

The Tranquil Narration of Death: Robert Frost's "Out, Out--"

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Abstract: Robert Frost, one of the outstanding poets of the 20th century in the United States, made outstanding contributions to the development of modern American poetry. Among his numerous works, the poem "Out, Out -" always occupies an interesting and mysterious position. It tells the tragedy of a boy's death, while also presenting this pain in a tranquil way. This approach creates a great contrast with the extremely intense struggle and painful fear of death that people usually experience, which is why it is particularly thought-provoking. In this poem, the location where the story takes place is still the most common natural environment in his works, and also the rural farm he is most familiar with. He achieves this effect through obscure language, different images, and the movements and expressions of characters, in order to express the numbness of the protagonist and bystanders to the readers while condemning the oppression of society and the indifference between people. This paper explores Robert Frost's "Tranquility" tragic color in "Out, Out -" based on some of the local culture and other related works associated with it. According to the analysis, he achieves this effect through his presentation of poetic technique and rhyme, language and tone, as well as the performance of the characters in the face of life and death, and different industrial and natural images in the poem.

Keywords: "Out, Out—", tranquility, death, Robert Frost

1. Introduction

Robert Frost was one of the most popular American poets of the 20th century. His poems were widely used in student textbooks, and he is still well known today. Frost's poetry is often mixed with many rural elements, which may come from his own life experience and upbringing. When it comes to his upbringing, no one usually embellishes it with words that are too rosy, for Frost was indeed an unfortunate man. His father died when he was still young, and his wife and children did not die of natural causes but before him. As an outstanding poet, his works have been interpreted in various forms without exception, and he has become a symbol, which has been used in some political interpretations because of the World War [1]. When it comes to war and all the unfortunate experiences in his past, this may be an element of tragedy in his work. These sad cruel elements are generally related to humans and nature. In the poem "Out, Out -", what is most worth analyzing is the calm tone of its narrator and the peaceful process of the boy's death. This calm tone corresponds to the indifference of the people in the poem. The narrator shows a kind of "New England" implication, and to some extent, the poet criticizes the indifference of the New England region [2]. At present, the main direction of development is to analyze the pain and purpose that Frost wants to express through

this tranquil tone, whether he is morally condemning the boy's guardian or the unfair society. However, bloody death is often not associated with the word "tranquility" in the cognition of most people, so a contradiction or conflict is created, and such conflict forms a contrast, which will deepen the impression of readers. This technique is more like deliberately ignoring life and stimulating readers' moral instincts. Make them not just look at it once, but empathize with the protagonist as a victim. Inspire them to think, thereby exposing real social problems. It stands to reason that both recently and in the past, there have been many articles related to it to analyze this unusual presentation technique. But these analyses actually have various differences, so that is to say, such a "calm narrative of death" still has research significance for the subject. Not only that but the poem can be analyzed in the light of this narrative to explore Frost's true purpose. It can also be combined with some natural or unnatural images often found in his poems, as well as his description of the characters and the process of death. Together, these are the views Frost wants to express or the consequences to be borne by society. In addition, he is not a very conformist or traditional poet, in fact, he also came into contact with modernist poetry relatively early, so his rhythm is not so rigid [3], which can also show that his poetry structure is not rigid, so his thoughts will not be presented in an ancient and boring way.

2. Analysis

In the poem "Out, Out -", Robert Frost depicts the tragedy of a boy's death in an implicit and tranquil tone. He does not embellish or focus on describing the suffering the protagonist bears in his death.

2.1. Text Content Analysis

2.1.1. Structure

The feeling of tranquility first comes from the form of the entire poem - the iambic pentameter in a blank verse. This regular syllable, combined with free rhythm, makes the entire poem catchy and reduces complex and anxious emotions, thus giving a sense of relaxation and composure. In order to better match the Narrator's calm tone and create a sharp contrast with the boy's tragic death.

