

## A Study of Tool Imagery in Robert Frost's Poems

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### Abstract

**Robert Frost is famous for his realistic descriptions of rural life in the United States. The salient feature of Frost's poems is the frequent use of instrumental imagery, but there is little research on it. Taking Frost's several masterpieces as examples, this paper discusses two kinds of tools in Frost's works including labor tools and entertainment tools based on his family background and life experience in order to understand the symbolic meaning and function of tool images and promote readers to fully and deeply understand the theme and connotation of Frost's poems.**

### Keywords

**Rural life; image; labor tools; entertainment tools.**

### 1. Introduction.

Robert Frost is regarded as one of the most outstanding poets of American literature in the 20th century. He was a diligent and tireless writer who won four Pulitzer prizes and was called the laureate poet and folk singer in American literature. What is unique about Frost is that cities rarely appear in his poetry at a time when many of his contemporaries were obsessed with writing about them. Frost once referred to himself as "one and a half persons"--- half farmer, half teacher, and half poet. In his view, he was a farmer, and the countryside was the most important part of his life, so Frost's poetry focused on nature and rural life. In the creation of poetry, poets have always paid attention to the preservation of distinct local colors. Just as the famous novelist William Faulkner (1897-1962) drew attention with his description of the American south, Frost is known for his poetic background in rural New England.

The charm of Frost's poems lies in its seeming naturalness, directness, and simplicity. Although it uses spoken language to describe everyday life and the customs of New England, his language is in fact a small and profound meaning that readers must take time to understand. At the end of Frost's poems, there are thought-provoking impressions, just like the poetic eyes of classical Chinese poetry. In the Frost's own words, poetry should begin with joy and end with wisdom. Such reflections on life run through his whole work.

After his father's death when Frost was at the age of 11, Frost returned to live with his widowed mother. Because of his uncertain early life, Frost began his life on a farm very early, day after day of hard and rigid farm work. The experience of being in the countryside not only cultivated his feelings for rural life and the landscape, but also provided him with material for his poetry, which might explain why Frost's poems are filled with the ubiquitous imagery of tools. His poems are based on his personal experience and rooted in the nurture land, as jin-cai Yang pointed out: "Frost captured the image of universal significance and concrete examples from the countryside of New England, implicitly symbolized the external world, referred to the universal philosophy with the regional characteristic people and objects. Frost's poetry is therefore concerned with the condition of the whole human race through the observation of life in New England." [1]p144

## 2. The Image of Poetry

The interpretation of poetry is a complicated process of meaning exploration. Readers should start from the works to explore the hidden meaning. Not only the ancient and modern poet but also the Chinese and foreign poets relentlessly pursued the endless meaning of poems with limited words. Therefore, the images have been the toast of poetry. Logical language can't perfectly express the inner feelings of poets, only use the imagery to express another kind of feeling.

The so-called image is a kind of artistic image created by the creative subject through its unique emotional activities. Tong qingbing, a master of literary theory, explained in his book *A Course in Literary Theory* that "image is an ideographic image that aims to express philosophical ideas and is characterized by symbolism or absurdity to achieve the ideal state of mankind, which is the artistic model." [2] P118 Image is a typical ideographic image and a subjective image, which can be perceived. In comparative literature, image is explained the combination of subjective meaning and objective image, what is the integrated into the poet's thoughts and feelings. It is a specific image endowed with a certain special meaning and literary meaning. In short, image is the lyricism by borrowing.

The theory of image originated very early in China. There was a saying in *Zhouyi Xici* about viewing objects to obtain images and producing images to fully express one's meaning. Chinese classical poems used images incisively and vividly. Many poets often arrange numerous images in dense and complicated order to express their ideas, such as Bai li's *Seeing off Menghaoran to Guangling*. The poem is composed of a series of images such as yellow crane tower, fireworks, solitary sail and the Yangtze River. It presents a vivid picture of hidden feelings in the scenery. Although it does not express feelings, it shows deep feelings in the hidden scene. The poem does not directly express Bai li's attachment to his friend, but expresses his deep feelings through the disappearing sail, the long river and the poet standing for a long time aside. On the surface, every sentence in this poem is to describe a scene, but in fact every sentence is lyrical, which arouses readers' endless aesthetic imagination.

