The Biography of Robert Frost

Robert Lee Frost (March 26, 1874 – January 29, 1963) was an American poet. His work frequently employed themes from the early 1900s rural life in New England, using the setting to examine complex social and philosophical themes. While Frost's poems continue to be popularly interpreted optimistically within the frame of an idyllic pastoral life, most modern literary criticism is preoccupied with their frequently pessimistic, menacing, and disingenuous undertones. A popular and often-quoted poet, Frost was honored frequ

Although he is commonly associated with New England, Robert Frost was a native of California, born in San Francisco, and lived there until he was 11 years old. His mother, Isabelle Moodie Frost, was of Scottish descent; his father, William Prescott Frost, Jr., was a descendant of colonist Nicholas Frost from Tiverton, Devon, England who had sailed to New Hampshire in 1634 on the Wolfrana.

Early Life

Frost's father was a good teacher, and later an editor of the San Francisco Evening Bulletin (which was eventually merged into the San Francisco Examiner), and an unsuccessful candidate for the city tax collector. The road not taken for young Robert might have been as a Californian editor rather than a New England poet, but William Frost Jr. died May 5, 1885, debts were settled, and the family moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts where William Frost, Sr. was an overseer at a New England mill. Frost's mother joined the Swedenborgian church and had him baptized in it, but he left it as an adult. Despite his later association with rural life, Frost lived
in the city, and published his first poem in the Lawrence high school magazine. He attended Dartmouth College, long enough to be accepted into the Theta Delta Chi fraternity. Frost returned home to teach and to work at various jobs including delivering newspapers and factory labor. He did not enjoy these jobs at all, feeling his true calling was to be a binman. After 3 years his dream was met and he got a job as a binman, but after a year of hard work in the bindustry he had to give this up going back to poetry.

Adult Years

In 1894 he sold his first poem, "My Butterfly: An Elegy" (published in the November 8, 1894 edition of the New York Independent) for fifteen dollars. Proud of this accomplishment, he proposed marriage to Elinor Miriam White, but she refused, wanting to finish college (at St. Lawrence University) before they married. Frost then went on an excursion to the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia, and asked Elinor again upon his return. Having graduated, she agreed, and they were married in Harvard University, which he attended for two years. He did well, but left to support his growing family. Grandfather Frost purchased a farm for the young couple in Derry, New Hampshire, shortly before his death. Frost worked on the farm for nine years and wrote many of the poems early in the mornings that would later become famous. His attempts at farming were not successful and Frost returned to education as an English teacher at Pinkerton Academy from 1906 to 1911, then at the New Hampshire Normal School (now Plymouth State University) in Plymouth, New Hampshire.

In 1912, Frost sailed with his family to Great Britain, living first in Glasgow, before settling in Beaconsfield, outside London. His first book of poetry, A Boy's
Will, was published the next year. In England he made some important acquaintances, including Edward Thomas (a member of the group known as the Dymock Poets), T.E. Hulme, and Ezra Pound. Pound would become the first American to write a (favorable) review of Frost's work. Surrounded by his peers, Frost wrote some of his best work while in England.

As World War I began, Frost returned to America in 1915. He bought a farm in Franconia, New Hampshire, where he launched a career of writing, teaching, and lecturing. The family homestead at Franconia, which served as his summer home until 1938, is maintained as a museum and poetry conference site. From 1916 to 1938, Frost was an English professor at Amherst College, encouraging his students to account for the sounds of the human voice in their craft. Starting in 1921, and for the next 42 years (with three exceptions), Frost spent his summers and into late fall teaching at the Bread Loaf School of English of Middlebury College in Ripton, Vermont. The college now owns and maintains Robert Frost's farm as a national historic site near the Bread Loaf campus.

Frost was 86 when he spoke at the inauguration of President Kennedy on January 20, 1961. He died a little more than two years later, in Boston, on January 29, 1963. He was buried at the Old Bennington Cemetery in Bennington, Vermont.

