

CHAPTER III
MODERN ERA AND BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF
THE POET

III.1. Modern Era

Modern era is sometimes called the twentieth century era, as it is counted from 1900 and so forth. The modern era is a time of increasing instability of society. There are absence of generally accepted view of life and in fact a bewildering variety of intellectual and material influences. All these aspects, unsurprisingly, are reflected in the twentieth-century literature.

In the early years of the new century, the former optimistic view of life and faith in progress still seemed to be justified by the rapid advance of applied science. Modern way of life was characterized by the application of the newest inventions and comodities such as the use of electricity and of the telephone. The superiority of the internal-combustion engine over steam engine made auto-traffic and aviation possible. Chemistry revolutionized photography by the introduction of the roll-film, which brought us the cinema. Many other inventions were introduced that in the first time made our

life better. New, synthetic drugs saved many lives. The increasingly use of rubber, reinforced concrete building, and of various kinds of mechanical equipment in companies, offices and households.

Small wonder that people had still a traditional feeling of security then. This feeling of complacency, however, was shattered by the terrible experience during the First World War (1914-1918). People became aware that, beside bringing prosperity, the modern applied science and technique could also lead to the disaster on the race of human being.

In the modern era, there were many teachings about many knowledge and ideology. From Einstein, people learned about relativity of things, from Freud about the influence of the subconscious, and from contemporary philosophers such as Bergson about time, from Satre about the importance of intuition.

The devaluation of the individual personality, the lost of self evidence, doubt of faith, unemployment were other features of the twentieth century and they still go on up to now.

So, we see that on the one hand, the spiritual climate is one of individual uncertainty, fear, anxiety,

--on the other hand, one of social commitment. Modern man, often without the certainties of revealed religion to support him, feels the burden of his existence and of his personal responsibility for his acts pressing heavily on him. So, he will turn to those thinkers and writers in whom he finds a response to his feelings. For this reason, the field of philosophy, especially metaphysics, becomes a major influence.

Along with the great deal of change and variety, the modern period has seen many changes, too. When we see the sequence of the period, the modern era comes after Victorian era (1832-1900) but poetry in this time reflects the characters of Romantic period more than victorian one.

Poetry of the romantic kind is still written, but the use of language is more free, less bound by any fixed idea of what is "poetic". Every kind of experiment has been made with rhythm, imagery and form. (Little, 1966: 171).

To get a clearer feature on the modern poems, let's see their chief characteristics: (1) the great freedom of form; (2) the new poets aim at precise, original images; (3) the traditional appeal to the emotion is replaced by an appeal to the intellect, often through

learned allusions or through satire; hence the affinity with seventeenth-century Metaphysical poetry; (4) the subconscious elements play an important part; (5) greater social consciousness. Directly or indirectly, the poet reflects upon the world of men around him; and (6) cosmopolitanism. (Baker SVD, 1975: 106-107).

From those characteristics, we can conclude that the modern era is full of loss of self evidence that people seek freedom, lack of spirit of faith that people doubt of what they do and revolt to the traditional rules. People seek new teaching about life and that philosophy gets its followers. As stated above (point 3) that literature becomes metaphysical trend.

III.2. Biographical Sketch of the Poet

Robert Lee Frost was born on March 26th, 1874 in San Francisco, California. He was the son of Will Prescott Jr, of Lawrence, Massachusetts and I. Mordie Frost, of Edinburgh, Scotland. His father was a chairman of the Democratic City Committee when Cleveland was elected. He was not a faithful religious man but his wife (R. Frost's mother) was.

Robert's father (wrote Untermeyer), a doggedly honest Democrat in a corrupt and hypocritical

Republican state, had offended the self-righteous community by rejecting ritual and refusing to go to church. His mother, on the other hand, was a confirmed true believer. Born a Scotch Presbyterian, she became a Unitarian; ... after studying Emerson ... she became a Swedenborgian. Robert inherited these mixed tendencies. He began as a romantic affirmer (not, he emphasized, a reformer), and became a nonconformist. (Shon, 1969: 6).

Robert's childhood was not like an ordinary child. He never went to school until he was about 12 years. When he came for the first time, he did not get back anymore. So, he had never read a book until 15. However, after he read his first book a new world opened up for him, and he became a heavy book reader.

At the age of 16, after moving to Lawrence since the death of his father, he published his first poem 'La Noche Triste' in the Lawrence High School "Bulletin". This was his first experience in writing a poem.

In 1892, Robert Frost graduated from Lawrence High School and was co-valedictorian with his future wife. He, then, continued to study at Dartmouth College. It seemed that none of his relatives wanted him to write. His grand-father wanted him to be a lawyer. His mother, however, was very fond of poetry, and, while she never said so, Robert Frost always felt that underneath she wanted him to write. That is why he entered college. There, Frost wrote many poems. Many of those poems were

for Elinor, his fiancée. "My Butterfly," his first professionally published poem, was printed in the 'Independent', a weekly literary magazine of that period. Since then, he started writing organized professionally poems and realizing his potential talent.

