hard worker through his life. He does not give up even when there is a lack of luck, he simply turns the lacks and misfortunes to something valuable.

Moreover, the speaker does not express the natural phenomenon (sleep), he asks whether his sleep is similar to that of the woodchuck. Posing questions without giving answers is regarded as a poetic element in so far as it excites suggestiveness on the part of the reader. As if Frost says that there are still other facts and notions man can find no interpretations for it till now:

“One can see what will trouble

This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.

Were he not gone,

The woodchuck could say whether it's like his

Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,

Or just some human sleep”(Frost , 1964 ,p88)

The only certain thing is the speakers need to sleep ,though his work is uncompleted in the orchard . The word ‘sleep’ is mentioned six times according to Donald J. Greiner the sleep ‘suggests rest’ (Greiner, cited in Gerber, 1982: 236). Comparing the apple-picker with the woodchuck’s long sleep seems to indicate a deeper meaning than merely a desire to get rest ,since the kind of sleep is not clear ,the sleep can be interpreted as a metaphor for death. The ending of the poem is artistically created to correspond with the ending of speakers life, from the very beginning starting with the ladder "toward heaven still " ,to the season autumn which emphasizes nature's death along with physical weakness in his body (strangeness in the man’s eyes which he cannot rub and aches in his feet as well as the man’s desire to sleep)all suggests death. While the woodchuck's hibernation suggests a form of death and rebirth.

Conclusion:

Frost contributions to American literature is exceptional and extraordinary. He has dealt with situations from man's everyday life. His poem is symbolic and highly suggestive. Symbols are used to express some sophisticated ideas about human issues in the same time it depicts a natural landscape of the authors own personal experience. He uses what is visible to present what is invisible.

Through the poem that has been already analyzed and discussed, Frost engages himself with human life and nature. He picks up whatever ethics and lessons useful, and helpful to mankind. He does not let nature and natural facts and phenomena dominate his thoughts and feelings like any other romantic poet; rather, he deals with it as source of inspiration to express what he wants .

Reference

- 1-Cox, James M. ed. *Robert Frost:A Collection of Critical Essays*. N. J.: Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962.
- 2- Brown, John Russell. *American Poetry*, ed., Irvin Ehrenpreis. Kent: Whitstable Litho, 1975.
- 3-Beach, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003),
- 4- Frost, Robert. *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* ,reviewed by Lesley Frost Ballantine. Canada: Holt,1964.

- 5- Ferber, Michael ,A Dictionary of Literary Symbols, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- 6- Elsanosi ,Mabroka A.M.A , “Nature is the Symbol of Spirit’: The Spiritual Cartographies of Robert Frost’s Poetry”, Thesis Department of English and Drama University of Loughborough,2017.
- 7- Pritchard, William H. (1984) Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered. New York: Oxford UP.
- 8- Jarrell, Randall. (1953) ‘The Other Frost’, Poetry and the Age. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Available at: <https://moresoul.wordpress.com/2009/10/17/the-other-robert-frost/>. [Accessed 05 Feb 2016].
- 9-Richardson, Mark. (ed.). (2007) *The Collected Prose of Robert Frost*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 10- Field, Peter. (2003) Ralph Waldo Emerson: *The Making of a Democratic Intellectual*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- 11- Serafino, Steven R. and Bendixen, Alfred (2003) *The Continuum Encyclopedia of American Literature*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- 12- Jennings, Elizabeth, Frost, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1966.
- 13- Fieldson, Charless. *Symbolism and American Literature*. Chicago: the U of Chicago Press, 1955.
- 14- Holman, Hugh C. *A Hand Book to Literature*. New York : The Oddyssey Press, 1960.
- 15-Cocklreas, Joanne and Dorothy Logan. Writing Essays About Literature: A literary Rhetoric. New York: Holt, Rihehart and Winston, Inc., 1971.
- 16 Mishra, Rajendra Nath ,*Search for Belief in the Poetry of Robert Frost* ,India :Abhinav publication,1992.
- 17- Wellek René and Austin Warren. *Theory of Literature*. London: Penguin Books, 1956.