2.1.2. Images

Not only that, Frost continues to incorporate many natural images in this poem, such as "sticks of wood", "Sweet-scented stuff", "sunset", and "mountains", which also give a sense of peace. Even in the context of a heavy plot, something trivial is enough for the poet to show some romantic, brief moments of joy in a sad story, to show the connection between humans and nature or anything else [4]. Frost uses his mastery of poetry to engage readers in the fantasy he created, so as to express his views on the real world to readers [5]. Thus, these natural and beautiful images that he creates now are a kind of fantasy. Now, contrast that with the repetition of "the saw snarled and rattled," which Frost imbues the saw with self-awareness, which can also be seen as an element of fantasy. Frost does not focus on the boy in the first nine lines of the poem, but instead describes the saw who is about to kill the boy, as well as some comparisons between industry and nature. These seemingly unimportant environmental details also bring a sense of calmness. Although the poet expresses the overload pressure and pain that the boy carries to the readers when describing the saw, the anthropomorphic behavior and self-awareness exhibited by the saw exacerbate the dreamy feeling of the entire poem, and instead do not make people pay special attention to these suppressed things. To sum up, in fact, readers can find that Frost has actually made readers anticipate some negative events, uncover its calm exterior, and look into its turbulent interior intentionally, in these images depicted and some contrasts between them.

2.1.3. Characters

The appearance of the boy and sister, as well as the word ‘supper’, brought a warm feeling and further weakened the negative content of the poem. Until the climax, the saw cut off the boy’s hand, causing pain. However, Frost described this bloody fact in a euphemistic way like ‘Neither refused the meeting’, without any atmosphere of tension or panic. Even the boy’s reaction was just a ‘rueful laugh’, and the pain seemed to disappear at this moment. However, such a peaceful scene is clearly abnormal. The ‘rueful laugh’ portrays the boy’s numbness, combined with the previous situation in the yard. In a high-intensity working environment, his body has become dull, as if he cannot feel pain. However, this is his greatest pain, and the poet also uses this calm appearance. Frost may have meant it as a rebuke, to condemn the family who made the boy work too early and reveal his true despair - ‘He saw all spoiled’. This sentence is followed by a cesura, indicating that the poet wants to emphasize the reason why the boy has lost his desire to survive - that is, work, which further exacerbates this numbness as if he left his hand and he would be completely worthless.

Thus, Frost interprets the helplessness and pain of a child and his situation. In fact, it is not only in “Out, Out -” that the concept of pastoral life is not as beautiful as people think, but also in Frost’s other poems, people who work in nature and on the farm face different difficulties and experience very different unhappy lives [6]. In other words, the pain of the boy is the pain of all the people in the poem.

2.1.4. Process of Death

Frost then begins to show some feelings of pain and despair. But the same is still the continuation of the previous calm narrative. ‘Don’t let him, sister!’ This sentence pushed the painful atmosphere to a painful climax, but soon, with the action of ether, everything returned to calm. The boy also gradually lost his heartbeat - “Little--less--nothing!” The expression of the death process was not strong. The boy died slowly in numbness, and his pain disappeared. In fact, the boy is also very likely to have died from the effect of ether, which again shows the doctor’s numbness and negligence [7]. Whatever the reason, it shows the same thing that he was a victim of this oppressive society, and in the end, he could not even struggle. ‘And they, since they / Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.’ People have no reaction to the death of a person, which is a cold ending, but it also shows that there is no difference between these people and the boy in reality. They are just not dead, and their hearts are actually numb and indifferent, just like the boy’s “rueful laugh”. The inner pain is replaced by the surface calmness, and the heavy pressure of reality has long made them unconscious.

Robert Frost uses a tranquil tone to tell such a sad story, in which he expresses a boy’s deep pain and despair, as well as condemning some social regulations at the time, such as child labor, and the tragic consequences it brings.

2.2. Relation and Association with Other Works

2.2.1. Macbeth

Similarly, this obscure feeling is implied in the title “Out, Out -”. It was originally a line from Shakespeare’s tragedy Macbeth, “Out, out, Brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow...” represents the disappearance of life, indicating that Frost initially hinted to the reader about the direction of the entire plot. However, in the poem, he did not express it clearly but described it in a calm tone. Either way, both Macbeth and the boy in this poem are destroyed by external forces, such as witches and saws, who control their fates [8]. This tragic element takes hold of them, in other words, from the title of the poem, the fate of the boy is already set. The control of his life as a child laborer is this society and his parents.

