

## CHAPTER IV

### FAITH IN HARD WORK IN FROST'S POETRY



#### I. The Positive Side of the Work Ethic

Frost's poetry reflects another American characteristic: an eagerness for, and faith in, hard work. It is quite clear that Frost values work, both for its own sake and for its result. As has been mentioned before, the Americans have created a "religion" of hard work since they first came to their new land. Frost himself worked hard before he was acknowledged as a great poet of America. In many poems, he builds up an image of a man who puts high value on hard work. For example, in "The Death of the Hired Man," Silas, the hired man, is portrayed as a man who works hard. Mary tells her husband that Silas has returned "home" to work.

'...Silas declares you'll have to get him back.  
He says they two [Silas and a boy who also works  
for Warren] will make a team for work:  
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth!  
...  
Silas up on the cart to build the load,  
Harold along beside to pitch it on.'  
(p. 51)

Here, Frost pictures Warren as a farmer whose sense of duty doesn't permit him to have Silas back; to him Silas is irresponsible about his work:

'I told him so last haying, didn't I?  
 If he left then, I said, that ended it.  
 What good is he? Who else will harbor him  
 At his age for the little he can do?

...  
 Off he goes always when I need him most.

...  
 In haying time, when any help is scarce.  
 In winter he comes back to us. I'm done.'  
 (p. 49)

Most of Frost's central characters are involved in hard work. A character in "The Code" emphasizes Frost's belief in hard work:

...But work! that man could work, especially  
 If by so doing he could get more work  
 Out of his hired help. I'm not denying  
 He was hard on himself. I couldn't find  
 That he kept any hours - not for himself.  
 Daylight and lantern-light were one to him:  
 I've heard him pounding in the barn all night...  
 (p. 91)

Even when Frost does not directly create an image of a man who works hard, the reader feels indirectly that most of his characters have undergone hardships and struggle against outer forces in an attempt not to be defeated and consequently to achieve and progress. For example, in the poem entitled "The Census-Taker," the speaker is sent out to be a census-taker, counting people; ironically he finds no one; what he sees is:

...None in the hundred miles, none in the house,  
 Where I came last with some hope, but not much  
 After hours' overlooking from the cliffs  
 An emptiness flayed to the very stone.  
 I found no people that dared show themselves,  
 None not in hiding from the outward eye...  
 (pp. 216)

They suffered at the hands of nature, as a result they abandoned their houses. What the poet feels is how strongly they fought against nature. They tried not to be defeated. The poet is somewhat melancholy, for he wants "life to go on living"; he says:

...The door was still because I held it shut  
 While I thought what to do that could be done -  
 About the house - about the people not there.  
 This house in one year fallen to decay  
 Filled me with no less sorrow than the houses  
 Fallen to ruin in ten thousand years  
 ...  
 The melancholy of having to count souls  
 Where they grow fewer and fewer every year  
 Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.  
 It must be I want life to go on living.  
 (p. 217)

Here, he means that he wants people to live on the land, develop their civilization and build up their society. In other words, he encourages people not to give up in the struggle against cruel nature, for their lives will thus count for something.

Again in "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind," the poet asserts that man must struggle very hard in order not to be defeated. He begins his poem with the

scene of a "... flickering, human pathetic light" which stands for "life." At first, he thinks the people will be defeated and give up:

...It seemed to me, by the people there,  
 With a God - forsaken brute despair.  
 It would flutter and fall in half an hour  
 Like the last petal off a flower.

But later he changes his mind, saying:

...They can keep it burning as long as they please;  
 They can put it out whenever they please.

...  
 Life is not so sinister - grave.  
 Matter of fact had made them brave.

...

they fear not life...  
 (pp. 376-377)

This suggests that men who work hard will get through hardships as men with

... weight and strength  
 To feel the earth...  
 (p. 280)

In "On a Tree Fallen Across the Road," there is an expression of a strong will to work hard and to struggle for progress and achievement; in the beginning the tree asks "Who we think we are"

Insisting always on our own way so.  
 She likes to halt us in our runner tracks,  
 And make us get down in a foot of snow  
 Debating what to do without an ax.

And yet she knows obstruction is in vain:  
 We will not be put off the final goal  
 We have it hidden in us to attain...

(p. 296)

The old man in "A Hundred Collars" shows himself to be an old man working hard with pleasure; Forst describes himself in the same way in "Two Tramps in Mud Time." For him, work is a combination of love and need. As the poet is chopping wood, two men come expecting to get his job. This, says the poet, only increases his love of the job:

...The time when most I loved my task  
 These two must make me love it more  
 By coming with what they came to ask,  
 You'd think I never had felt before  
 The weight of an ax - head poised aloft,  
 The grip on earth of outspread feet.  
 The life of muscles rocking soft  
 And smooth and moist in vernal heat.

(p. 358)

For Frost, it requires love and need to work successfully; for this will lead to achievement and progress. He says:

...My right might be love but theirs was need.  
 And where the two exist in twain  
 Theirs was the better right - agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,  
 My object in living is to unite  
 My avocation and my vocation  
 As my two eyes make one in sight.  
 Only where love and need are one,  
 And the work is play for mortal stakes,  
 Is the deed ever really done  
 For Heaven and the future's sakes.

(p. 359)

The conflict between the husband and the wife in "In the Home Stretch" follows from their different attitudes toward life. For the wife, to live on a farm is hard, cruel and dangerous. But for the husband, it is a new beginning which by requiring hard work, develops his character as a man, and gives him the experience of self-reliance and independence. As the poet says:

'... Never mind,  
It's not so bad in the country, settled down,  
When people 're getting on in life. You 'll like it.'  
(p. 142)

All the way through the poem, the husband encourages his wife to change her attitude toward country life.

