

Where Events Determine Everything: A Study of Frost's Selected Poems Through Bakhtin's Concepts of 'Unfinalizability' and 'Dialogue'

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ABSTRACT

Whether the actions or thought processes of the characters of any text can be fully and justifiably understood or interpreted either by its creator or reader is a question that constantly keeps us baffled. It is a general tendency among both writers and readers to evaluate the characters of a text as per prevalent ideas of their times, which tend to plummet both the beauty and mystical element of a text. It is where Bakhtin comes to our help. The article examines Frost's selected poems in light of Michael Bakhtin's ideas of "Unfinalizability" and "Dialogue." The article delves deep into both principles of Bakhtin, who categorically declared that no pre-existing ideas can define any event or character. Frost's poems are generally inconclusive since they defy all standard principles of psychology. The research article aspires to locate the proximity between Frost's poems and Bakhtin's principles of "Unfinalizability" and "Dialogue". In a nutshell, the article deals with the idea that it is preponderant to interpret literature from preconceived notions, as events are independent of everything and have their origins and ends without having a necessary connection with any past event.

Keywords: *Unfinalizability, Dialogue, Pre-existing, inconclusive, Preconceived.*

Introduction

Literature is undoubtedly an attempt to understand human behavior, which has invariably remained a riddle. Though human behavior has been subject to many studies, no finality has been achieved so far. In fact, the whole of the literature is about the eccentric and erratic behavior of humans in a particular situation without any clue in advance. Even the wisest of humans have indulged in the most wayward and whimsical behavior, which has left everyone

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startled. It is still a matter of pondering why King Lear asked such an abrupt question while dividing his kingdom among his daughters. Why did Mariner in *The Rime of Ancient Mariner* suddenly resort to the brutal behaviour of killing an albatross without any provocation? Why was Porphyria in Browning's poem murdered by her lover? Even a casual glance at human history and literature reveals that humans are riveting creatures that often defy all standard definitions of behavior and add a new chapter to the riddles of humanity. Hence, the research article aspires to examine whether human behavior in all texts is predictable or can be comprehended by any pre-existing notions or if it is random, situational, and contextual. Since the behaviour and actions of one human impact another, it is a matter that needs to be probed. It was William Shakespeare who observed the paradoxical nature of humans in his play *Hamlet*:

What a piece of work is a man, How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, In form and moving how express and admirable, In action how like an Angel, In apprehension how like a god, The beauty of the world, The paragon of animals. And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor Woman neither; though by your smiling you seem to say so (692).

Hence, poets like Robert Frost have also been instrumental in presenting such behavior of humans, and it goes to the credit of Frost that through his poems, he presents humans and their actions in the most honest manner, which leaves us startled. Several of his poems are yet a puzzle to be solved which cannot be comprehended by a simple mind. He does not believe in any fixed ideas. Here, one finds a proximity between the ideas of Bakhtin and the poems of Frost, which illustrates the principles of Unfinalizability and dialogue. Robert Frost was a considerable poet who was blessed with insights into the divine and ordinary affairs of humans, and that is precisely why he refuses to say anything final about anything. "The focus is on the psychological analysis of the individual and what might be considered to be 'real' (that is, it has causal power) as a complement to the sociological analysis of the individual which dominates the discourse on individual agency and its relation to social structure" (Booker 240). Chirkov applauds Frost for demolishing the established notions and questions "what is the nature of these realities and what are the mechanisms of their functioning and relations to humans' mentalities? These realities are not natural; rather, they are socially constructed emergent kinds that are created by cultural communities to regulate the social lives of their members" (457). Harold Bloom feels that his poetry is a sincere attempt to find something lasting in this ephemeral world. He wants us to see things in the clear light of the day and desist from playing any game with ourselves. He wants us to stay away from all kinds of deceptions

that take us away from real life: "This reality is the foundation of friendship, religion, poetry and art" (7). Robert Faggen rightly summed up Frost's poetry "as a way of psychological survival in a chaotic universe. His poetry represents a continual dialogue between control and chaos, and he saw poetry as creating 'momentary stay against confusion' something facing the nothing" (4).

Bakhtin's Concepts of "Unfinalizability" and "Dialogue"

The twentieth century was indeed an age of interrogation in which new knowledge demanded a thorough investigation of earlier ideas. The idea of God and all other grand narratives were under scanner. It inspired new theorists to challenge the older ideas, which seemed to become irrelevant all of a sudden. A deconstruction approach became the order of the day. Mikhail Bakhtin, who was a Russian theorist, came up with some ideas that are strikingly relevant and help us view and appreciate literature. Out of all his concepts, two chief principles which occupy a central place in his philosophy are "Unfinalizability" and "dialogue." The concept of "unfinalizability" is fundamental to Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's approach to character, although he also frequently discussed it in other contexts. He summarizes the general principle behind unfinalizability in Dostoevsky thus: "Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world, the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, and everything is still in the future and will always be in the future." (Morson and Emerson 37). It means whatever theories we have so far built regarding human psychology are no guarantee of the future behavior of humans as they are always in a state of fluidity. They do not know themselves properly.

