

The Complexity of “Tree” Imagery in Robert Frost’s Poetry

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Abstract: Robert Frost is often regarded as a highly esteemed poet within the realm of modern and current American literature. Frost’s poem appears straightforward but is actually quite intricate. Furthermore, Frost’s poetic works are characterised by a rich tapestry of imagery that adds to their overall intricacy. Moreover, Frost’s poetry exhibits a substantial presence of tree imagery. A variety of trees exhibit distinct behaviours, like falling to the ground, emitting sounds, or remaining in a state of quiet. Furthermore, these trees manifest diverse forms and dimensions. This study focuses on three selected poems by Frost, namely *The Sound of the Trees*, *On a Tree Fallen Across the Road*, and *Tree at My Window*. The objective is to examine the intricate employment of tree imagery in Frost’s poetry through the lens of analysing poetic imagery. Upon careful examination, it has been shown that the intricacy of the “tree” imagery in Frost’s poems can be attributed to two distinct factors. Initially, Frost undertakes a division of the “tree,” a whole entity, into two distinct components, each symbolising distinct concepts of liberation and restriction. This deliberate act enhances the depth of the underlying symbolism. Another factor to consider is that the depiction of “tree” is not fixed, but rather undergoes transformations as time progresses.

Keywords: Robert Frost, poetry, trees, imagery

1. Introduction

The utilisation of imagery in poetry holds significant importance since it allows the poet to evoke sensory responses within the reader, facilitating an immersive experience of the poem’s atmosphere. In contrast to conventional language, which conveys information directly, poetic language is frequently distinguished by its emphasis on sensuality, metaphor, and figuration.

Robert Frost was born in 1874 and died in 1963. He is thought to be one of the most famous American writers of the 20th century. He won the Pulitzer Prize four times. To this day, he remains the sole individual in the annals of American literary history to have received a presidential invitation to deliver a recitation of his poems during an inauguration ceremony. Robert Frost has produced several widely recognised literary works, including notable pieces such as *The Road Not Taken*, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* and *Mending Wall*. Throughout Robert Frost’s lifetime, his identity underwent multiple transformations. Despite living in an era characterised by the emergence of prosperous modern poetry, Robert Frost diverged from prevailing trends and instead opted to utilise classic poetic forms as a means of expressing his inner thoughts and life experiences. Using his writing instrument, the author can vividly depict idyllic landscapes and the beauty of nature.

During the period spanning from Robert Frost’s birth until the conclusion of the 19th century,

Robert Frost's persona was characterised as that of a typical student who cultivated a lasting fascination in the fields of botany, astronomy, and evolution, while intermittently releasing collections of poetry. The individual completed the entrance examinations in Latin, Greek, ancient history, and physical sciences at Harvard University. Subsequently, he commenced his studies at Harvard as a first-year student, having secured financial support through a loan obtained from his grandfather. However, as a result of experiencing both physical and psychological stress, he decided to discontinue his studies based on the recommendation of his medical practitioner. During the early 20th century, Robert Frost underwent a significant shift in his lifestyle, transitioning from his roles as a student and educator to that of an agriculturalist and poet. During the period spanning from 1901 to 1906, Robert Frost assumed the role of a dedicated agriculturalist, devoting his days to the management of his farm while reserving his evenings for the pursuit of poetry. His notebooks during this time were replete with numerous draughts, serving as a testament to his unwavering commitment to his craft. During the period spanning from 1906 to 1911, Robert Frost transitioned from his occupation as a farmer to that of a teacher, all the while continuing to engage in the composition of poetry.

During his formative years as a student, Robert Frost engaged in rigorous academic pursuits that facilitated the acquisition of information across various disciplines, including classical literature, philosophy, and aesthetics. This multifaceted educational background served as a fundamental basis for his subsequent poetic endeavours. Furthermore, the pursuit of farming allowed him to foster a deep appreciation for the natural world. The individual had sensory perceptions of floral fragrances, the verticality of arboreal structures, and the verdant abundance of herbaceous vegetation within the natural environment. Subsequently, this person documented their observations of these botanical entities using the medium of poetry, articulating their profound affection for the natural world.