In western literary works, Ezra Pound's *In a Station of the Metro* is similar to Zhiyuan Ma's poems. Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was a representative poet of the modern imagist school in the west. By reading and translating Chinese classical poetry and Japanese haiku, he found that Chinese poets never directly expressed their views, but expressed everything through imagery to realize the art of imagery. Pound defined image poems as that image is the combination of reason and emotion presented in a moment. The masterpiece of Pound is *In a Station of the Metro*.

The apparition of faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough. [1] p66

The images presented to the reader are visual, such as faces in a crowd or petals on a branch. There are also those that appeal to the sense of touch. "Wet black bough" is a vague sense of touch outside the vision. In a few words, readers can experience the vivid effect of overprinting of by the correspondence between human face and petals.

Frost, a contemporary poet of Pound, drew symbols and images from nature and rural life. Through the use of imagistic language, his poems make readers hear the voice of New England.

## 3. The Tools in Frost's Poems

Nature and country life is the theme of Frost's poems. He uses imagery and metaphor to express a symbolic meaning with the help of nature and countryside, endow all things in nature and rural labor with emotion and spirituality, and make readers appreciate the complexity and richness of life. Unlike other modernist poets, the tools in Frost's poems come from people's

real rural lives, which are independent and objective, not imaginary, and therefore closer to life. The tool images explored in this paper are generalized rather than limited to the tool of labor. Frost's tools fall into two categories: working tools, which people use to work on a farm; Entertainment tools, which people use to achieve the purpose of entertainment or appreciation, with metaphorical and symbolic meaning, but also more difficult to grasp.

### 3.1. The Tools for Labor

#### 3.1.1 Shovel

The shovel used to dig a grave for a recently deceased child in Home Burial is one such tool. The poem described the obstacles in human relations and the difficulties in communication between husband and wife. The couple in the poem had just lost their beloved son. They should have supported each other, cared for each other and shared the pain and overcome the difficulties, while the couple in the poem had different attitudes towards the loss of their son. The husband was rational and calm. The loss of the child was just a part of family life. Everything had become the past and they should establish a new life order as soon as possible. For the young wife, it was a pain that could never be healed. The wife wanted her husband to share her grief. When she found that her husband unmoved by his shovel, let every grain of sand fall, buried her son and went back to his laughing and talking life, she was in great pain and felt that she endured the pain of losing his son. The husband tried to convince himself that this was the order of nature by digging a grave for his child himself. In the face of family tragedy and life misfortunes, it was indeed a wise choice to struggle against fate to be cheerful, to be witty, and to forget as soon as possible. But a husband could neither make his wife understand his feelings nor help her to get rid of the great sadness.

The wife could not understand why her husband was so indifferent to the death of their child. Home Burial is actually a pun, referring both to the father burying his children and to their marriage burying their family.

#### 3.1.2 Long Ladders and Barrels

The long ladder was high on the tree top, with the two points pointing skyward, and the barrel at the foot of the ladder was not yet filled with apples. At this time, the author dreamed in the hazy smell of apple and dreamed of peeling the ice in the morning. He dreamed of a huge apple. This was a scene depicted in the work After Apple Picking. Long ladder and wooden barrel are the images of tools in the poem. Through this image, the poem symbolized the beauty of labor. At the same time, the author warned people not to be greedy through the illusory scene of dreaming. Only by taking the proper measure could the harmony between man and nature be achieved. Life was always a lot of defects and the greatest joy could be detached from the world, By contrast, the farmer who picked the apple in the poem was somewhat pathetic. A year of pay for the moment to be happy and satisfied is shattered because the past hardships and harvest were not perfect.

