

Design, Darkness and Duality: Defamiliarization in Frost's Poetry

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Abstract

Robert Frost (1874-1963), a true representative of American literature, deals with the idyllic pastoral landscape of America and traces the transition of American life and society of his time in a lucid way. He is highly rated and esteemed as a pastoral poet. Though the diction of his poems apparently seems to be simple, many of these poems deal with complex and philosophical themes. Sometimes, the level of complexity is so high that the readers become intrigued and deceived and it instigates the readers' thoughts to a great extent. Frost intentionally brings odd and weird imageries and symbols or 'something sinister' which works as a pattern or design for Frost's poetry and this process defamiliarizes his poems and presents them as a new wine in an old bottle. In the core of many of Frost's poems we find that there dwells a macabre, eccentric, and lonely feature of human life wearing the terrifying 'design of darkness' in the lap of a gentle, meek, and picturesque nature. In essence, this paper is an effort to find out and show how Frost focuses on the design of darkness and duality, and deeply penetrates nature to acquaint his readers with a deeper meaning of life and its surroundings in a sing-song and pleasant voice by skillfully applying the technique of defamiliarization.

Key Words: Ambiguity, Ambivalence, Binary, Defamiliarization, Design, Duality, Enigma.

Robert Frost, being deprived of due recognition for a long period of his lifetime, becomes famous at the end of his career because of his peculiar representation of life in poetry that tries to squeeze out dark design of life and its dual nature from a simple background of rural America. It is interesting to note that Frost whistles an optimistic tone and attitude in his poetry but quite paradoxically, he doesn't forget to imprint the negative and bleak designs of 'Nature' which work as stop signs for thinking about and comprehending the broader perspective and philosophy of life. Moreover, in his poems we find that, unlike other nature poets, he defamiliarizes familiar aspects of nature by portraying their demonic, harsh and dangerous elements against the beautiful and calm backdrop of nature and its corresponding elements. However, Frost deals with this darkness and terror so intensely and deftly that the whole process of defamiliarization doesn't give us a shock but invites us to embrace these poems with a different philosophy and outlook. His poems inspire the readers to get the meaning out of a deceptive and enigmatic source that they come across as the poet presents the commonplace everyday things dressed in an uncommon attire. This paper tries to analyze and explore some of the famous poems of Frost and takes the endeavor to show that though his treatment of nature and life apparently looks simple, a deeper reading of his poems gives us a subtle metaphorical meaning through deceptive coloring of

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imagination and defamiliarization. When the readers thoroughly and critically study his poems, they suddenly find that the rural and picturesque scenes described in his poems have nothing relaxing about them. Rather, they suggest a bleak and harsh design of life in every element of nature. This paper is a simple attempt to show how Frost defamiliarizes the commonplace elements of nature through his deliberate depiction of a transcendental design of darkness and duality, and how he juxtaposes different forces of nature to sketch a somewhat gloomy but realistic picture of human life in this universe.

Frost never forgets the compassionate and benevolent force of nature. On the other hand, he is also not oblivious of the futile and disastrous forces of nature. If we delve deep into his poetry, we will find an enigmatic, mysterious, and intricate nature of life dressed in a simple and natural outfit which soothes and calms the senses of human mind and soul but, as soon as the readers start to feel this calming influence, they are gripped by the sinister and dark tone of Frost's poetry. This trait is perfectly illustrated in the lines of his poem "Design" where he says,

*I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth—
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredient's of a witches' broth—* (Frost, lines 1-6)

Frost conjures up a sinister and bizarre scene by using some apparently harmless imagery of white spider, white heal-all and white moth. The readers become instantly aware that the common things and symbols like flowers, moth and spider have been rendered unfamiliar to them by the poet's magical touch of imagination. Frost, unlike Wordsworth, doesn't want to tell us that nature is spiritual and all comforting. Rather he has a tendency to encounter the evil visage of nature in an innocent mirror. It is like a Freudian child who is first encountering its imperfectness in the mirror. It finds a 'lack' in it (Barry, 2002: 97). This lack helps it to grow up fully only to deny the so called perfect world. Similarly, Frost, being a bit cautious and skeptic, finds a lack in nature which works as a mad and evil force to design the apparently modest and simple life. This design not only attacks and terrifies the comforting zone of the people in the world but it pushes and ignites all the life and works as an impetus to go forward with a positive note breaking the illusion of a 'fairy tale' life.