The poetry of Robert Frost has garnered significant scholarly interest due to its notable accomplishments. Several scholars have conducted analyses of Robert Frost's poetry using a stylistic approach. The majority of these stylistic assessments largely focus on a certain poem written by Robert Frost [1,2], Some scholars have analysed the content of Robert Frost's poetry, such as humanistic idealism and the form of labour organisation in the poetry [3,4], some scholars have analysed the emotions in Robert Frost's poetry [5], and some scholars have analysed the language in Robert Frost's poetry [6]. Few researchers have conducted comparisons and analyses of the poems that feature specific imagery in the works of Robert Frost. This paper selects three poems authored by Robert Frost: *The Sound of the Trees*, *On a Tree Fallen Across the Road* and *Tree at My Window*. This paper examines the imagery of the "tree" as a representation of Robert Frost's ecological perspective, building upon previous studies. Additionally, it aims to address the research gap in the analysis of imagery and provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate portrayal of the "tree" in Frost's poems.

2. Reasons for Using Tree Imagery

The application of imagery holds significant importance in the composition and admiration of poetry. Frost demonstrates a remarkable skill in employing imagery, and the aesthetic qualities of his poetry are evident in every facet of his poetic endeavours. However, it is his exceptional mastery in employing a diverse array of imagery that distinguishes him from his contemporaries [7]. Frost employs tree images for several purposes.

The utilisation of tree symbolism is intricately connected to the personal experiences of Frost. According to incomplete statistical data, Frost demonstrates a predilection for employing floral and arboreal imagery in his poetry. It has been observed that his poems feature over thirty distinct varieties of flowers and plants [8]. Trees are portrayed as natural elements of the landscape rather than anthropocentric features. This predilection for utilising trees as poetic imagery can be attributed, at least in part, to Frost's prolonged residence in rural areas and agricultural settings. Furthermore,

throughout his tenure at Harvard University, the individual in question diligently pursued the fields of astronomy and botany, fostering a particular fascination with botany [9]. This affinity for plants subsequently played a role in shaping Frost's use of natural settings as a form of imagery, albeit to a limited extent.

Furthermore, the use of tree imagery is intricately linked to the inherent structural attributes and behavioural patterns exhibited by the tree. The selection of imagery is influenced by the subject's inherent self-identity, leading to a preference for some imagery over others. The apparent vertical and upward orientation of a pillar within a temple, giving the impression of supporting the weight of the roof, can be attributed not to the viewer's perspective aligning with that of the pillar, but rather to the deliberate design of the pillar itself. Through meticulous consideration of its position, proportion, and shape, the pillar inherently possesses this expressive quality. Similarly, trees exhibit a comparable phenomenon. Take, for instance, the willow tree. Its melancholic appearance is not attributable to its resemblance to a sorrowful individual but rather stems from the configuration, orientation, and pliability of its limbs. These characteristics collectively transmit a subdued and sagging expressiveness [10]. In the poem *The Sound of the Trees* by Robert Frost, the poet engages in a contemplation of the auditory experience produced by leaves rustling against one another. Frost envisions these sounds as a manifestation of the learning for liberation, while also perceiving the rootedness of trees in firm soil as a sonic expression of their inability to physically depart from their current location. This notion is encapsulated in the line *They are that that talks of going/But never gets away* [11].

Ultimately, Frost's selection of trees as a form of imagery might be characterised as markedly arbitrary. From a psychogenetic standpoint, the poet skillfully incorporates and generates imagery by drawing upon their state of mind, mood, and emotions at the time of creation. The resulting imagery is influenced by the specific emotions experienced, as different emotions elicit distinct types of imagery. Alternatively, from a semiotic perspective, the seemingly arbitrary nature of the imagery can be attributed to the poet's establishment of a relationship between two components within symbols: the signifier and the signified. This relationship is driven by the poet's individual artistic personality, which lends a unique quality to their work [12]. Within the realm of artistic symbols, the energetic reference denotes the depiction of imagery, while the referent signifies the underlying emotion and significance associated with that imagery. In the given context, the term "signifier" pertains to the recurring depiction of the tree image in Frost's poems as the literal entity of a "tree". On the other hand, the term "signified" pertains to the notion that the tree symbolises various meanings within the cohesive representation due to the poet's varying states of mind. In the given scenario, the fallen tree on the road might be interpreted as a symbolic representation of fragility. The tree's actions are rendered futile, as it is unable to impede individuals from following their quest for freedom. Ultimately, it is reduced to a mere ordinary tree, devoid of any significant influence. *Tree at My Window* serves as a symbolic image of an entity devoid of emotional capacity, rendering it incapable of comprehending the intricate depths of human consciousness.

