

Between “Seeming” and “Being”: Robert Frost’s writing of Man’s Existential Dilemma in “After Apple-Picking”

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Abstract: *As one of America’s sage poets, the New England farmer-poet Robert Frost is renowned for his profundity and subtlety in poetry writing. Being “deceptively simple”, his poems are philosophical as well as substantial. This paper, revolving around “seeming” and “being” of the explicit and implicit demonstrations in Frost’s poem “After Apple-Picking”, tends to exert a close reading of its ambiguity, irony and tension in light of several binaries evidenced in the poem in formalistic approach. In doing so, readers can have a better understanding of Robert Frost’s writing of man’s existential dilemma as depicted in “After Apple-Picking” and further their understanding of the true meaning of life when faced up with various choices in life.*

Keywords: *After Apple-Picking; Ambiguity; Irony; Tension; Existential Dilemma*

1. INTRODUCTION

Having received four times of Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, Robert Frost is regarded as a legendary figure and has become an icon not only in his own lifetime but also in the whole American literary history, and he is “an almost granite-like figure worthy of a place on Rushmore or a similar pantheon of poets” [1]. His poetry, most of which is against the backdrop of the landscape of tranquil New England, though “deceptively simple”, embraces a profound regional hue and is deep in both literal and connotative meanings. He is a man who uses his own language to depict what real life is like and tells people what they should do when they are confronted with big moments in life.

Robert Frost implicitly guides people to rise up against life through his simple but subtle poetic language and tells people the true significance of life no matter what occurs. That is why John F. Kennedy sings his praises in this way when he gives a speech about the function of arts in American people’s life: “The death of Robert Frost leaves a vacancy in the American spirit.....His death impoverishes us all; but he has bequeathed his Nation a body of imperishable verse from which Americans will forever gain joy and understanding”[2]. With regard to this, we will never overestimate the role which Frost has played in the whole American culture.

As a great master in poetry, there is no denying the fact that he should be acclaimed as the representative literary embodiment in the twentieth century, due to his claim of American spirit—freedom, independence, individualism, human values so on and so forth. However, his life is a mixture of both triumphs and hardships. The death of his four children, two of which suffer seriously from mental problems and one of which commits suicide, the death of his beloved wife who he encounters at high school, and a defeated love affair with a married wife all together put great torture on his life. Therefore, one should not be shocked when he witnesses the dark side and witty humour in his poems, which are all true reflections of Frost’s attitudes toward life when he goes through the merciless issues of human existence. His thinking of man’s existential dilemma is well portrayed in his lyric poems where he delineates the common feelings people will harbour when confronted with unexpected negative side of life, such as pressure, insecurity, fatigue, hesitation, death and among others. According to formalistic approach, literature should “concentrate on the work itself, on the text, examining it as art” [3] and “it is concerned to trace how the parts of the text relate, how it achieves its ‘order’ and ‘harmony’, how it contains and resolves ‘irony’, ‘paradox’, ‘tension’, ‘ambivalence’ and ‘ambiguity’; and it is concerned essentially with articulating the very ‘poemness’—the formal quintessence—of the poem itself” [4].

This paper, based on Frost’s philosophical point of view in life, will apply formalist criticism in terms of the ambiguity, irony and tension as interpreted in the poetic language in his poem “After Apple-Picking”, which is collected in Frost’s second poetry anthology *North of Boston*, in order to advance people’s clear recognition of the true meaning of existence when challenges in life are underway.

2. BEHIND APPLE-PICKING

This poem unrolls against the background of an early winter when the speaker is reaping apples with his “two-pointed ladder” sticking through the sky in a harvest season. Apples serve as the crystallization of his hard labor after a certain amount of time and waiting. Therefore, they definitely carry with themselves some fundamental significance for the speaker. However, as the poem develops gradually, it can be recognized that the essence of apple has transformed since the speaker drops his labor and is lost in “sleep” not only because of his fatigue but also because of something thought-provoking, though leaving a barrel unfilled. Just as what Empson poses in his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity*: “An ambiguity, in ordinary speech, means something very pronounced, and as a rule witty or deceitful” [5], apple in this poem, absolutely bears some ambiguous implications as the poem develops, that is to say, the meaning of apple no longer merely has something to do with a symbol of reaping in this poem. Otherwise, its meaning has become unclear, uncertain, and can be understood more than one way.