In some way or another, most of his famous poems shrewdly reveal a 'Design of Darkness' in almost every event or happening of nature. This design of darkness is not that much horrific or catastrophic rather it is an alarming signal for the human being as a whole. Moreover, Frost employs this evil design to understand the binary of life which inevitably suggests that life is not a simple journey rather a topsy-turvy and a chaotic one. Though, in his poems, Frost shows an optimistic journey of life, he, ironically, with the progress of a poem or in the midst of it takes refuge in a dark zone which is shrouded in ambivalence, ambiguity, mistrust, loneliness, and maladies. In support of this view, Trilling (1959 cited in Gerber, 1969, p.85-86) says, "I think of Robert Frost as a terrifying poet. Call him, if it makes things any easier, a tragic poet, but it might be useful every now and then to come out from under the shelter of that literary word. The

universe that he conceives is a terrifying universe." Frost doesn't forcefully try to bring out light out of darkness instead he gently places 'evil' and 'innocence' together in one garland. This awkward and weird placement and presentation of evil force or design in the poet's apparently smooth 'dancing- rhyming- sing-song' journey of life in nature defamiliarizes the common perspective and view of life. This defamiliarization of everyday life doesn't irritate the readers; instead they become awe-struck and numb. It compels the audience to go deep inside the poems which carry them into the inner stream of human psyche and enable them to relate to its enigma. It is rightfully summed up by Elmer Andrews (1996, p.337) when the critic says, "While opening his poetry to darkness, wildness, loneliness and violence, he never loses faith in human nature or in an ultimately benign creative force, concerned though as he is with walls, conflicts, limitations and failures, he is capable of registering wonder and delight in the natural world. For Frost, life holds the potential of beauty and terror."

To Frost, life is a pattern; it's a cycle-a complex blending of 'beauty' and 'terror'. The predominant image of darkness is necessary to understand the essential light and beauty of the earth. Thus in his poem "Design" we see how in a white serene scene an appalling "Design of Darkness" prevails and lingers like 'witches broth'. In the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and in "Desert Places" we find mysterious and alluring invitation of the dark woods. The captivating, alluring and enigmatic sight of the darkness creates an illusionary sight of charm and aura in the forest that draws the traveler like a magnet. This representation of the simple woods gives us the view of a different type of forest altogether and places us in a hesitant position but, at the end, we come back with a conclusive, bigger and broader view of life like the travelers of these poems.

In other poems too, we find that Frost is not decisive and conclusive though his voice is almost inevitably emphatic. To some readers, Frost is very easy to approach and the meanings of his poetry are easy to decipher. But, Frost's poetry is deceptively simple. He disguises modern poetry in the simplistic attire of everyday American dialect, common images and natural setting. He is very much a modern and enigmatic poet with dark sarcasm, skepticism and psychological insight into human mind. Throughout his poems he gives hints of a mysterious design in life and nature and also expresses his skepticism regarding it. This contradiction and mystery becomes markedly pronounced in the poem "Design" when he says, "If design govern such a thing so small." (Frost, Line 14)

In essence Frost's poetic diction is highly suggestive and for that reason deceptive as well. Through the magical weaving of his words and sentences, he creates lyrics which provide layers of meanings and beg a variety of interpretations. As a result, different critics and readers have interpreted his poems differently. This has happened because the words and phrases used by Frost do not adhere to their literal and traditional meanings in many cases. He defamiliarizes the common words and human experiences of life by giving them new meanings and guides us through a world of uncertainty and complexity. Nothing is as it seems in Frost's poems. He hides layers of meanings in the simplistic diction of his musical lyrics. Ambiguity, duality and darkness

are the predominant features of Frost's poetry through which he defamiliarizes the common and familiar words and concepts.