Harvard's 1965 alumni directory indicates his having received an honorary degree there; Frost also received honorary degrees from Bates College and Oxford and Cambridge universities, and he was the first to receive two honorary degrees from Dartmouth College. During his lifetime, the Robert Frost Middle School in Fairfax, Virginia, as well as the main library of Amherst College, were named after him.
Robert Frost’s Selected Poems

Meeting and Passing

As I went down the hill along the wall
There was a gate I had leaned at for the view
And had just turned from when I first saw you
As you came up the hill. We met. But all
We did that day was mingle great and small
Footprints in summer dust as if we drew
The figure of our being less than two
But more than one as yet. Your parasol
Pointed the decimal off with one deep thrust.
And all the time we talked you seemed to see
Something down there to smile at in the dust.
(Oh, it was without prejudice to me!)
Afterward I went past what you had passed
Before we met and you what I had passed.
Nothing Gold Can Stay

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower.
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay
After Apple Picking

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
  Toward heaven still,
  And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
  Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
  But I am done with apple-picking now.
  Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
  The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
  I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
  And held against the world of hoary grass.
  It melted, and I let it fall and break.
    But I was well
    Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
    And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
    Magnified apples appear and disappear,
      Stem end and blossom end,
    And every fleck of russet showing clear.
    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.

    And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
      The rumbling sound
    Of load on load of apples coming in.
      For I have had too much
      Of apple-picking: I am overtired
    Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.

For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.
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.
Home Burial

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him. She was starting down,
Looking back over her shoulder at some fear.
She took a doubtful step and then undid it
To raise herself and look again. He spoke
Advancing toward her: 'What is it you see
From up there always-for I want to know.'
She turned and sank upon her skirts at that,
And her face changed from terrified to dull.
He said to gain time: 'What is it you see,'
Mounting until she cowered under him.

'I will find out now-you must tell me, dear.'
She, in her place, refused him any help
With the least stiffening of her neck and silence.
She let him look, sure that he wouldn't see,
Blind creature; and awhile he didn't see.
But at last he murmured, 'Oh,' and again, 'Oh.'

'What is it - what?' she said.
'Just that I see.'

'You don't,' she challenged. 'Tell me what it is.'

'The wonder is I didn't
see at once.
I never noticed it from here before.
I must be wonted to it - that's the reason.
The little graveyard where my people are!
So small the window frames the whole of it.
Not so much larger than a bedroom, is it?
There are three stones of slate and one of marble,
Broad-shouldered little slabs there in the sunlight
On the sidehill. We haven't to mind those.
But I understand: it is not the stones,
But the child's mound'

'Don't, don't, don't, don't,' she cried.

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm
That rested on the bannister, and slid downstairs;
And turned on him with such a daunting look,
He said twice over before he knew himself:
'Can't a man speak of his own child he's lost?'

'Not you! Oh, where's my hat? Oh, I don't need it!
I must get out of here. I must get air.
I don't know rightly whether any man can.'

'Amy! Don't go to someone else this time.
Listen to me. I won't come down the stairs.'
He sat and fixed his chin between his fists.
'There's something I should like to ask you, dear.'

'You don't know how to ask it.'

'Help me, then.'

Her fingers moved the latch for all reply.

'My words are nearly always an offense.
I don't know how to speak of anything
So as to please you. But I might be taught
I should suppose. I can't say I see how.
A man must partly give up being a man
With women-folk. We could have some arrangement
By which I'd bind myself to keep hands off
Anything special you're a-mind to name.
Though I don't like such things 'twixt those that love.
Two that don't love can't live together without them.
But two that do can't live together with them.'
She moved the latch a little. 'Don't-don't go.
Don't carry it to someone else this time.
Tell me about it if it's something human.
Let me into your grief. I'm not so much
Unlike other folks as your standing there
Apart would make me out. Give me my chance.
I do think, though, you overdo it a little.
What was it brought you up to think it the thing
To take your mother-loss of a first child
So inconsolably-in the face of love.
You'd think his memory might be satisfied'

'There you go sneering now!'

'I'm not, I'm not!
You make me angry. I'll come down to you.
God, what a woman! And it's come to this,
A man can't speak of his own child that's dead.'

'You can't because you don't know how to speak.
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, like that, like that, and land so lightly
And roll back down the mound beside the hole.
I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.
And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs
To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.
Then you came in. I heard your rumbling voice
Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,
But I went near to see with my own eyes.
You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns.
You had stood the spade up against the wall
Outside there in the entry, for I saw it.'

'I shall laugh the worst laugh I ever laughed.
I'm cursed. God, if I don't believe I'm cursed.'