3. The Complexity of Tree Imagery

3.1. Structural Features

The intricate nature of tree symbolism is intricately linked to the inherent structural attributes of the tree, as previously discussed, as exemplified notably in the poem *The Sound of the Trees*. Frost's poem delineates the tree into two distinct components, namely the crown and the roots, symbolising divergent paths in life. The canopy symbolises both liberation and defiance. The leaves of the trees engage in a discourse of movement, as they rub against each other, producing audible vibrations that resonate near the narrator's door. These leaves possess a desire for liberation and refuse to remain in

a state of silence. The narrator expresses their intention to embark on a journey towards an unspecified destination, emphasising the audacious nature of their decision. The aforementioned statement not only represents the sincere expression of the narrator but also signifies the trajectory of life that the tree's canopy embraces - that of liberation. On the contrary, the roots serve as representations of both obstinacy and adherence to established norms. The canopy poses inquiries regarding the arboreal entities:

*I wonder about the trees.
Why do we wish to bear
Forever the noise of these
More than another noise
So close to our dwelling place [13]?*

However, the roots do not engage in introspection from an objective standpoint, wherein they critically examine the assumptions they hold dear. The roots exhibit a profound level of anchorage within the soil, rendering them incapable of adapting and evading their current position. Adaptation and escape involve the process of venturing beyond one's familiar surroundings, confronting obstacles, and enduring hardships on extensive voyages. The roots exhibit apprehension towards this phenomenon, as they fear the potential loss of their accustomed possessions and the prospect of confronting ambiguity. The poem explores the dichotomy between freedom and stability, with the crown of the tree symbolising the pursuit of freedom and the roots representing the desire for stability. This oscillation between the two opposing forces creates significant dramatic tension throughout the poem, evoking a sense of entanglement for the reader. Frost's skillful use of complex imagery further enhances this feeling of entanglement. In Frost's poem, it can be observed that the tree possesses a multifaceted nature, characterised by its division into several components. Specifically, the top of the tree embodies notions of liberation and autonomy, while the roots serve as a representation of traditionalism and resistance to change. According to Frost, individuals have a common desire for freedom while simultaneously tending to evade it.

The image of the tree in Frost's poem combines its crown and roots rather than being a single, complete whole. The imagery of "tree" becomes more intricate because of this attribute.

3.2. Images of Trees Evolve over Time

Additionally, within Frost's poetry, the utilisation of tree imagery is characterised by its dynamic nature. Frost's perception of trees may be analysed via a chronological lens, revealing a progression from contempt to comprehension. This transformation serves as the cause for the intricate nature of the "tree" imagery employed in his works.

The poems chosen for this study predominantly exhibit a pessimistic perspective in their depiction of trees. In *The Sound of the Trees*, the trees (as a whole) only shout slogans without taking action, *They are that that talks of going/But never gets away [13]*, They lose themselves in everyday life. *We suffer them by the day/Till we lose all measure of pace [13]* and become slaves rather than masters of life. In *On a Tree Fallen Across the Road* in the opening lines of the poem, the tree descends across the road, thereafter, becoming the subject of ridicule and satire as presented by the narrator. *And yet she knows obstruction is in vain/We will not be put off the final goal [13]*. According to the narrator, the tree serves as a representation of fragility. The narrator perceives the tree's actions as futile, incapable of impeding the pursuit of freedom by others. Consequently, the tree is regarded as an unremarkable, fallen specimen. The tree positioned outside my window lacks the capacity for emotional experiences and hence cannot engage in an empathetic understanding of the human psyche. *Your head so much concerned with outer/Mine with inner, weather [13]*, The tree is very far from man, who has an abundance of the People have a rich spiritual world and are good at thinking, while trees do not have a spiritual world and do not think. Overall, the poems depict the tree as exhibiting

characteristics that are simultaneously obstinate and delicate, perplexed and devoid of emotion. It is important to note that these features are predominantly negative rather than positive in nature.