On the individual level, this means that a person can never be entirely externally defined: the ability to never be fully enclosed by others' objectification is essential to subjective consciousness. Bakhtin is critical of what he calls the monologic tradition in Western thought that seeks to finalize humanity and individual humans in this way. "Dostoevsky always represents a person on the threshold of a final decision, at a moment of crisis, at an unfinalizable, and unpredictable, turning point for their soul (Bakhtin 61-62).

The twentieth-century Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin also extensively wrote about the concept of dialogue. Although Bakhtin's work took many different directions over the course of his life, dialogue always remained the "master key" to understanding his worldview. "We cannot understand the world of events from within the

theoretical world. One must start with the act itself, not with its theoretical transcription.” (Bakhtin 50) According to Bakhtin, dialogue lives on the boundaries between individuals: A person has no sovereign internal territory; he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another. In his early writings, Bakhtin used the concepts of outsideness and surplus to elucidate the necessary conditions for dialogical interaction.

Robert Frost as a Poet

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was a leading American poet of the twentieth century who, in his lifetime, witnessed tremendous changes in America. He was a spectator to wider economic and geographic changes triggered by two world wars. His personal life was also a saga of bitterness and anguish. Still, out of all the mayhem, he was determined to find essential humanity and the meaning of life that could invest humanity with some kind of spiritual healing. He was disturbed to see a ravaged humanity. "Robert Frost was the most popular American poet. By the end of World War II, Frost was receiving admiring attention from modernists and intellectual critics. It was observed that, along with the rise in of traditional forms, he had after all given expression to contemporary sensibility” (Unger 5- 6).

He had once said that he had a lover's quarrel with the world, but he never rejected life. The most significant aspect of Frost's poetry was that despite knowing that things were not well, we never felt pessimistic and understood his responsibility. He knew that it is the duty of an artist not to please, but to reach reality, unmindful of its cost. "Two types of realists, one who offers a good deal of dirt with his potato to show that it is a real one; and one, who is satisfied with the potato brush clean. He is inclined to be the second kind. To him, art does for life is to clean it, to strip it to form" (Hart 264). Frost knew that the growing wave of rationality, materialism, and science were actually to be blamed for the entire ongoing mess and conflicts that had made humans too scary, bereft of a sense of certitude that defines the very essence of humanity. It was loathsome. The increasing sense of alienation among humans needed to be effectively cured. "Reason has been responsible for the universal crisis of modern man and modern life. The crisis is symptom of overall alienation of man from himself, from fellow men, from the world and from God" (Patka 68).

Despite understanding all the evident complexity of the world where science and poetry were in direct confrontation with each other, he echoed the almost same sentiments that Matthew Arnold once did in his essay 'The Study of Poetry' (1880):

The most substantial part of a religion today is its unconscious poetry. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses and called to higher destinies than those which, in general, men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more, humanity will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, and to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete, and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it. (Arnold).

Despite all technological and material changes in human society, it is abundantly clear that essential human nature never changes. It remains almost the same. There is no fundamental change in human nature. "This man has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint things as he sees it; he is without shame and without affectation." (Wagner 122) "His reputation remained unchallenged in his times. His achievement in his writings which he enjoyed repeated and thought about people of all ages and callings" (Untermeyer 361-362).

What made Frost such a relevant poet to our times was his intensity to feel human emotions which he could easily translate into universal experiences. "Many of his poems center on the idea that humans are fundamentally and sometimes irreparably flawed. When they are not personally flawed, they suffer from the flaws of others or the unpredictability of an indifferent universe. Still, they often persist in life, even when surrender might appear the logical choice" (Sartre 29). It was during his lifetime that he was treated as "public literary figures, almost an artistic institution" (Jean C. Stine, Bridget Broderick, and Daniel G. Marowski 110). "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew...[Poetry] must be a revelation, or a series of revelations, for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity"(Oates 176). "Frost's best work explores fundamental questions of existence, depicting with chilling starkness the loneliness of the individual in an indifferent universe. (Stine, Broderick and Marowski 110).

He was one of those who was fascinated and annoyed by life at the same time. Despite his best endeavors, he could not say anything with surety, but this uncertainty did not deter him from treading into the unknown. He made it his strength. The very ambivalence that pervades the

universe invests it with rare beauty. Being a poet, he considers himself no less than the best interpreter of life, and he considers it his duty to convey what he feels. His poetry is the embodiment of this universe. If the universe is ambivalent, why should his poetry contain any specific conclusions?

Frost believes that when it comes to humans and their behavior, all our existing knowledge about humans is of little help because what decides their behavior is the particular event in which they are involved. None of us knows what life is going to present before us after a while. We are all swimming in this vast ocean of uncertainty without having the least idea of our tomorrow. Once this is understood, it opens vast horizons before us, and we start understanding that this world is an ever-evolving place when things are in constant process of evolving. Humans themselves are creatures of evolution who evolve with time. Such an understanding will enhance our appreciation of literature as it will help us to break the conventional toes of understanding any event or text with a fixed notion. Any reader with fixed notions or writer of fixed notions will not be able to contribute much to the cause of literature. Hence, a reader must not take anything for granted. He must always remain ready for the vast world of possibilities that keep on startling us.

