

A Study of Understatements in the Selected Poems of Robert Frost

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Poems emerge out of the endless activities of life which is an amalgam of innumerable experiences of every sort, often without a pattern or meaning. And a poet selects and rearranges the events and presents them as coherent and meaningful. I.A. Richards firmly advocates that the business of a poet is "to give order and coherence to a body of experience". Therefore, poetry, as an inseparable part of literature, presents the life in a refined form. And for it a poet makes use of words in such a way as to create deeper effects upon the readers. A poet adopts and follows the particular style or techniques which help him to convey the deeper meanings of the poem.

The technique as defined by Mark-Schorer "is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject-matter, compels him to attend to it"

The *study* of understatements in Robert Frost's selected poems is aimed at the study of the various techniques employed by the writer to communicate the multiple and deeper levels of the meanings of the various issues he has taken up in his poems.

There is no doubt that Robert Frost's poetry touches the hearts of his readers because of his rich and ripe philosophy, his deceptive simplicity, his symbolism, his modernity and several other qualities. A lot of research work has been done on his poetry and his poems have been studied from various angles e.g. symbolism, poetic style, the treatment of Nature, terrifying nature of his poetry, theme of loneliness, barriers and boundaries, theme of quest, pastoral element, regionalism, his rich and ripe philosophy in his poetry and many others. But no exclusive study, in my knowledge has been made upon the use of understatements in his poems. The major thrust of this study is to explain the element of 'understatement' in his selected poem.

This article has been divided into five parts: 'introduction', 'The First Phase', 'The Middle Phase', 'The Final Phase' and 'Conclusion'. 'Introduction' is an account of Frost's life and works showing varied qualities of his poetry. An attempt has been made to define the 'understatement' and its effects in the poetry. In 'Webster Comprehensive Dictionary' the understatement has been defined as "a statement covering less than the truth or fact."

Stageberg and Anderson opine that "understatement" is a statement which falls below the truth or fact, which represents something as less important than it actually is or which represents something with less force than the facts warrant. The result of understatement is often opposite of what one would expect from its definition. Though understatement itself falls short of the truth, its effect is to increase one's awareness of the situation as it actually is. It is not so much what is said but what is left unsaid that makes such understatement so effective."

The recognition of the difference between what is stated or the actual situation gives understatement its effect. The fact cannot be denied that understatement has been very much popular in English and American poetry. F. Bracher in his article "Understatement in Old English Poetry" has remarked that 'one of the most striking features of the style of Old English Poetry is the frequent use of rhetorical understatement.

A.H. Tolmen was apparently the first to point out this stylistic trait. Frost has generally used the simple language of the common American people. At times the different figures of speech are also used. As Knicker Bocker and Reninger remarks: The figure of speech not only says exactly what the poet means, it also invites the reader to help to say it ... The figure requires us to participate in the life of the poem."⁶ Thus, it helps in exploring the hidden meanings in the poem. Frost has transformed his personal experiences into the artistic creations through the use of understatements.

Robert Frost published nine volumes of poetry and two poetic dramas during a large time span of about fifty years of his age. In this article, his poetic career has been divided into three phases: 'The First Phase' (1913-1916), 'The middle Phase' (1923-1936), and 'The Final Phase' (1942-1962).

'The First Phase' deals with the use of understatements in some of his poems written during the early period of his life i.e. 1913-1916. During this period, he published three poetic volumes known as 'A Boy's Will' (1913), 'North of Boston' (1914) and 'Mountain Interval' (1916).

