

A Study of Symbols and Imagery in the Poems by Robert Frost

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Abstract

This study focuses on the analysis of symbols and imagery found in poetry. It employs the symbolism theory proposed by Pickering and Hoepfer (1986) and the imagery theory developed by Lawrence Perrine (1992). The primary aim of this study is to analyze the symbols and imagery present in the poems of Robert Frost. To support this aim, three specific objectives have been established: (i) to identify the types of symbolism and imagery in each line of the poems, (ii) to examine the poetic language and the meanings behind these types of symbolism and imagery, and (iii) to explore the relationships between these themes, meanings, and symbols within the poems. This study utilizes a descriptive qualitative method. The findings indicate that the use of original symbolism and visual imagery is the most dominant aspect, with a close interrelation in terms of intertwined meanings and thematic constructions. In summary, Frost's use of symbols and imagery aligns with the themes of his poems. Although he is a 20th-century poet who focused on modernism rather than stereotypes, his work does not exhibit significant modernization. It is also evident that his adherence to traditional poetic conventions, combined with his emphasis on themes through the brilliant use of symbols and imagery, fosters a strong relationship among the themes, symbols, and imagery in his poetry.

Keywords: symbolism, imagery, theme, poetry

Introduction

Language serves as the primary instrument through which poets construct their compositions. Literary analysis facilitates the exploration of the multifaceted meanings embedded within a poem. Symbolism and imagery are essential components that enhance the poetic form, fostering emotional depth and a more profound comprehension. Through the examination of the interplay between these elements, readers can gain a greater appreciation for the intricacy and artistry inherent in poetry. As a form of symbolic expression, language represents objects, ideas, emotions, feelings, thoughts, and more. This symbolic nature is evident not only in everyday life but also in literature. Among the various literary forms, poetry stands out as the most prominent medium where symbolic language is frequently employed. Furthermore, these symbols are powerful tools for expressing human ideas, imagination, and emotions through poetry.

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According to Dunton (1911), poetry serves as a concrete and artistic expression of the human mind. In academic contexts, symbols play a crucial role in poetry; they are words or phrases employed by the author to convey implied meanings within the poem.

Poetry is a branch of literature that employs words as a medium to evoke illusions and stimulate the imagination, much like paintings utilize lines and colors to convey the artist's ideas (Hudson, as cited in Aminuddin, 1995).

Literary theory focused on poetry examines, among other aspects, the relative significance of various perspectives on poems. A poem can be understood both as a structured arrangement of words (a text) and as an event—encompassing the act of the poet, the experience of the reader, and its place in literary history. When considering the poem as a verbal construction, a key question arises regarding the relationship between meaning and the non-semantic features of language, such as sound and rhythm.

The predominant method of appreciating poetry in schools and universities has been to concentrate on the complexities of the speaker's attitude, viewing the poem as a dramatization of the thoughts and feelings of a speaker that one reconstructs. This approach is effective for analyzing lyric poetry, as many poems feature a speaker engaging in recognizable speech acts, such as reflecting on the significance of an experience, admonishing a friend or lover, or expressing admiration or devotion. Symbols serve as signs used to describe or convey meaning within the poem. (Stanton, 2007).

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to analyze 32 poems from Robert Frost's poetry collection, "A Boy's Will", through the lenses of symbolism and imagery, and to assess their contributions to the themes and meanings of his works. To support this aim, three objectives have been established: (i) to identify the types of symbolism and imagery present in each line of the 32 poems, (ii) to examine the poetic language and the meanings behind these types of symbolism and imagery, and (iii) to explore the relationships between the thematic meanings, imagery, and symbols in these poems.

Research Questions

There are four research questions in this study that align with its aims and objectives.

- (i) What types of symbols and imagery are the most and least frequent in these poems?
- (ii) What poetic language, symbols, and imagery are present in the poem, and what meanings do they convey?
- (iii) Is there a relationship between the symbols and imagery present in the poems?
- (iv) Is there any intended meaning beyond the symbolic uses found in the poems?

Literature Review

Brief Biography of Robert Frost

Robert Frost (1874–1963) was an American poet renowned for his portrayals of rural life and his command of traditional verse. Born in San Francisco, he relocated to New England following his father's death, a region that profoundly shaped his poetry. Despite facing early challenges, he achieved recognition with his collections **A Boy's Will** (1913) and **North of Boston** (1914) while residing in England. Frost won four Pulitzer Prizes and became one of America's most celebrated poets, renowned for works such as *Road Not Taken*, *by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, and *His poetry frequently explored themes of nature, individualism, and existential reflection, skillfully blending simple language with profound philosophical insights.* He was honored as the U.S. Poet Laureate and recited a poem at John F. Kennedy's inauguration. He passed away in 1963, leaving a lasting impact on American literature.