Selected Poems

Robert Frost is usually hailed as a complex poet since his poems contain a vast ocean of diverse meanings, which leave his readers clueless about his philosophy. Frost, like Shakespeare, had no philosophy of life. Since there is no use in attaching any permanent ideas to random things, his poems evolve spontaneously. He presents what his various characters think and act as if they are trapped in different circumstances. The world in which they live may be one, but they have their worlds, which are consistently colliding with each other, creating a conundrum for poets. Frost lived this conundrum and expressed it honestly. His poems say little and vast unsaid and are left for readers to speculate. Home Burial is one such poem that offers two contradictory attitudes, but these attitudes raise some very pertinent and quintessential questions before mankind. As the poem opens, we see the couple has just lost their child, which is a huge tragedy. However, the tragedy causes a split between couples who are behaving differently in the same situation. The wife fails to understand how anyone can be so callous as to forget the death of her young son too early and reconcile with life. It shocks her wife. She

reprimands her husband for being too worldly wise and showing scant respect for the memory of his young son. For her, this death is unforgettable:

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 (27).

Even though they are human beings, biologically and psychologically, there are differences between men and women. Moreover, when it comes to the topic of home, they are typical husband and wife. Two different human beings have got together under one home, which creates ceaseless rivalry. This is a psychological one, and sometimes it may be physical. When the husband psychologically outmaneuvered the wife, she does not bear it, and when the wife psychologically outmaneuvered the husband, he does not tolerate it. Robert Frost has realized this reality, and readers are given a psychological analysis through the poem of Home Burial:

She withdrew shrinking from beneath his arm

That rested on the banister, 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.' '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. (28).

The wife asserts herself categorically that she is adamant with regard to her loss and will keep on wailing till her last breath. She takes it as some duty towards her son. "For atheistic existentialists, the burden of freedom becomes heavier because there is no God to give meaning to the universe; each man must accept individual responsibility for his becoming, a burden made heavier by the fact "that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men." (Sartre 29)

His Death of the Hired Man perhaps is one of the best poems of the century bringing out the economic and moral crisis which humanity is facing. The poem, like other poems by Frost, presents an ambiguous view of this universe where a dialogue takes place between a couple, but that goes beyond them and raises a question for the whole of humanity. The poem is a

critique of modern capitalist economies where humans have become liabilities with a dearth of earning skills:

Mary sat musing on the lamp flame at the table, Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage To meet him in the doorway with the news And
put him on his guard. 'Silas is back.'

She pushed him outward with her through the door And shut it after her. 'Be kind,' she said.

She took the market things from Warren's arms And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

'When was I ever anything but kind to him? However, I'll not have the fellow back,' he said. 'I
told him so last haying, didn't I?'

If he left then, I said, that ended it.

What good is he? Who else will harbor him At his age for the little he can do?

What help he is there's no depending on. Off he goes always when I need him most. He thinks
he ought to earn a little pay, Enough at least to buy tobacco with,

So he won't have to beg and be beholden.

All right," I say, "I can't afford to pay (158-159).

However, when it comes to conflicting attitudes, no poem of Frost comes near the Mending wall in its spirit. It is a marvelous piece of writing, providing a compromising situation between two extremes. The dialogue here seems to be familiar, but the situation is amazingly realistic:

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.

He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.' Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder

If I could put a notion in his head:

'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out, And to whom I was like to give offense.

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. I see him there Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. He moves in darkness as it seems to me,

Not of woods only and the shade of trees. He will not go behind his father's saying, And he
likes having thought of it so well

He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors. (97)

In all these poems, one can see how Frost allows characters and situations to develop spontaneously and nowhere hinders their natural outcome. Nowhere in poems are the readers in a position to clearly judge the situations on the basis of their earlier experiences. Situations become cornerstones in poems, which further define characters. The element of Unfinalizability is ubiquitous. The characters are in a perennial state of evolution, which invests them with a sense of Unfinalizability.

Conclusion

Thus, the research study reveals that Robert Frost is truly a poet with a mammoth poetic imagination who could not only examine the existing ideas about human existence and behaviour but also was capable of imagining higher truths of human existence. Frost was convinced that human life is an inexhaustible treasure of moments that keep on yielding itself always afresh. Unlike most writers, he could not underestimate the power and potential of a moment or event, which is the actual trigger of human reactions or emotions. If earlier experiences could have fully understood life, it would have ceased to be a riddle and so fascinating. It is an ever-evolving mystery. The real keys are contextual. That is why the concept of destiny is given so much importance. There is nothing absolute in this world. Thus, it is not surprising that Bakhtin's ideas had a startling affinity with his ideas of Frost.

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