In these poetic volumes, understatements reveal the fact that *New England* landscape gave him the matter and style for his poetry." Therefore, in a number of poems, Frost has presented either a farmer working alone in fields or a traveller making choices between right way or the wrong one, thus growing to be mature. In this connection, Amy Lowell has aptly remarked. "Mr. Frost writes down exactly what he sees, but being a true poet, he sees it vividly and with a charm which translates itself into a beautiful simplicity of expression"

Frost's earlier life was full of tensions. There were frustrations and sorrows *due to* the death of many of his family members, and poverty. These factors brought a note of melencholy, theme of alienation and isolation in his poetry. He also realized the value of labor and the need of duty. All these ideals have found expression in his poems on a deeper level through the use of understatements in a very simple language of the common rural New Englanders. And this simplicity of expression compels the readers to make efforts for finding implied truths and realities of life. For example, in the sonnet "Mowing", of this phase, a farmer, working alone in a field with his scythe, speculates on the meaning of the whispering sound of the scythe because here the poet farmer's long scythe is not only a tool used for cutting the hay rather personified as a whisperer, it helps the poet to give expression to his deeper idealistic views:

*"There was never a sound beside the wood but one,
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.
What was it it whispered ?"*

The poet thinks that this whispering may be about the heat of the sun or it may be a complaint about the lack of any other sound. He continues with his exploration of various possible alternatives but asserts with certainty that the scythe does not speak of idleness or easy wealth because to do so would diminish the value of the work that is being done: cutting of the hay, leaving the small flowers standing. But the climax is provided in the thirteenth line of the poem as the emphasis is laid upon the need of labor which forms the basis for the happiness in life.

'The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.'

This single line is full of so many thoughts and it implies the fact that working has its own reward. This is the crux of the poem which ends with philosophical conclusion. Here day-dreaming is rejected in favor of life's action and reality. This poem is an assimilation of Frost's acute power of observation, perception and expression, because the poet totally remains close to nature feeling also the lack of something familiar to his real life. The thought in the poem is developed through question and answer method though both are concerned with a single mind's guesses and imagination.

Frost bases his observations on the sordid and brutal realities of life. As the title of the poem "Birches" itself suggests the object related to practical life. The eight of the birches' bending to left and right seems to remind the poet of his own playful childhood as he prefers the birches being bent by the boy's swinging rather than by an "ice-storm". But, immediately the truth dawns on him:

*"Swinging does not bend them down to stay
As ice storms do"*

The poet realizes the reality that ice storms may be the main cause for the birches' bringing so low to stay. He even expects and wants to prove that in "a sunny winter morning, after a rain" the birches are mostly found to be loaded with ice and which turn many colors due to the blowing of the breeze and the heat of the sun rays. He so minutely observes the phenomenon that the crystals of the ice appear to him as "heaps of broken glass" and he even imagines it and compares it to the "inner dome of heaven". But even then he wishfully thinks and imagines of a boy's swinging and playing near the birches in order to get relief from the worries and tensions of life because he thinks:

*"Life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs"*

Therefore, like John Keats, Frost also expresses his desire "to get away from the earth" but not for a long time rather temporarily. Because soon he wants to come back to earth realizing the fact that:

*"Earth is the right place for love:
I don't know, where it is likely to go better."*

Like the bending of the birches, the poem also turns from reality to imagination and imagination to reality. Thus, it moves between the fact and fancy. The poem is reminiscent of Keats's 'Ode to Nightingale' where he too wants to escape from the Weariness, fret and fever of life". Frost's withdrawal too is momentary as he keeps the fact in mind that the earth is the only right and the best place where man can do whatever he likes. Birches may reach towards 'heaven' but they are rooted in the earth. Thus Frost appears to suggest that

his goals because he has got much to do in his short lived transitory life. God has endowed man with conscience, a moral sense of judging right and wrong, so according to his understanding he should work and fulfil each and every type of promise so that he does not repent thereafter. Actually, the poet has so much stressed upon the need of duty and rejected the human desire to be tempted by temptations that R.A Brower described Frost as a poet of “ rejected invitations.” This poem presents the conflict between the demands of practical life with its obligations to others and the poignant desire to escape into the land of reverie.