Robert Frost eventually married Elinor Miriam White at age of 21, in 1895. He became a teacher in his mother's school.

Because of unpleasant circumstances, in 1912, Frost moved to England with his family to seek another space that was possible to enhance his life. He found a little cottage to rent where he could stay there with his family. The cottage was surrounded by a large grassy space in front, and a plenty garden behind with some fruit trees and a lot of flower. It is unsurprising, then, that his subject matter for his poems are much about nature.

There, he found new friends, too, that some of them were very helpful to make his career successful. He knew David Nutt who had helped him bring his poems to be known in England. The day his poetry was accepted in England was one of the happiest days of his life. It made him confirmed that he had indeed a capability and talent to write poems.

He could afford to publish his book for the first

time there in 1913. By the time "A Boy's Will" was published, Frost had met and cultivated friendship with several important poets and critics who helped him greatly by reviewing and praising his book.

In August 1914, when war broke out, Frost suddenly wanted to get his family and himself back to America. In 1920, Frost helped to found the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in New England, where he lived. He returned to teach on the college level, for examples, at Amherst College, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, and the University of Michigan.

The life of New England, which was reflected in his poems, influenced him much. ... as he said at the end of the title poem in the collection "New Hampshire" (1923), he considered that his real living was being done in Vermont --first in Shaftsbury and then in Ripton, near the mountain campus of Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English and its Writers' Conference, which he helped to create and sustain. (Encyclopedia Americana vol. 12 : 128).

The farm land, the way people did their activities in New England as an effect of industrialism and its impact both to the environment and culture were the subject matter of Frost's poems. It seemed that he tended

to be romantic but it was not all true because he did not write and adore nature only but also gave place to men.

The stone wall in "Mending Wall," the berry garden in "Blueberries," and the dry forest in "The Road Not Taken," all were the characteristics of New England. Frost, however, did not describe the situation only but he also connected his subject matter with human kind. He seemed to think that men were superior to nature even though men fed on nature.

Frost, day to day, became a popular poet in his country. This invited critics. Some of them supported him while some were in opposition. During his life, he won four Pulitzer Prizes, the only person ever to achieve this honor. (Shon, 1969: 29).

His poems were read and analyzed by many critics from any points of view. It is stated in Encyclopedia Americana:

In the philosophical climate, too, there was little tolerance for many Frost's attitude and deepest loyalties. Brought up by a devout mother, Frost remained a religious man all his life despite recurrent dark moods, skepticism, and a preference for heterodox opinions. . . . Frost kept his religious faith mostly to himself or confided it only to close friends. When it entered his poetry at all, it was usually in a very guarded and equivocal. (Encyclopedia Americana vol 12: 128).

Based on these reasons, the writer uses philosophical

approach to analyze Frost's poem beside literary approach which takes mimetic theory to look the poem as the reflection of his life through his imagination when he wrote the poem.

Despite the success in his career life, his personal life was not so satisfying. Frost's eventual poetic success was counterpointed by much personal grief and loss. Several of his children were stillborn or died in infancy. His son committed suicide. A daughter became insane. After the death of his wife in 1938, the poet lived alone or with his friends. He had undergone up and down of life. He, therefore, formulated a thought through poems as he conceived: "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom." (Foerster and Falk, 1960: 906). He understood that life was not perfect and loved it together with its unperfectness; in this case we should face life in a wise way. He died in Boston on January 29th, 1963.

About Frost's major works are on poems and verse plays. On poems are A Boy's Will (1913) includes "Mowing," "My November Guest," "A Prayer in Spring," "Reluctance," "Storm Fear," and "The Tuft of Flowers;" North of Boston (1914) includes "After Apple-Picking," "Death of the Hired Man," "Home Burial," "Mending Wall," and "The Wood File;" Mountain Interval (1916) includes "Birches,"

"The Impulse," "Loneliness," "An Old Man's Winter Night," "Out, out--," "The Oven Bird," "The Road Not Taken," and "The Sound of Trees;" New Hampshire (1923) includes "Dust of Snow," "Fire and Ice," "The Onset," "The Runaway," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," and "To Earthward;" West Running Brook (1928) includes "Acquainted with the Night," "Bereft," "Once by the Pacific," "A Soldier," and "Tree at My Window;" A Further Range (1936) includes "Departmental," "Desert Place," "Norther Out Far nor In Deep," "Two Tramps in Mud Time," and "A lone Striker;" A Witness Tree (1942) includes "Come In," "The Gift Outright," "The Lesson for Today," "The Most of It," and "The Silken Tent;" Steeple Bush (1947) includes "Directive;" In the Clearing (1962) includes "Away." His two verse plays are "A Masque of Reason" (1945) and "A Masque of Mercy" (1947). (Gwinn, 1985c: 24).

From his work we can see that Frost is indeed a famous, competent, and outstanding poet in his era. Many critics and students pay attention much to his works. His poem, The Road Not Taken, is also worth to be analyzed.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS