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# **The Poetry of Robert Frost, The Power and Intrigue of Simile Transcript**

Date: Tuesday, 11 April 2017 - 6:00PM

Location: Museum of London

11 April 2017

## **The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Power and Intrigue of Simile**

Professor Belinda Jack

We have been listening to a selection of piano music by George Gershwin whose creative period overlapped with Robert Frost's, although Gershwin, unlike Frost, died young.

Why have I chosen to speak about Frost (1874 - 1963)? He was described by T.S.Eliot as 'the most eminent, the most distinguished Anglo-American poet' and by Robert Graves thus: 'Frost was the first American poet who could honestly be reckoned a master-poet by world standards'. He is the only writer in history to have been awarded four Pulitzer prizes. But his relationships with literary circles, or 'in groups' were more complex. His creative life coincided with the rise of Modernism and Frost kept his distance. Literary modernism, originating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, displays a self-conscious refusal of traditional ways of writing, in order to explore new sensibilities. Modernists experimented with literary form and expression, following Ezra Pound's maxim to 'Make it new' (Make it New, Essays, London, 1935).

Frost was committed to traditional verse forms, which he nevertheless innovated but he abhorred the modernists' abandonment of regular structures. In an address to the Milton Academy, Massachusetts (in 1935), he declared that 'Writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down'.

Frost is revered almost as an American institution but I'm not sure how well known he is here, now: so a few words of biography.

Frost's father was a teacher and later a journalist. After his death in 1885, the family moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts, under the patronage of Frost's paternal grandfather who was an overseer at a New England mill. Frost graduated from Lawrence High School in 1892. He attended Dartmouth College briefly but returned home to teach and to work at various jobs, including helping his mother teach her class of rowdy boys.

Frost went to Harvard University from 1897 to 1899, but left due to ill health. Shortly before his death, Frost's grandfather purchased a farm for Robert and his new wife Elinor, in Derry, New Hampshire; Frost managed the farm for nine years, writing poetry early in the mornings and producing many of the poems for which he would later be celebrated. Ultimately his farming proved unprofitable and he returned to teaching.

In 1912, Frost came to England with his family, living first in Beaconsfield. His first collection of poetry, *A Boy's Will*, was published in 1913. In England he struck up some important friendships with other poets, including Edward Thomas, T.E. Hulme and Ezra Pound. Pound was the first American to write a complimentary review of Frost's work but later Frost found Pound somewhat overbearing and intrusive.

During World War I, Frost returned to America, and bought a farm in New Hampshire, and settled into writing, teaching, and lecturing. During the years 1916-20, 1923-24, and 1927-1938, Frost taught English at Amherst College in Massachusetts.

Here are three images that give a good idea of Frost across his life. (1-3)

It could be that Frost's reputation as a national poet has prejudiced literary critics against him. When he died, John F. Kennedy declared, 'His death impoverishes us all; but he has bequeathed his nation a body of imperishable verse from which Americans will forever gain joy and understanding.' Presidential sanction is not something that literary critics are going to be swayed by - quite the reverse. It would be death to any living American poet today to be trumpeted by Donald Trump!

As James M. Fox writes, 'Though his career fully spans the modern period and though it is impossible to speak of him as anything other than a modern poet... it is difficult to place him in the main tradition of modern poetry.' By this Cox means Modernism. Frost stands at the crossroads of 19th-century American poetry and modernism. His unwillingness to convert to all-out modernism - if there really were ever such a thing - infuriated the likes of Pound, for example.

So what I'm arguing is that Frost's reputation has been marred by his status as a 'national' poet and therefore in some sense the everyman's poet, a populist. This is prejudice. I also think that his commitment - or semi-commitment - to traditional forms, including the sonnet form, has led other readers and critics to consider him a reactionary rather than an innovator, like his contemporaries, the modernists.

But I think there is another, more complex reason for prejudice against his poetry, and that has to do with his use of simile, and the fact that his use of simile is quite extraordinarily various.

So tonight we'll be looking at another rhetorical trope, namely simile, and exploring some of Robert Frost's wonderful poems.

To set the mood we'll begin by listening to Frost reading one of his early poems, 'After Apple-Picking'. It's a deceptively straightforward poem, or straightforward until the final four lines where simile comes into play:

[Video/audio: <https://vimeo.com/109638231>]

Frost was concerned, among other things, to bring the rhythms of vernacular speech to poetry. So bear his voice and manner of reading in mind.

Critics have disparaged Frost claiming that he is a poet without technical ability, rhetorical complexity, or intellectual density. One of the reasons for this, I think, is to do with a common literary critical prejudice, namely the rating of metaphor over simile. Metaphor is commonly seen as more typical of poetic language and simile has often been seen as being better able to help express the logical qualities of the mind.