When Adam and Even eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil by disobeying God’s order, they are expelled from the Garden of Eden and taste their own punishment because of their succumbing to the temptation of the appealing apple. It is to some extent similar to the implication of apple in this poem. When the speaker has eventually welcomed the time of his harvest, he spares no effort to pick those apples regardless of his weariness and physical pain—“My instep arch not only keeps the ache, / It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round” [6]. Therefore, apple here functions as the driving force to carry on his effort and hard labor. In his temporary break, he still thinks about “Magnified apples appear and disappear, / stem end and blossom end, / And every fleck of russet showing dear” [6]. Apple-picking provides him with continuous enjoyment until he considers that he is “done with apple-picking now” [6] although “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” [6].

On the one hand, apples taken out of the tree symbolize the epitome of harvest and value; on the other hand, “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” [6].

The speaker in this poem really presents a vivid picture of what the orchard is like. There is also a clear suggestion that no matter an apple is bad or not, when it falls, it becomes useless. Its value no longer lies in being an apple itself, but the value of apple lies in where the apple is. That is to say, if the apple is hang up on the tree, it’s perfect, once it goes down, it becomes useless. This set of value system seems ludicrous as it judges the true value of an object not based on its qualities but on some irrelevant factors, and it in some way implicitly has something to do with the essential meaning of American Dream. Apple here basically does not mean its original worth, but serves as a symbol of the American Dream. As is known to all, the root of American Dream originates in the promise of a better life and social mobility with the proclaim of the right of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” in “Declaration of Independence” [7]. However, people find that the expectation are extremely inflated owing to the tremendous social changes and economic uncertainties and the pursuit of American Dream turns out to be futile and counterfactual in the early twentieth century of America. People feel disappointed as well as impotent to change their conditions and it seems that the reason why American Dream is called that way is that people have to fall into sleep to gain that dream, besides, it seems that the value of a person does not lie in his qualities, but lie where he is and how high he can climb the social ladder. The famous journalist Chris Hedges who wins Pulitzer Prize poses in his book *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*: “The vaunted American dream, the idea that life will get better, that progress is inevitable if we obey the rules and work hard, that material prosperity is assured, has been replaced by a hard and bitter truth. The American dream, we now know, is a lie. We will all be sacrificed. The virus of corporate abuse—the perverted belief that only corporate profit matters has spread to outsource our jobs, cut the budgets of our —schools, close our libraries, and plague our communities with foreclosures and unemployment” [8].

As a matter of fact, the pursuit of American Dream robs people of their real value and that’s why the speaker in this poem decides to give up his pursuit because he suddenly understands the truth of fighting for success. Therefore, there comes an incongruity between the actual meaning of the apple and its expected meaning, and Guerin accordingly holds that “the essential structure, or form, of the poem is the irony that the speaker got precisely what he or she wanted—but hardly in the way anticipated” [3]. As a consequence, tension in this poem results. As C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon summarize about tension—“A term introduced by Allen Tate, meaning the integral unity that results from the successful resolution of the conflicts of abstraction and concreteness, of general and particular, of denotation and connotation” [9]. Apple in this poem, not only serves as the speaker’s seasonal harvest, but also a stepping stone for him to see what he has fighting for clearly. It’s the driving force for his laborious work and also the driving force for his pause. The two facets of the meaning of apple is just well-presented in the integrity of the speaker’s prior and latter actions.

Behind the apple-picking, there is the speaker’s awareness of his arduous pursuit, the epiphany of which arises from a piece of glass that he “skimmed this morning from the drinking trough” [6].

3. INSIDE OF THE “ICE”

In early winter, the speaker in this poem does not see a beautiful and clear world but rather an unexpected scene: “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 glass/ It melted, and I let it fall and break” [6].

It seems that the ice is not transparent because it is obtained from the trough which is used to hold water or food for animals, due to which the world is distorted and strange. The sense of strangeness gives the speaker such a powerful impact that he is “upon my way to sleep before it fell” [6]. This kind of strangeness seemingly puts him into daydream. However, just as what Empson claims about the core of poetry— ambiguity: “being an essential suggestive act” [5]. It denotes that the intention of the poet can be definitely interpreted more than one.