Theoretical Background

Three Types of Symbolism

According to Pickering and Hooper (1986), there are three common types of symbolism: (i) Conventional or Traditional Symbols, (ii) Personal or Private Symbols, and (iii) Universal or Original Symbols.

(1) Conventional or Traditional Symbol

Conventional or traditional symbolism refers to the use of symbols that have widely recognized meanings within a specific culture, tradition, or society. These symbols are not arbitrary; the members of that community generally agree upon their meanings. They can convey complex ideas, beliefs, or concepts in a simplified manner. Conventional symbolism is often found in art, literature, religion, rituals, and other forms of cultural expression.

(2) Personal or Private Symbol

Personal or private symbols are symbols that hold specific meanings for an individual, rather than being widely understood or recognized by society or a particular culture. These symbols are often unique to a person's experiences, memories, emotions, or private beliefs, and their meanings may not be immediately apparent to others. Personal symbols can carry significant emotional or psychological value.

(3) Universal or Original Symbol

Universal or Original Symbolism refers to symbols that possess meanings transcending cultural, societal, and individual boundaries. These symbols are often innate or universally recognized across various societies and time periods, connecting to fundamental human experiences or natural

elements. They tend to evoke emotions, ideas, or concepts that resonate on a profound, almost instinctual level, often grounded in shared human psychology, biology, or spirituality.

Imagery

Imagery is a powerful literary tool that enables writers to create vivid, sensory-rich experiences for their readers. It appeals to the senses, painting pictures in the mind of the reader and enhancing the emotional or intellectual impact of a story, poem, or other literary work. Imagery is not confined to merely visual representations but extends to all the senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—and even emotions and internal sensations. According to Laurence Perrine (1992), there are seven main types of imagery, each evoking a different sensory or emotional experience.

1. Visual Imagery

Visual imagery is perhaps the most commonly recognized type of imagery. It appeals to the sense of sight, allowing readers to visualize scenes, objects, characters, or landscapes in a detailed and vivid manner. This type of imagery uses descriptive language that evokes clear pictures, colors, shapes, and spatial arrangements. Visual imagery helps set the scene and builds a strong foundation for the reader's experience.

2. Auditory Imagery

Auditory imagery appeals to the sense of hearing. It involves words and descriptions that evoke sounds, whether they are loud, soft, musical, harsh, or anything in between. Writers use auditory imagery to evoke the sound of voices, nature, machinery, or anything that makes a noise. It can bring to life the background sounds of a setting or heighten the emotional atmosphere.

3. Olfactory Imagery

Olfactory imagery refers to descriptions that evoke smells, whether pleasant or unpleasant. This type of imagery can be particularly evocative, as smells are deeply connected to memory and emotion. Certain scents can trigger nostalgia, discomfort, or pleasure, making olfactory imagery a powerful tool for emotional resonance in a narrative or poem.

4. Gustatory Imagery

Gustatory imagery appeals to the sense of taste. It describes flavors, textures, and the overall experience of eating or drinking. This type of imagery can be used to convey the pleasure of food, the unpleasantness of a taste, or even metaphorical ideas about nourishment or deprivation.

5. Tactile Imagery

Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. It describes physical sensations of contact, including temperature, texture, pressure, and other tactile experiences. Tactile imagery helps create a

visceral sense of the physical world and brings depth to scenes involving interaction with objects or the environment.

6. Organic Imagery

Organic imagery focuses on internal sensations, such as feelings, emotions, or physical experiences within the body. This type of imagery represents internal states such as hunger, fatigue, nausea, fear, and longing. Organic imagery goes beyond the physical world to evoke the emotional or physiological states of characters, offering insights into their emotional journeys.

7. Kinesthetic Imagery

Kinesthetic imagery involves the sense of movement or action. It describes a physical movement or the sensation of motion, often portraying a character's actions, gestures, or the movement of objects or the environment. Kinesthetic imagery is especially important in dynamic scenes, where energy, tension, and action need to be conveyed to the reader.