Robert Boyle's analysis of metaphor and simile in the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins strikes me as typical of this prejudice (Boyle, *Metaphor in Hopkins*). In his book Boyle demonstrates that – and I quote – 'Hopkins' mind tends towards expression through metaphor rather than through simile'. Here he is not stating a simple fact. Rather he is making an aesthetic judgement. He is saying that Hopkins' is great poetry because of his deft use of metaphor. Boyle pays virtually no attention to Hopkins' use of simile, not because Hopkins doesn't use simile but because of Boyle's implicit attitude to simile: it is a trope that is much less 'poetic' than metaphor: 'To a mind which prefers the clarity and order of content', he informs us 'simile is the natural expression. To a mind which hungers for the reality of being, even involved as being is in the darkness of unintelligibility, mystery, and confusion, metaphor is the natural expression'. For Boyle, metaphor is the creative force of the imagination. For him, 'Simile deals with relation between beings, not directly with being itself. Hence, since the two sides of the simile both exist outside the mind, simile can be used by the scientist'. The implication here is that the quest for knowledge undertaken by the scientist is at the furthest remove from the poet's pursuit. I don't believe this is necessarily always the case: see the poetry of Robert Frost.

Frost's use of simile across the years is strongly related to the growing complexity of his intellectual convictions about what we can know. Sometimes he uses simile to clarify, endorsing one of Boyle's definitions of simile: 'simile can be used to clarify. Simile is available to scientists'. This may be true of some of his early poetry but in his mature poetry the trope is put to work in different and more complex ways. His struggle to express the inexpressible is made especially visible by his long efforts to come to terms with this figure of speech, to mould its 'logical' structure so that it suits his expressive needs. Mastery of this figure of speech is perhaps more difficult than mastery of metaphor itself.

There is more to simile and metaphor than meets the eye, so to speak. Philosophers of language often use the Shakespearean example from *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo declares that 'Juliet is the sun'. This is patently untrue: Juliet is a young woman and the sun is a star. In this example the metaphor is indistinguishable, many argue, from a simile. What we understand is that 'Juliet is like the sun'. Here metaphor and simile amount to the same thing. In both cases an interpretive response is required of us. Juliet is warm, brilliant; Romeo's world revolves around her and so on. In these senses Juliet and the sun are alike.

So what exactly do we understand simile to be. It is a figure of speech in which a comparison is expressed by the specific use of a word or phrase such as: like, as, than, seems or Frost's favourite, 'as if'.

The technical terms 'tenor' and 'vehicle' are sometimes used to designate the two constituent parts of simile. In the statement, 'Juliet is like the sun', 'Juliet' is the tenor and 'the sun' is the vehicle.

Similes exist on a scale from those which can be immediately assimilated, and clarify, to those that bemuse – or amuse.

Let's consider some – at the far end of the scale.

'The earth is blue like an orange': the tenor = the earth; vehicle = the orange.

This is the Surrealist Paul Eluard. We've seen images of the earth from outer space which show it to be blue and we know that the earth and oranges are more or less spherical – the earth and an orange can be likened to each other. But there is a problem – oranges are orange in colour!

Or T. S. Eliot's, 'He laughed like an irresponsible foetus'? Assuming that we know to whom the 'he' refers, where do we find an irresponsible foetus whose laugh we can study? Eliot adds to the simile and gives clues for its interpretation by way of metaphor and further simile: 'His laughter was submarine and profound/ Like the old man of the sea's/ Hidden under coral islands/ Where worried bodies of drowned men drift down in the green silence,/ Dropping from fingers of surf' ('Mr. Apollinax'; 4). And I can't resist quoting the next three lines (5):

I looked for the head of Mr. Apollinax rolling under a chair

Or grinning over a screen

With seaweed in its hair.

It appears that Mr Apollinax has 'laughed his head off'!

Still more extreme, what about, 'He is as handsome ... as the chance encounter upon a dissecting-table of a sewing machine and an umbrella!?' (Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror*, 1869)

What I want to argue is that Frost's increasingly complex use of similes demonstrates how they satisfied both his own intellectual needs and the needs of modern poetry.

His similes are, in a curious way, an attempt at the subordination of expression by nodding to a word that does not exist as he struggles with the problem of referential inadequacy. [gloss] 'Meaning' may well be imponderable, but the similes trace in outline, or create a shadow for, what is there, and they do so with a kind of commanding and scientific exactness.

Frost was a great admirer of Mathew Arnold. In 'The Buried Life', Arnold wrote (6):

But hardly have we, for one little hour,

Been on our own line, have we been ourselves-

Hardly had skill to utter one of all

The nameless feelings that course through our breast,

But they course on for ever unexpressed.

Simile, in Frost, allows for the tracing of an outline of the otherwise nameless and unexpressed.

I'd like to look at a few examples in isolation, and then at a number of others, exploring how they work within the wider patterns of the relevant poems.

'Mending Wall' is not just the title of one of Frost's most famous poems, it is a trope of American culture. Two justices in the Supreme Court went as far as to cite it in order to illustrate two points of view in constitutional law!

In a dramatic monologue the speaker of the poem relates a conversation he has had with a neighbour. It is springtime and the two men are mending the stone wall that separates their properties. The speaker decides to engage his neighbour with a discussion of the needs or redundancy of boundary markers. The wall becomes a powerful metaphor: first for a lack of imaginative freedom, a kind of tyranny. But for the neighbour the wall is a metaphor for the rule of tradition, the necessity for limit markers, a sign of the individual's private ownership.

The speaker argues, 'My apple trees will never get across/ And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.' And the response has become an American idiom: 'He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours"'. The discussion continues, somewhat one-sided: 'Why do they make good neighbours...?' and so on. The neighbour is then described, through the use of simile (7):

'I see him there, /Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top/In each hand like an old-stone savage armed.'

The judgement is not given by way of metaphor. We are not told he 'was a savage armed', merely like one. So this is only suggestion. We talk, metaphorically, of the 'Stone Age', sometimes using it to suggest the archetypally primitive. Not only is the neighbour likened to a Stone Age savage, he is 'armed' too - not with a firearm, but with his stones.

The poem dramatizes the American debate between two principles: the freedom of the imagination - without boundaries, and the pragmatic need to check dreams. And in this poem the speaker's use of simile suggests that he is on the side of the liberals.

'Hyla Brook' is one of many Frost poems that begins contemplating a natural object - here a stream which in June has run dry. Metaphor is beautifully exploited, 'Its bed is left a faded paper sheet/ Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat.' One reading is that the stream represents poetic inspiration which has run dry, 'a [blank] faded paper sheet'. But the poem also exploits a deft simile: the stream has dried up and the cattle have been moved accordingly:

'(And taken with it all the Hyla breed/That shouted in the mist a month ago, /Like ghost of sleigh bells in a ghost of snow.)'

The vehicle, 'ghost of sleigh bells in a ghost of snow' could hardly evoke anything more elusive and mysterious.

'Sleigh bells' awake our aural sense, 'ghosts' are visual sense - if only in negative as it were. And the idea of a 'ghost of snow' is so white as to suggest a white-out. There is a similarly nebulous simile in 'The Runaway' (8; 1923):

And then we saw him bolt.

We heard the miniature thunder where he fled,

And we saw him, or thought we saw him, dim and gray,

Like a shadow across instead of behind the flakes.

(‘The Runaway’, 1923)

This is visually complex. ‘Shadows’ are an effect of light, not the object, and the prepositions ‘across’ and ‘behind’ in relation to snowflakes is dizzying.

‘Mending Wall’ and ‘Hyla Brook’ are relatively early Frost poems. I’d like to look at a couple of paired poems, one earlier, one later: Stars/Take Something like a Star.

‘Stars’ was first published in *A Boy’s Will* (1913), with the gloss, ‘There is no oversight of human affairs’. Appealing to the stars is symbolic of our humble place in the universe, but it also allows for the powers of human imagination latent within us. The expanse of virgin snow is conjoined to the symbol of the stars: it stands for the empty places within us and without us and also a *tabula rasa*, a clean sheet, on which we can inscribe the metaphors and similes which link us with the objects around us. Most importantly, in my view, this early poem already shows signs of Frost’s status as a speculative poet, questing for meaning rather than stating it, and this by way of his use of simile.

Here’s the first stanza (9):

How countlessly they [that is, the stars] congregate

O’er our tumultuous snow,

Which flows in shapes as tall as trees

When wintry winds do blow!-

‘As tall as’ might be taken to be a simile but no interpretive act is required of us. The comparison is straightforward: the snow is as deep as the height of the trees.

Then in stanza two things become more complicated (10):

As if with keenness for our fate,

Our faltering few steps on

To white rest, and a place of rest

Invisible at dawn -

‘As if’ here is another kind of simile. This is figurative language. It is ‘as if’ the stars were concerned for the fate of the walker in the snow - but they are not really. This is simile exploited to undermine the pathetic fallacy - the endowment of nature or inanimate objects, etc., with human traits and feelings, as in the laughing skies; the stubborn stone).