This glaring example of ambiguity is amply manifested in his poem "The Road not Taken". The narrator of the poem speaks about an experience of travelling. While travelling one day he reached a point where the road was bifurcated. He suffered from indecision and difficulty for a while in choosing which road to take out of the two. Finally, he chose the path that he thought was less frequented by people. But then the realization dawned upon him that his choice had made no difference as his going through the road would have worn it anyhow. In the poem the poet deals with the eternal human issue of making the right choice out of the available alternatives in human life. Apparently one may find that the issue of determining the choice is guided by no obvious reasons in the poem. No sense of moral obligation or self-respect inspired the narrator to make the choice. One may be even tempted to think that the narrator's choice here was arbitrary, whimsical and logically incomprehensible. That is why Frost is criticized by Yvor Winters (1957) who says that Frost's poems "have a single theme: the whimsical, accidental and incomprehensible nature of the formative decision." (<http://galenet.galegroup.com>). But Frost is actually less incomprehensible when one analyses all of his poems in totality and takes a holistic approach to understand Frostian view of life. The reason why Frost's poems seem to be incomprehensible to many is because he defamiliarizes common objects and ideas to give them new meanings. As a result, when his poems are tackled in an isolated manner, they confuse some readers and critics.

It is frequently alleged that the poet mistook whimsical impulses for moral choice. But one has to remember that though Frost's diction is somewhat akin to the diction of Classical poets and in some cases Romantic poets, he is essentially a modern poet. He does not view life from a black and white perspective. To him human life is far more complex and diversified and the moments of making choices are complex themes in themselves. Close analysis of his poem will reveal that the decision-making factor is not single but several. Ultimately it's not based on whim. Intuition and an element of design guide the narrator to make his decision as if the narrator was forced by an invisible spirit in the guise of intuition in choosing his road. One also finds the element of duality in this poem. In the poem it is seen that the narrator makes a conscious choice but it is subtly implied that this choice indirectly guided or choreographed a designer from behind the scene. The poet defamiliarizes the idea of 'decision making' and introduces a new concept to the readers about the process. According to his poetry the taking of a conscious decision may not be that conscious at all. The familiar term 'choice' deceives the readers with its ambiguity in meaning in Frost's poetry. For example, the readers become genuinely intrigued by the following lines of "The Road not Taken":

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*" (Frost, lines 18-20)

What kind of difference is the narrator talking about? It is really difficult for a reader to ascertain the implication of the word 'difference' here. One can argue that the word 'difference' may have

both negative and positive implications. This implicit paradox in Frost's poems makes them so enigmatic and perplexing.

Perhaps this element of duality is nowhere more pronounced than in "Fire and Ice". The symbolic and metaphorical significance of the poem seems to combine two contradictory meanings in a word in order to accommodate Frost's binary world view. The epigrammatic lines of this poem effortlessly trace the looming threats to human existence on earth and the reality of human life. A close analysis of the poem indicates that the word 'fire' in the poem signifies extreme emotion of love as well as intense desire of human beings whereas the word 'ice' here signifies intense hatred or lack of feelings. The world depicted by Frost in this poem is governed by these binary forces. The poet implies that the first force will one day destroy the world but the second one is also very much capable of destroying the world. One finds the poet to be a hopelessly helpless onlooker who is witnessing the world moving towards its end in a mood of gloom. This element of darkness pervading through the poem sheds a new light on the concepts of love and hatred. The readers are compelled to see both elements as the agents of destruction of this world though they are not used to judge these two things in the same light. The familiar term 'fire' signifying love defamiliarizes the concept of love and represents it in a new perspective and makes the readers form new ideas regarding the concept of love. The representation of hatred by the word 'ice' also brings a new dimension to the concept of hatred. Thus this short poem with its pithy and epigrammatic lines traces Frost's philosophy regarding human life and passions in a truly wonderful manner. One cannot but wonder at these deceptively simplistic but highly thought-provoking line of Frost's poem "Fire and Ice",