There are four quartets in the poem *and* the tone of poem communicates with the poet's attitude towards the facts *of* the poem. Knickerbrocker and Reninger have observed that "The third line in each *stanza* always rhymes with *the* first line in the following stanza; hence the sound helps to pass the sense from one stanza to the next. *And* third, in the last stanza all four lines, rhyme: hence, the sound *is* brought to rest just as *the* reconciliation of the conflict within the driver is brought to rest, and as he will be brought to rest upon *his* arrival at home."

Further *the* predominance of the monosyllabic words contributes to the music and melody of the poem. The repetition of the concluding lines, as *one* of the main stylistic features of his poetry, shows *his* preoccupation with the material and the quest for the essential.

Even it seems as if the *suggestiveness* in the poem is greatly due to the less concrete, less literal words used in the list lines. It can also be called a *poem* of life as well as of death because life is a journey *and* man's journey ends with the *end* of this life.

The road of life, man's duties, pleasantories, strife, *commitments in life*, performance and thought, work and satisfaction may be the possible layers of meaning that can be felt. Moreover, the poem ends with a gospel of life, duty and work.

Thus this middle phase shows that Frost's ideas and the way of expression have greatly changed and he has dealt not only with worldly things but *surroundings but also* about the whole of the universe, and whole humanity like a philosopher.

Even Randall Jarrell has observed “The younger Frost is surrounded by his characters, living beings he has created; the older Frost is alone. But it is this loneliness that is responsible for the cold finality of poems like “Neither out Far nor in Deep” or “Design”. Moreover, understatements have been used not only in simple language by adding only some of the conjunctions rather there is *a* fine economy of words with similes and metaphors having colloquial idioms and rhythm. All these factors had led to the poet's maturity in the final phase.

"The Final Phase" deals with the understatements in some of his poems written during his old age-1942 to 1962. This Phase reveals the poet's grown up qualities as he talks like a philosopher about man-man, man-nature and man-God relationships in the universe. His last poems written in three poetic volumes- *The Witness Tree* (1942), *The Steeple Bush* (1947) and *In the Clearing* (1962) present the poet as the modern man concerned with the future *of* humanity. During this phase, his views about life get complete expression and his outlook towards life tends to be more moralistic and philosophical in nature. And the cultural perception of the poet is also deepened as in the poem "Take something Like *a* Star" (P. 403), through the images of darkness and star, the poet seems to suggest that man has to pass through hardships to achieve something greater.

O Star (the fairest one in sight)

We grant your loftiness the right

To some obscurity of cloud--

it will not do to say of night,

Since dark is what brings out your light."

The poem is in the form of an imaginary dialogue between the Poet and the star (the fairest one in sight) shining brightly. A passing cloud may obscure its glory for a moment but in the darkness of night it shines more.

Frost thinks and then suggests that man should not allow the mind to loose equilibrium at the time of utter difficulties. He even *seeks* some advice:

"Say something to us we can learn

By heart and when alone repeat.

Say Something ! And it says "I burn."

The words of star – “I burn”-also suggest that it faces many hardships only then it shines brightly in the night. The poet even assumes didactic twist in the following lines:

It asks of us a certain height,

So when at times the mob is swayed

TO carry praise or blame too far,

We may take something like a star

To say our minds on and be staid"

Here the poet suggests that only suffering and sacrifice and waging a relentless battle against crude reality can make one attain lofty heights and shimmering glory of a star. He also suggests that like mob man must not be swayed by praise or blame rather one must remain steadfast like- the star. This poem thus is an expression of the poet's rich and ripe philosophy.

In the long poem "Directive' (PP-377-79) which seems to be a revelation of the poet's inner explorations in the realm of the life and the religion, Frost observes the cultural transformation in the New England life that took place from the agricultural set up to the industrial one. These drastic changes deteriorated man-man, man-nature relationship. This lyric provides an ample evidence of an old New England that faded into nature and was lost. Randall Jarrell observes in this poem a "theme of isolation, extinction, and of the final limitations of man"

- In this poem, the poet as a guide gives, directions to a traveller to travel along a road that leads to a deserted farm house which, in the past, was a flourishing homestead peopled by a farmer's gay family. But now it is totally ruined 'burned, dissolved, and broken off:

*There is a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in town that is no more a town"*

Here by the repetition of 'no more' the poet understates that the glory of the New England's past is totally faded out of existence. The traveller moves on the road which bore the 'wear of iron wagon wheels'. It shows the dependence of the life on industrial output. The metaphor of Arctic glacier deepens the sense of loss' sadness, desolation in the bleak and barren landscape:

*The ledges show lines ruled southeast-northwest,
The chisel work of an enormous Glacier
That braced his feet against the Arctic pole.
You must not mind certain coolness from him
Still sad to haunt this side of Panther Mountain.*

*The only field
Now left's no bigger than a harness gall.
First there's the children house of make believe,
Some shattered dishes under neath a pine
The play things in the play house of the children."*

Here the littleness of human aspirations and ambitions is suggested. But the traveller reaches his destination and he is asked to drink water of the brook, symbolizing continuity in the universe which will save him from confusion and chaos:

*Here are your waters and your watering place.
Drink and be whole again beyond confusion."*

The poet even seeks salvation that mere longing for the past does not yield anything. It is only, when past and present, heritage and modernity, imagination and reality join hands that there is any chance for the redemption of the individual.

It seems to say that the water of life must *be drunk from* the cup of imagination and this cup of imagination must contain the old actuality if one *has* to have something more than a broken cup. Therefore, man *should* be more realistic. The poem presents the modern man's depressed psychology and the longings for spiritual, physical balance, and well-being.

The poem conveys that a search for the dead past is futile and useless. One must be practical and try to live in the world of the present. One can be clear headed and sane only by drinking the clear water of reality. Only then one can hope to acquire the rounded wholeness, that spiritual power which is the ultimate aim of all thinking beings.

Acknowledging the presence of wholeness in Frost's poetry M. B. Trikha has aptly remarked that Frost's poetry "with its enduring strength" has become a 'clarification of life.'

Thus, it becomes clear that *Frost's* poetic canvas has grown from the particular to the general and from the general to the universal. His inner doubts about the reality of the worldly things seem to be resolved and clarified in the final phase. His poetry shows his endless struggle for accuracy and perfectness of rhyme and repetition.

Throughout his development, he draws his images constantly from the same sources: flowers, *woods*, birds, stars, fire, sea etc. But *his* early images are transformed into the later images of intensity and concentration and tend to possess more meaning and effectiveness than the early ones. Moreover, his use of understatements in a simple language of the common rustic folk makes his poetry more complex with multiple

meanings and makes the simplicity of his poetry deceptive. His poetry demonstrates the ample use of poetic devices such as epigram, simile, metaphor, symbols, irony, wit, personification and indirection.

Repetition of words and sentences is an important useful device used by the poet to hammer his point. He would not tell the whole thing and leaves the most of the things for the readers' imagination.

No doubt, he has written about natural objects and natural scenes in one poem after another marked by accurate and minute observation but M. B. Trikha remarks that "Nature remained a mysterious phenomenon, which is very attractive and enchanting but is basically alien " other" and "unfeeling."

In this connection Lionel Trilling has called Frost "a terrifying poet' end he adds: "I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet—the universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe." Frost has written not only about

man who is always obsessed with the idea of alienation and loneliness but in psychological terms, Frost's concern with loneliness is an expression of his intensely felt need for human love, sympathy and fellowship which can be achieved through faith, courage and fortitude. R.J. Squires asserts: "Frost is a poet not because he is affected by nature or because he has lived on farm, but because he speaks to men about men".

To conclude it may be affirmed that Robert Frost's poetry is in a sense encyclopedia of human thought and emotions and human characters. And through understatements in most of his poems, he has commented so much upon the various facets of life that his poetry achieves an air of sweetness, sanity and even universality. All these qualities of his poetry make one really feel and realize that Robert Frost is really one of the few poets in English literature who has earned a place of distinction both at home and abroad and who has a message of hope for the whole humanity.

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