And, finally, in the third stanza a further pivotal simile conjoined to a metaphor (11):

And yet with neither love nor hate,

Those stars like some snow-white

Minerva’s snow-white marble eyes

Without the gift of sight.

The bright stars are like (simile) the white eyes of the goddess Minerva. Her eyes are ‘snow-white marble’ (metaphor) - and therefore ‘without the gift of sight’.

Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, art and war.

So already in this early poem Frost is exploiting the speculative power of simile, not to provide clarification but to undermine the Romantic notion that the stars look down on us with benign concern. The stars are likened to blind eyes that cannot see.

Frost wrote a number of poems about the night sky. One of the most sophisticated is ‘Choose Something Like a Star’, also published with the title, ‘Take Something Like a Star’ in *Selected Poems* (1963), first published in *Come*

In and Other Poems (1943). Frost described the poem in a statement for the magazine *Poet's Choice*, explaining that it 'mingle[s] science and spirit', while 'playing the words'.

Again Frost is exploring the pathetic fallacy (12).

The apostrophe in the first line, the opening, 'O Star', sets up expectations which have soon to be revised. (See the entry on the poem in *The Robert Frost Encyclopedia*, p. 51) The tone of the poem is mixed throughout. The speaker allows that the Star has a 'right' to some obscurity but the deferential qualification of lines 4-5 leads to the poet asserting the right to speak through the witty turn of line 5 which alludes to the sixteenth- and seventeenth- century tradition of metaphysical intellectualisation. The humour of line 11 exploits the wit of Tudor lyric poetry. The star's response to being bid to 'Say something we can learn/ By heart and when alone repeat', parodies the clichéd hyperbole of courtly love poetry, 'I burn'.

The reference to Keats' *Eremita* is also important. Keats rejects the meaning of the star as a remote benign presence, watching over us: 'A sleepless eremite'. Keats seeks instead to make the star a symbol of passionate human constancy.

The vagueness of the title, 'Take Something Like a Star' is fundamental to the poem. What is there, one wonders, that is like a star? Or is the 'like' here functioning not as simile, but rather as a 'for instance'.

The poem ends with the same reference:

So when at times the mob is swayed  
To carry praise or blame too far,  
We may take something like a star  
To stay our minds on and be staid.

The pun, 'stay', meaning to 'rest' and 'staid' meaning 'steady' or even 'conservative', adds a satirical, sceptical tone. Again there is a speculative sense to the poem. Contemplating a star may bring us a sense of peace, but it is also a clichéd way to behave, hence 'staid'.

If we cannot see that 'all metaphor breaks down somewhere', Frost maintains, we cannot know what to believe or how far to believe in anything.

This idea is explored most thoroughly in 'Design' (13; my analysis is in part based on that of the *Frost Encyclopaedia*).

'Design'

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 ingredients of a witches' broth --  
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,  
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.  
What had that flower to do with being white,  
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?  
What brought the kindred spider to that height,  
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?  
What but design of darkness to appal?--  
If design govern in a thing so small.

'Design' is an overtly speculative poem. It explores the theological argument that God's munificent design for the universe can be deduced from contemplation of the matter of his creation: 'And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good' (Genesis 1.31). Frost was an anti-romantic through and through, and the

poem undermines such a view of things while remaining ambiguous in terms of how Frost does see the universe.

The first stanza exploits simile, while the second, which should by rights [tradition] explain the first stanza, instead asks a number of questions which remain unanswered. The poem first appeared in *American Poetry 1922: A Miscellany*, and in its final form in *A Further Range* (1936). The poem has a narrative: the speaker finds a white spider on a 'white heal-all' (a flower which is usually blue), eating a dead white moth. In the second stanza the speaker considers the 'meaning' of the scene: is design evil? Is the designer wholly absent? Is the poem a satire on Romantic poetry?

Critics, taking their cue from Lionel Trilling's remarks, stress the 'terrifying' implications of the poem. The speaker is confused by his own metaphysics of whiteness and darkness. The speaker's existential angst stems from the failure of the created world to impart meaning. The speaker stands alone in the obscurity of his metaphysics.

The form of the poem, as always with Frost, is also key. [gloss] It is written in the form of a Petrarchan sonnet with a variant sestet. There is a sense of reasoned argument in the first eight lines, but the sestet, usually reserved for answers, undoes the certainties of the initial octave.