Some say the world will end in fire,

Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire

I hold with those who favor fire. (Frost, lines 1-4)

With very simple words Frost explores the twisted mind of modern humanity in isolation. Therefore, he is forced to create new meanings out of familiar words. The mysterious regions of human psyche and the paradox or duality of individual minds are traced through the apparently simple words and lines of his poems which are in reality complex and highly symbolic and suggestive. In one of his most popular poems "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", the poet displays this trait in a very skillful manner. On the surface the moving lyrics of the poem seem to be a simple and descriptive record of an individual's observation of nature and a series of vivid imageries. But deep below the surface level the poem is meditative and complex, and it contains layers of meanings as well as symbols. The profound and esoteric implications of this poem have baffled not only the common readers but also the critics. The poem underscores the importance of duty and responsibility in human life and simultaneously portrays before us the beauty and mystery of nature entailing the allure of rest, peace and forgetfulness. Seemingly the poem appears to be an anecdote relating that one evening the narrator temporarily stops along a country road to watch snow fall in a dark mysterious woods. He feels tempted to prolong his stay there as he encounters mesmerizing and fascinating woods. He longs to indulge himself in the terrifying beauty of the scene, and also wants to take refuge there. But, our sense of responsibility

urges him to move on. The very moment he feels attracted to the ‘queer’, ‘lovely’, ‘dark and deep forest’, he is also repulsed by it simultaneously. And for that very reason, the pertinent doubt is raised “...if there is some mistake.” If one delves deep one will find that the images concerning woods, snow and the dark evening have layers of meanings. On one hand, the dark mysterious woods signify the mystery of human life and, on the other hand, it simultaneously signifies the mystery of death and afterlife. On one hand, the frozen lake mentioned in the poem reveals the pure beauty of nature but, on the other hand, it also signifies death. These seemingly paradoxical elements are balanced in an intricate and fascinating manner. In an uncommon way Frost presents his fascination with death using common symbols. In addition to that he defamiliarizes the concept of death and life as he represents death with a white image and life with a dark one.

The symbolic use of nature to signify and explore the harsh realities of life and human mind is also present in Frost’s another poem “Desert Places”. The poem is mainly concerned with terrifying loneliness. The natural setting of snow fall, a lifeless deserted place and the emptiness of the infinite universe have been set against the lonely landscape of human mind. The narrator is not terrified of the emptiness of the infinite space as he suffers in a lonely and lifeless environment of the natural surroundings. His unfamiliar rendering of nature’s significance makes the readers think about nature from a new point of view. But Frost is not altogether a pessimist. A deeper analysis of his poems will reveal that there is a certain consistency in his poems based on a sense of pattern and design. Though Frost shows the littleness of man in the scheme of infinite universe, he does not forget to shed light on the intrinsic heroism of human soul and the human endeavor in search of the ultimate truth. Here lies his optimism. In the poem “Neither out Far nor in Deep” this duality of optimism cloaked in negativity is wonderfully reflected when Frost depicts the true human spirit by saying,

*They cannot look out far,
They cannot look in deep.
But when was that ever a bar
To any watch they keep?*” (Frost, Lines-13-16)

In essence Frost dwells greatly in duality and ambiguity. His pessimism wraps around his optimism. The darkness painted by him nurtures the light of life. Through this sustaining dualism and ambiguity a consistent design emerges from his poem. But it is very difficult to trace this unless one gets accustomed to the process of defamiliarization that Frost introduces. Nina Baym (1965, p. 336) aptly says in her essay “An Approach to Robert Frost’s Nature Poetry”,

“The world Frost discovers, and he depicts in the making of this discovery in many nature lyrics, is not friendly to man’s great hopes and needs. But to despair in it is not the human answer to the grim world discovered. To be glum as Frost says in “The Times Table” is the best way ‘to close a road, abandon a farm’.”