But Frost's understanding of trees also changes from *The Sound of the Trees* (published in 1916) to *Tree at My Window* (published in 1921) to *On a Tree Fallen Across the Road* (published in 1928), Frost's understanding of trees also changes. In *The Sound of the Trees* the narrator expresses a strong opposition towards the concept of the tree in its entirety, perceiving it as being confined within a state of comfort and without the initiative to pursue its aspirations of liberation. The narrator resolutely chooses the opposite path to the trees at the end of the poem: *I shall have less to say, /But I shall be gone* [13], which implies an emotion of frustration towards the "trees" imagery. The prevailing mood expressed in the text is characterised by a combination of defiance and mockery, directed towards the perceived cowardice associated with the utilisation of the "tree" symbol. But in *Tree at My Window*, Frost addresses "tree" in the second person, clearly placing "tree" on an equal footing with himself in his dialogue with the tree. In *Tree at My Window*, Frost addresses "the tree" in the second person. In contrast to *The Sound of the Trees*, where the narrator is tired of the noise of the leaves, in *Tree at My Window* the narrator is reluctant to close the curtains and separate himself from the tree: *But let there never be curtain drawn/Between you and me* [13]. Frost's sentiments in this poem are more understanding and accepting than purely critical of the "tree". *That day she put our heads together* [13].

Certain scholars have posited the notion that Frost's quotation signifies a behaviour that could have been deemed as nearly sacrilegious for American transcendentalists during the mid-1800s [14]. However, when examining Frost's prior body of work, such an interpretation suggests a shift in Frost's perception of the tree, not by equating the human being with the tree, but by elevating the tree to a level akin to that of the human being. The transformation of the "tree" into a human being signifies a shift in Frost's perception of the "tree". While this alteration does not signify an absolute endorsement of the concept of a "tree," it does indicate Frost's partial acknowledgement of the presence of this imagery. Despite the distinctions between trees and humans, including the tree's lack of emotions and limited intelligence, humans ought to embrace the existence of this imagery rather than outright dismissing it. While trees possess distinct characteristics from human beings and lack emotional capacity, it is important to acknowledge and embrace the validity of this representation rather than dismissing its reason.

In summary, Frost's evolving perspective on trees contributes to the heightened complexity and richness of the imagery associated with them.

4. Conclusion

The present analysis reveals that the utilisation of tree imagery in Frost's poetry is distinguished by its intricate nature, which manifests in two distinct dimensions. The structure of tree imagery in Frost's work exhibits complexity, as it portrays the tree as a divided entity consisting of two distinct parts: the crown and the roots. These components symbolise freedom and restraint, respectively, within Frost's conceptualization. The depiction of trees in Frost's poems is not characterised by a static and unchanging nature but rather undergoes transformation over time. This dynamic quality adds complexity to the interpretation of the tree imagery, necessitating a meticulous analysis that takes into account various contextual elements such as the historical period and the author's mindset during the creative process.

Hence, it is recommended that scholars engaged in the examination of Frost's works begin by acknowledging the intricate nature of the imagery employed, such as the recurring motif of "tree" in his poetry. As a result, they need to adopt a more objective viewpoint to properly express Frost's thoughts and views on life, aided by the imagery of the "tree" and flowers. Furthermore, take a more objective viewpoint to restore Frost's emotional condition and life reflections as represented through

the usage of images relating to “tree” and flowers. By effectively utilising the creative realm provided by Frost’s works, one can gain a comprehensive understanding of the various forms of expression and rhetorical devices employed in contemporary poetry. In order to reveal the depth of Frost’s poetry, this article has centred its attention on the intricate portrayal of “tree” symbolism. Despite conducting comprehensive evaluations, it is evident that the content provided is excessively constrained in scope in a limited selection of three poems by Frost. Therefore, Further scholarly investigation could delve into further literary works to explore the multifaceted nature of tree imagery.

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