#### 3.1.3 Scythe

The scythe in Mowing is a traditional image. Usually, the sickle is the tool for the worker's survival, and also the embodiment of the worker's willingness to control the world according to his own will in the process of labor, symbolizing hope and harvest, as well as the conquest of nature. But in this poem, the scythe in the hand seems to lower its head to the earth and whisper. "What was it whispering? I knew not well myself." [3]p12 In front of the mysterious and magical world, people can only act as spectators, can only guess. "Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun. Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound." [3]p12 There was a gap between man and nature. Tools had their own power, and man must learn to use them and live in harmony with nature. At the same time, the poet wanted to use the experience of mowing grass to map to the creation of the poems. The pen in the poet's hand is not only a tool for creation, but also a tool for harvest.

### 3.1.4 Buzz Saw

Out, out begins with the roar and murmur of the buzz saw, a loud noise that reverberates through the yard and the world, filling everyone's ears. The boys in this poem, due to some reason did some hard work that should have been done by adults. In this kind of overload physical labor there was no freedom. He must finish all the work on hand before he could have a rest. But the saw suddenly like animals ate the boy's hand, and ate the life of the young child. The chainsaw, the symbol of modern industrial civilization, became the dominant force in the poem from the beginning. It seemed to have come to life and could have killed a living being, but what was more terrible than death was the indifference and numbness of the boy's family. The title of the work was originally Macbeth's lament for his dead wife in Shakespeare's play Macbeth, which was intended to express the poet's anger at the loss of his emotional ability.

The pessimistic mood and the picture of death in Frost's poetry originated from his life full of sorrows and frustrations. None of his six children had a happy ending. In 1900, Frost was hit by a double whammy of life. His youngest son died of cholera at the age of five, and his mother died of cancer. In 1907, her 3-day-old daughter died. In 1934 the youngest daughter died of puerperal fever. In 1938 his beloved wife died of a heart attack. In 1940 the son committed suicide and another daughter was committed to a mental hospital. In addition, the death of his father and sister tormented him. For him, life was so hateful and unbearable, and the experience of life was reflected in the poem, and the poet expressed his feelings in the poem.

## 3.2. The Tools for Entertainment

In essence, Frost's poems are not as simple and straightforward as they seems. In the poet's opinion, the highest value of poems lied in its meaning, which is secrecy. Frost is keen to use the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of images in his poems to convey feelings and philosophy. Each poem is, in its essence, a new metaphor for the deepest thoughts we have.[4]p198

In The Birch Tree the birch tree pointing straight to the sky is a typical entertainment tool. The poet thought of the boy swinging the tree from the curved birch tree. The Birch Tree symbolized the boy in the poem and it was also a way of overcoming loneliness in the poet's childhood, and a way of getting away from the real world for a while. Therefore, the poet writes:

Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,  
Whose only play was what he found himself,  
Summer or winter, and could play alone.  
One by one he subdued his father's trees,  
By riding them down over and over again.  
Until he took the stillness out of them,  
And not one but hung limp, not one was left.  
For him to conquer. He learned all there was.  
To learn about not landing out too soon.  
And so not carrying the tree away,  
Clear to the ground.[3]p63

From describing a child climbing a birch to thinking about his own life, the poet wished to climb another birch and return to his carefree boyhood. What the reader saw was the poet's ambivalence between the ideal and the reality. He ass tired of life. He wanted to climb a silver birch tree to find a way out, a way to heaven. People started from the reality to pursue the ideal, and finally could not give up the connection with the reality and returned to the reality. People were in this reality and the ideal of the paradox of survival. The boy who swung the tree made

the birch bend from the sky to the ground and back again to the sky, just as the poet claimed the path of his creation ---begin with joy and end with wisdom.

#### 4. Conclusion

Rural life and tools images make Frost's poems full of philosophy and wisdom. Emerson's transcendental philosophy thought is his poetic theory foundation. Some researchers tried to compare Frost and Emerson, Wordsworth, but Frost's works are not just the traditional simple inheritance of romantic poetry since the 19th century, but manifest the characteristics of modern poets. Frost is often referred to as the romantic and modernist poet in the alternation between the different periods of the poetry. In the world of Frost's poems, we can often feel the loneliness, alienation and helplessness of human beings everywhere in modern society. Although his poems describe simple subjects with simple techniques, they reveal the ultimate concern for life and baptize our souls.

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