Actually, it is this sense of strangeness that makes the speaker involved not in sleep but in deep thinking about his life. It is a moment of epiphany which manifests the truth of life, and when the ice breaks, the speaker suddenly realizes the meaning of life and that’s why he decides not to finish his undone laboring work because of its futility and purposelessness. He is deceived by the distorted picture because the ice does give him a realistic picture of the outside world—years have been spent on pursuing success and finally when he achieves his success he is disillusioned because the success is just like the distorted picture that the ice gives him. This is a clear-cut evidence of what Cleanth Brooks asserts about irony: “in certain contexts the statement means quite the opposite of what it purports to say literally” [10]. To some extent, apple-picking no longer embraces its literary meaning, but has something to do with an unrealistic pursuit of one’s ambition. This is rather like a play of the truth of life between being and nothingness.

This piece of ice functions as the mirror through which the speaker can be aware of his own truth of life. The discrepancies between his prior knowledge and latter knowledge of life forms a kind of poetical tension in his expression of his feelings. That’s why Allen Tate confirms that “the meaning of poetry is its ‘tension,’ the full organized body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it” [11]. Ambiguity of the strangeness, irony correspondingly, and the tension as the result of both of them present a whole picture of the substance of the inside of the ice.

4. BETWEEN HUMAN SLEEP AND WOODCHUCK DORMANCY

The word “sleep” appears six times with two other related exceptions—“dreaming” and “drowsing”. However, sleep in this poem does not literally mean a relaxing activity of both mind and body. As a matter of fact, the speaker in this poem only has short and disturbed dream—in his dream, “Magnified apples appear and disappear, / Stem end and blossom end, / And every fleck of russet showing dear” [6]. If it is a dream after hard labor and industry, then it is supposed to be peaceful and settled instead of being disturbed. Besides, the speaker still feels the pain in his instep arch which keeps his sleep troubled. As a result, there is a conspicuous irony of human’s fighting for desires, which “shows itself in a ‘collocative clash’, that is a combination of words which conflicts with our expectation” [12].

To some extent, sleep in this poem does not mean what its literal meaning suggests, but rather the process of one’s pursuit of dreams, during which, people are constantly feel disturbed and unsettled. Therefore, this kind of ambiguity of meaning, “as a matter concerning whole states of mind, occurs when what is said in, refers to, several different topics, several universes of discourse, several modes of judgment of feeling” [5] and “the more closely we examine this lyric, the more obscure it becomes; the more we trace the implications of the imagery, the denser the confusion” (Tate, 54).

However, compared with the woodchuck sleep, the speaker states: “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 one./ Or just some human sleep” [11].

Free from disturbance and uncertainties, woodchuck’s dormancy is long and peaceful.

Woodchuck follows its nature, but human sleep is all about desires which trouble them. Woodchuck just lives by the circles and rhythm of life while human beings just hustle and bustle around without a clear and proper aim of life in mind, being busy climbing the social ladder and pick as many as apples they desire. Consequently, tension between woodchuck dormancy and human sleep arises and enables the poem to have a profound significance in lexical level.

People do not have the same kind of state of life for they being deprived of their human nature, in order that they can chase after whatever they long for. Just like what Rousseau asserts in the beginning of his book *A Discourse on Inequality*: “We should consider what is natural not in things depraved but in those which are rightly ordered according to nature” [13]. Nature should necessarily play a significant role in people’s whole life when they are on the road for their goals in life.

5. CONCLUSION

In this philosophical poem, Robert Frost presents to readers a comprehensive picture of the “after apple-picking” scene and brings thought-provoking pondering over life to readers. Readers can feel the powerful impression brought by this “deceptively simple” poetry. just as what Kennedy claims when he gives a speech on the importance of arts in Amherst College: “When power leads men towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.” Robert Frost, as one of the greatest poets in the twentieth century, writes simple and ordinary human experiences but embodies the virtues and universal truth of human nature.

In “After Apple-Picking”, Frost well-stated the meaning of life and the significance of following one’s nature through the reconciliation of ambiguity, irony, as well as the increased tension as a result of the frequent use of the above-mentioned two factors and meanings between several binaries—apple and American Dream, ice before and after its breaking, and woodchuck dormancy and human sleep. Through this kind of formalist analysis, we can have a glance at Frost’s writing of human’s existential dilemma and deeply understand the meaning of life between “seeming” and “being”.

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