2.2.2. *The Laocoon and His Sons*

The calm performance of the protagonist's death in "Out, Out--" might also be understood as sublime. The definition of the sublime from the psychological perspective is more complex, it includes fear, pleasure, etc. [9]. This complex emotion seems to be difficult to define in this poem, but it can be seen that the environment in which the boy grows up is at the junction of nature and industrialization, and whether it is the peace of death or the contrast between nature and the saw, it creates and aggravates this complex emotion. In the midst of his greatest danger, the boy's performance is not reflected in an extremely ferocious way, even at the time of death, there is no struggle, but a peaceful death. This has something in common with the famous sculpture "The Laocoon and his Sons", that is, when the Laocoon is in a life-and-death situation, he does not show excessive panic and ferocious features. Although Laocoon's muscles are tightened and his face shows pain, he does not show extreme features. Unlike ordinary people's extreme fear of death, their faces do not show such extreme fear. The same is true of the boy in Frost's works. Such expressions are filled with a tragic sense of sublimity, which transcends ordinary people's cognition of death as well as tragedy and thus makes this pain more obscure. Returning to the common feature of "Out, Out -" and Laocoon's statue mentioned before, that is, this sublime feeling comes from external calmness and inner pain. This sublimity is not an attempt to show the restrained soul and spirit of a child, for it is obvious that he is unable to do so, and it only shows the helplessness and numbness of the boy. The expression of such lofty tragic color may be found through many images in the poem, as well as the historical background of the poem and Frost's real experience.

Whether it is the statue of many centuries ago or the poem of modern times, where does the sense of the sublime of tragedy appear in "Out, Out -", and what is the help and interpretation of it, is exactly the content that needs to be explored.

3. Discussion

In analyzing Robert Frost's poem 'Out, Out -,' it becomes evident that Frost was not merely a storyteller; rather, each of his poems encapsulates unique insights and ideas. Despite the presence of interesting and at times exaggerated elements within this poem, its core essence remains that of a tragedy. Considering the essence of tragedy as its capacity to provoke introspection and reveal societal issues, 'Out, Out -' aligns perfectly with this notion.

Within the poem, Frost employs the boy's numbed acceptance of his imminent death to satirize the boy's irresponsible guardian and the societal pressures that force children into labour. In the face of the relentless struggle for survival, adults are compelled to delegate physical labour even to their own offspring. One might expect that this child should have thrived in the harmonious and picturesque natural environment that surrounded him. However, the stark reality is that he had no opportunity to appreciate the beauty around him. Instead, there was a workload beyond his years. Even after the traumatic loss of his hand, overwhelming exhaustion and stoic acceptance betray the premature maturity imposed upon him. His tragic end was an outcome of circumstances beyond his control, and lack of panic only underscores the harshness of life.

It is worth noting that prior to his death, the child harboured resentment toward life and its unfortunate conclusion, evoking a profound sense of regret in readers. Frost masterfully employs subdued and tranquil language through the narrator's perspective to draw attention to the disturbing elements within the poem. During the era in which this poem is set, the death of a child was regrettably a commonplace occurrence, and the callous indifference that followed such events is particularly chilling.

Indeed, at a time when labor was scarce, many families in Europe and the United States engaged their young children in manual labor at an early age [10]. Frost's condemnation extends to society's

disregard for the sanctity of life and its exploration of the concept of responsibility. The child bore a burden of responsibility far beyond tender years, while adults seemed to evade culpability for his tragic fate. Consequently, the poem serves as a stark exposé of prevalent issues in the agricultural society of that time, compelling readers to confront these societal shortcomings and injustices.

4. Conclusions

Frost's use of the tranquil tone in 'Out, Out -' makes the death process of a boy unusual, but at the same time, it more intuitively demonstrates the neglect, oppression, and irresponsibility of adults towards their children. The society depicted by Frost gradually becomes anti-human, and the calm language can perfectly express the numb pain and despair. Readers can also empathize with the protagonist's process of destruction in silence, filled with unwillingness and fear. This somewhat contrasting expression technique can precisely arouse readers' curiosity, such as saw and child, death and tranquillity, industry and nature. These contrasting things, as well as their tone and expressive techniques, attract them to pay attention to such things and think about their consequences. However, there is not much correlation with other concepts and historical facts in this article, which has led to some limitations, such as the lack of comprehensive exploration and the inclusion of extended materials, resulting in a single content. Frost's personal experience is also rich and colourful, and this poem and his own experience can also be analysed many times. However, the poet has too much information, which makes it difficult to screen information and explore more comprehensively, which is also a regret of this paper. Perhaps adding more citations and themes, or comparing them with Frost's other poems or essays, can make this theme better understood. Anyway, the expression of this poem is to add some novel narratives to the poet's original common themes, which seems to remind the reader that he hopes such events will be taken seriously.

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