Summary of the Poems

Into My Own

This poem explores a young person's longing for independence and self-discovery. The speaker imagines walking into a dark, endless forest, symbolizing personal growth and the unknown future. They believe that once they venture into this mysterious place, they will gain a deeper sense of self. The poem reflects themes of individuality, self-reliance, and the journey toward maturity.

Stars

Frost portrays the stars as distant, unwavering, and beyond human reach. He contrasts their silent, steady existence with the impermanence and struggles of human life. The stars symbolize guidance, constancy, and a sense of mystery. The poem suggests that while humans are drawn to the stars, they remain separated by an unbridgeable gap, emphasizing the contrast between earthly concerns and cosmic permanence.

A Late Walk

This poem captures the melancholy beauty of autumn's end. The speaker takes a walk through a field that is nearly barren, with fallen leaves and signs of approaching winter. The imagery conveys a sense of loss and nostalgia, but the poem ends with a small moment of hope—a late-blooming flower, symbolizing resilience and renewal. It reflects themes of change, endings, and fleeting beauty.

Related Research

The first research is "An Analysis of Symbolism in Robert Frost's Poems" accomplished by Aldila Ilma Aziza (2023). The collected data are analyzed according to Charles Sanders Pierce's Semiotics

Theory. In that research, the symbols of the meaning illustrate Robert Frost's feelings by using a comparison of life with nature. Based on the results of the symbol analysis in that research, many of the synonyms of nature are used to describe the connotation and meaning of existing life. The findings suggested that there are several symbolic meanings in each poem of Robert Frost and Robert Frost can properly supplement the symbols and meanings of natural life which become a beautiful harmony for his readers.

The second research is "An Analysis of Symbolic Signs in John Milton's Poems: Semiotic Approach" done by Milton Viensen (2020). In that study, the researcher focused on finding the symbols, the meaning, and the kind of symbols used in three poems titled *On His Blindness*, *On His Deceased Wife*, and *On His Being Arrived to the Age of Twenty-three*. The researcher used a semiotic approach and descriptive qualitative method in that research. In the process of collecting data, the researcher used the documentation method and to analyze the collected data, Riffaterre's semiotics theory is used. Most of the symbols that were used in the poems were personal symbols to highlight John Milton's experience and some of them were conventional symbols, especially Cristian symbols.

The third research is "An Analysis of The Symbols in Westlife Song Lyrics" (2019) by Hanna Eka Rosita. In that study, the meaning and the kind of symbols are used in Westlife songs. The researcher used a semiotic approach and descriptive qualitative method in that research. In the process of collecting data, the researcher used the documentation method and to analyze the collected data, Charles Sanders Pierce's theory is used. Most of the symbols that were used in the songs are symbols of color.

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research method. 32 poems by Robert Frost from the poetry book "A Boy's Will" served as the basis for this study material. Among them, 6 poems are randomly selected as a sample data analysis. Here, various symbols and imageries are examined through three types of symbolism classifications by Pickering and Hoeper (1986) and seven types of imagery by Perrine (1992). The data collection is presented in terms of tabulated format and the data analysis is also shown in tables and figures.

Every line of all poems is analyzed and shown in different colors and tables. All the results from this analysis are described in a numerical table format by means of frequency and percentage. Later, the findings are exhibited into figures and discussed by the focused theories.

In Symbolism analysis, there are three categories and they are (i) Traditional Symbolism [shown in terms of short form (TS)], (ii) Private Symbolism [shown in terms of short form (PS)] and (iii) Original Symbolism [shown in terms of short form (OS)].

In Imagery analysis, there are seven types, and they are (i) Visual Imagery (VI), (ii) Auditory Imagery (AI), (iii) Olfactory Imagery (OI), (iv) Gustatory Imagery (GI), (v) Tactile Imagery (TI), (vi) Organic Imagery (ORI) and (vi) Kinesthetic Imagery (KI).

Sample Data Processing

Sample Poem No. 1

In the following Table 1, analysis of symbolism found in the poem *Into My Own* is described as follow.