The volume of poems in Frost’s *New Hampshire* depicts a bleak and gloomy picture of life using dramatic tension and nature imagery diffused with ambiguity. But Frost accepts pain or pleasure with indifference. He is the supporter of true human spirit of an indomitable soul as he says in “The Census Taker”, “It must be I want life to go on living” (Frost, Line -64). The themes of

human struggle against nature and rugged individualism continue in his next poetry book *West Running Brook*. Here the poet stresses on the dark sense of fate and an element of darkness contributes to create ambiguity in the meanings of the poems. 'The universal cataract of death' looms large behind the general themes of the poems of this book. Duality, ambiguity and isolation of human beings are the prevalent elements in these poems. In "Acquainted with the Night" the poet narrates the loneliness and melancholy of an individual walking in the city street at night. The city street which is a common symbol of crowd and busy life of city dwellers has been presented as a deserted place signifying isolation and melancholy. The process of defamiliarization is very much at work here. Frost embellishes a word with a new sense of symbolism and projects an unfamiliar symbol out of a familiar symbol. V.Y. Kantak (1974, p. 162) adequately sums up Frost's attitude in his essay "Poetic Ambiguity in Frost" when he says, "What happens in his most characteristic poems is that a vividly grasped image or situation remains as though untouched by reflection and without the buttress of statement." He further adds, "The image doesn't occur as a powerful detail in a montage as it may in Eliot or Pound. Frost's image seems always to carry with it a certain anecdotal spread". On another occasion Kantak (1974, p. 165) says about Frost's treatment of nature, "He does not make the characteristically Romantic commitment – the acceptance of a benign spirit behind the forms of nature through which it manifests itself. The Wordsworthian affirmation of the Wisdom and Spirit of the universe is alien to his mode." That is why Frost's poems are deceptive and ambiguous. He uses traditional settings and terms in a new manner and invests new symbolic meanings in them. The technique used by Frost in these cases is the defamiliarization of traditional symbols and concepts to propound his personal view regarding human life and the world in general.

In most of his poems he uses objects and forces of nature as symbols of universal issues, ideas and feelings. A natural bifurcating path in wood evokes the idea of universal problem of choice in Frost's poem "The Road not Taken". In "Design" the natural image of a spider on a heal-all flower signifies the symbol of universal design but, within a moment, he expresses his doubt by saying, "If design govern in a thing so small" (Frost, Line-14). In this way in Frost's hand the common objects and images of nature take on new meanings and it becomes difficult for the readers to understand the significance of his symbols on first reading. But repeated reading and deeper analysis of his poems reveal deep realization of human fate and reality of the physical world.

Frost is a very cautiously optimistic poet. In his poetry lightness is shrewdly shrouded by a weird kind of gripping and 'appalling' darkness. Unlike the smooth and enlightened presentation of nature and life in Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau, Frost's nature foregrounds an ever traumatic complex human life which is almost ambiguous. Frost actually wanted to present an ideal reconciliation of everything but he never found it. His positive drive to reconcile the human beings presence amidst the nature has most of the time been haunted and doomed by the evil spirit that is said to create the core design in every item of nature. Frost, in his poetry, neither draws a linear plot nor a circular one. In most of the cases we find him following the Blakian concept of poetry and life claiming that "without contraries there is no progression" (Blake, 1790: 3). Being both a conservative and radical poet he not only juxtaposes black and white forces or

spirits of nature but shows the coexistence of creative and destructive nature of man's life also. He never exposes nor meditates or contemplates about any single thing that much in his poetry but he has a great power to present anything in a symbolic way so that it loses its familiar visage but, surprisingly, it doesn't become unfamiliar. It rather gives the readers a sense of mystery and enigma that is both alluring and deceptive. The reason behind this enigma and ambiguity is Frost's deft use of the technique of defamiliarization utilizing the vehicles of darkness and duality.

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