In the poem entitled "Mowing," Frost clearly praises the idea of hard work. He begins with the lines:

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,  
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.  
(p. 25)

Pretending that the scythe whispers something to him, the poet says:

... I knew not well myself;  
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,  
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound -  
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.  
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,  
....  
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.  
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.  
(p. 25)

Nothing is heard except the sound of the scythe: the final picture is that of a man working hard.

## II The Negative Side of the Work Ethic

As was mentioned in Chapter II, the American people work hard because they believe in achievement and progress. As a result they often succeed, but sometimes they turn out to be too practical, hard-hearted, and tough. For example, in the poem entitled "Out, Out -," Frost presents the excessive practicality of the workers. Because they concentrate too much on their work, they seem to be indifferent even when a boy is badly hurt. It appears that Frost disapproves of having a boy working in the factory; he says:

... I wish they might have said  
To please the boy by giving him the half hour  
That a boy counts so much when saved from work...  
(p. 171)

Accidentally his hand is cut off by the saw and he dies later. At first they are shocked to see it and

No one believed. They listened at his heart.  
Little - less - nothing! - and that ended it.  
No more to build on there. And they since they  
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.  
(pp. 171-172)

The same picture is again given in the poem called "Home Burial" in which a couple has lost its child but cannot share the grief together. As the husband is very practical, he only concentrates on his business and working. This detaches him from his wife, who is very sensitive to the death of "her" child. His excessive practicality hurts her. This is immediately shown after the burial; as his wife accuses him of no feeling, saying:

'...If you had any feelings, you that dug  
 With your own hand - how could you? - his little  
 grave;  
 I saw you from that very window there,  
 Making the gravel leap and leap in air,  
 Leap up, like that, like that, and land so lightly  
 And roll back down the mound beside the hole.  
 I thought, Who is that man? I didn't know you.  
 And I crept down the stairs and up the stairs  
 To look again, and still your spade kept lifting.  
 Then you came in. I heard your rambling voice  
 Out in the kitchen, and I don't know why,  
 But I went near to see with my own eyes.  
 You could sit there with the stains on your shoes  
 Of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave  
 And talk about your everyday concerns.  
 ...

'I can repeat the very words you were saying.  
 "Three foggy mornings and one rainy day  
 Will rot the best birch fence a man can build."  
 Think of it, talk like that at such a time!  
 What had how long it takes a birch to rot  
 To do with what was in the darkened parlor.  
 You couldn't care! ...

(p. 72)

What his wife has seen is shocking to her as he suddenly begins to talk about his business and the weather as if nothing had happened.



In his well-known poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Frost seems to feel sympathetic with the speaker, imagined as a man who senses his duty and responsibility and has no time for himself. The poem begins with the speaker, who on a frozen night stops by someone's woods to appreciate the quietness of the place. He is deeply touched with the scene, although

[His] little horse must think it queer  
 To stop without a farmhouse near  
 Between the woods and frozen lake  
 The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake  
 To ask if there is some mistake.

(p. 275)

Spending a short period of time sensing the loneliness and the privacy of the woods, the speaker reminds himself that he has

... promises to keep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep,  
 And miles to go before I sleep,

(p. 275)

This means that though he wants to spend more time to appreciate the peacefulness of the place, his "promises," which are his business affairs, work, and responsibilities, keep him from doing it.

Frost also emphasizes an idea of excessive practicality in "Birches." He says he feels released when swinging birches and

... dream(s) of going back to be.  
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,  
 And life is too much like a pathless wood  
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs  
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping  
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.

(p. 153)

This is a picture of a man who feels tired of his "considerations," the "promises" of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." He works hard to achieve and progress but he is excessively burdened by his consciousness of duty. As a result he wants to be free from it, at least temporarily; he says :

...I'd like to get away from earth awhile  
 And then come back to it and begin over.  
 ...  
 I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,  
 And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk  
 Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,  
 But dipped its top and set me down again.  
 That would be good both going and coming back.  
 One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.  
 (p. 153)

The image given in "The Bear" is more symbolic but the idea is similar. Frost uses the poor bear in the cage to symbolize man,

...That all day fights a nervous inward rage,  
 His mood rejecting all his mind suggests.  
 He paces back and forth and never rests...  
 (p. 347)

Again Frost presents a practical man who is fighting and working hard and cannot stop even for a short period of time; he is trapped by life. Obviously, Frost sympathizes with him.

In addition to the obsession with practical affairs, sometimes Frost points out another negative side

of the work ethic; as in the poem entitled "The Wood-Pile" in which he describes a man who works very hard - and then forgets what he has done. The poem begins with the poet walking in a frozen swamp and seeing a pile of wood:

...It was a cord of maple, cut and split  
 And piled - and measured, four by four by eight.  
 And not another like it could I see.  
 No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it,  
 And it was older sure than this year's cutting,  
 Or even last year's or the year's before.  
 The wood was gray and the bark warping off it  
 And the pile somewhat sunken.

...

I thought that only  
 Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks  
 Could so forget - his handiwork on which  
 He spent himself, the labor of his ax,  
 And leave it there far from a useful fireplace  
 To warm the frozen swamp as best it could  
 With the slow smokeless burning of decay.  
 (pp. 126-127)

Frost does not state clearly why the wood is left unused but to him it seems unreasonable to work hard and then forget about it. To the men, the wood-pile stands for something: it has been experienced as a piece of work and he is no longer interested in it. This suggests that he is too concerned with the task; the end of this job only means the beginning of the another.