'Design', then, is also a poem about its own design. The spider, the moth and the heal-all are 'kindred'. They exist in an association which cannot be made sense of by means of simile or scheme. The similes seem designed not to work. They function more as repetitions. The moth is likened to 'rigid satin cloth'; the dead wings of the moth are carried 'like a paper kite'. Simile which is supposed to clarify, to add precision, seems to add nothing fails and this contributes to the poem's metaphysical failure. What the speaker describes is 'a thing so small' but it comes to stand for the mysteries of the created world, including its terrible savagery. The 'design' of the natural world may be beyond our comprehension. The design of the sonnet form is not. The poem draws on the imponderables of the natural world and places words into a form (a shape with structure and balance), a web of meaning, which is the only meaning that we are given. And in his poem 'Pertinax', he writes:

Let chaos storm!

Let cloud shape squarm

I wait for form

I'd like to explore one further poem, 'Come In', in terms of its use of simile.

'Come In' was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1941) and was included in *A Witness Tree* (1942). As in so many of Frost's poems the speaker is out in nature and experiences an encounter. What, if anything, is its meaning (14)?

As I came to the edge of the woods,

Thrush music - hark!

Now if it was dusk outside,

Inside it was dark

Too dark in the woods for a bird

By sleight of wing

To better its perch for the night,

Though it still could sing.

The last of the light of the sun

That had died in the west

Still lives for one sing more

In a thrush's breast.

Far in the pillared dark

Thrush music went -

Almost like a call to come in

To the dark and lament.

But no, I was out for stars:

I would not come in.

I meant not even if asked,

And I hadn't been.

The poem's imagery is dominated by darkness and light – 'dusk', 'dark', 'too dark', 'night', 'last of the light of the sun', 'pillared dark', 'dark', and, perhaps, 'stars', which are, after all, bright pinpoints in the night sky. And the contrast between the light and the darkness is associated with 'death' and 'life':

The last of the light of the sun

That had died in the west

Still lives for one sing more

In a thrush's breast.

The simile in the line, 'Almost like a call' provides the turning point in the poem. The 'I' introduced in the first line only reappears in the final stanza, although the 'almost like a call' must be apprehended by the speaker; so there is an implicit 'I' or 'me'. So it is almost as though the thrush's song is a call to the speaker to enter the 'dark and lament'.

The final stanza is one of assertions: 'I was out for stars', 'I would not come in', 'I meant not even if asked', 'And I hadn't been.'

The poem refuses the pathetic fallacy. The song of the thrush isn't 'calling' the speaker; his song is not just 'like a call', but 'almost like a call'. And yet the apprehension by the speaker of thrush song at the end of the day stimulates the imagination, it is a call to creativity.

Another magical simile involving birds comes in the poem, 'The Need to be Versed in Country Things' (15):

The birds that came to it through the air

At broken windows flew out and in,

Their murmur more like the sigh we sigh

From too much dwelling on what has been.

Again the simile is qualified, 'more like'. Again the pathetic fallacy is refused but the experience of nature is a stimulus to the imagination.

I'd like to end by suggesting that Frost's increasingly complex exploitation of simile is related to his commitment to form and his antipathy for his contemporaries' commitment to free verse. Frost was committed to form. 'Words in themselves do not convey meaning' he wrote in 1915. 'When in doubt there is always form to go on with' (Frost, *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Cox and Lathem, p. 106) Form, like simile, creates relationships – between the words conjoined in end rhyme, alliteration which brings words into relationship, or the comparative structure of stanzas etc.

Form is relationships – and so is simile.

Like the philosopher, Henri Bergson, whom Frost greatly admired, Frost accepts the uncertainties and instabilities of reality, but believed that we can prevail over temporal limitations by the imposition of form.

Writing about the process of making poems he says,

No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs its course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.

That 'momentary stay' is a function of form. And the 'momentary stay' allows us to feel what Seamus Heaney beautifully describes as, 'the cold tingle of infinity'

But Frost is not all existential doom and gloom (16):

'In a Glass of Cider':

It seemed I was a mite of sediment



That waited for the bottom to ferment  
So I could catch a bubble in ascent.  
I rode up on one till the bubble burst,  
And when that left me to sink back reversed  
I was no worse off than I was at first.  
I'd catch another bubble if I waited.  
The thing was to get now and then elated.

Frost writes about the process in 'The Figure a Poem Makes':

I tell how there may be a better wildness of logic than of inconsequence. But the logic is backward, in retrospect, after the act. It must be more felt than seen ahead like prophecy. It must be a revelation or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader. For it to be that there must have been the greatest freedom of the material to move about in it and to establish relations in it regardless of time and space, previous relation, and everything but affinity.

In Frost, the mystery is always a revelation – or the revelation remains a mystery. Frost wrote (17):

We dance round in a ring and suppose,  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.  
Frost can tell us what the secret is like, but not what it is.  
Thank you.

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