Table 1: Analysis of Symbolism Found in the Poem *Into My Own*

No.	Poem Line	Types of Symbolism			Total
		TS	PS	OS	
1.	One of my wishes is that those dark trees,	-	1	-	1
2.	So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,	-	-	1	1
3.	Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,	1	-	-	1
4.	But stretched away unto the edge of doom	1	-	-	1
5.	I should not be withheld but that some day	-	-	-	0
6.	Into their vastness I should steal away,	-	1	-	1
7.	Fearless of ever finding open land,	-	1	2	3
8.	Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.	2	-	-	2
9.	I do not see why I should e'er turn back,	-	-	-	0
10.	Or those should not set forth upon my track	-	1	-	1
11.	To overtake me, who should miss me here	-	-	-	0
12.	And long to know if still I held them dear.	-	-	-	0
13.	They would not find me changed from him they knew '	-	1	-	1
14.	Only more sure of all I thought was true.	-	-	-	0
Total		4	5	3	12

In the following Table 2, analysis of imagery found in the poem *Into My Own* is described as follow.

Table 2: Analysis of Imagery Found in the Poem *Into My Own*

No.	Poem Line	Types of Imagery							Total
		VI	AI	OI	GI	TI	ORI	KI	
1.	One of my wishes is that those dark trees,	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	2
2.	So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,	2	-	1	-	-	-	2	5
3.	Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
4.	But stretched away unto the edge of doom	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
5.	I should not be withheld but that some day	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
6.	Into their vastness I should steal away,	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
7.	Fearless of ever finding open land,	1	-	-	-	-	1	2	4
8.	Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.	3	-	-	-	-	-	2	5
9.	I do not see why I should e'er turn back,	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
10.	Or those should not set forth upon my track	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	2
11.	To overtake me, who should miss me here	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2
12.	And long to know if still I held them dear.	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	2
13.	They would not find me changed from him they knew	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	3
14.	Only more sure of all I thought was true.	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	3
Total		14	-	1	-	-	6	17	38

Findings and Discussion

In this study, all the results are shown in tables and figures so as to discuss the possible relationships among symbols, imagery, theme, and the intended response of the poet as well as the readers.

Table 3: Total Frequency and Percentage of Symbolism Found in Sample Poems

No.	Poem Name	Types of Symbolism			Total
		Traditional	Private	Original	
1	Into my own	4	5	3	12
2	Stars	2	3	14	19
3	A Late Walk	2	9	11	22
Total		8	17	28	53
Average Percentage		15%	32%	53%	100%

According to Table 3, while the total symbolism of sample poem 1 can be found in 12 occurrences, traditional is 5 times, 4 for private, and original is 3. The most dominant one is traditional symbolism in this sample poem 1. In sample poem 2, there are 19 occurrences as the total number of symbolisms. Among them, the most dominant one is original symbolism which is 14 times, and the others are 3 for private and 2 for traditional. In sample poem 3, 22 occurrences can be seen and the most frequent one is original symbolism which is 11 times and the rest are 9 for private and 2 for traditional. In doing so, the total number of symbolisms is 53 occurrences. It can also be observed that the most significant one is original symbolism which is 28 times and its percentage is 53% in all poems. The second one is private symbolism which is also 17 times and the percentage is 32%, the third one is traditional symbolism which is 8 times and its percentage is 15%.

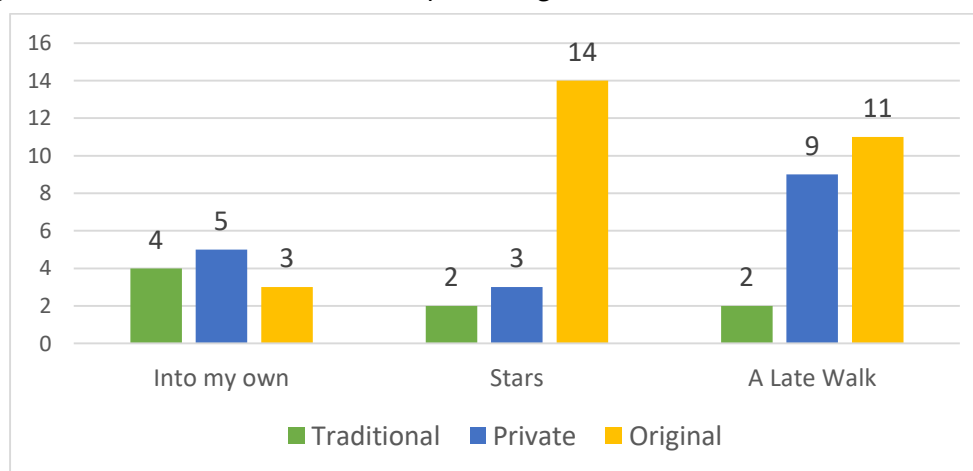


Figure 1: Symbolism Found in the Sample Poems

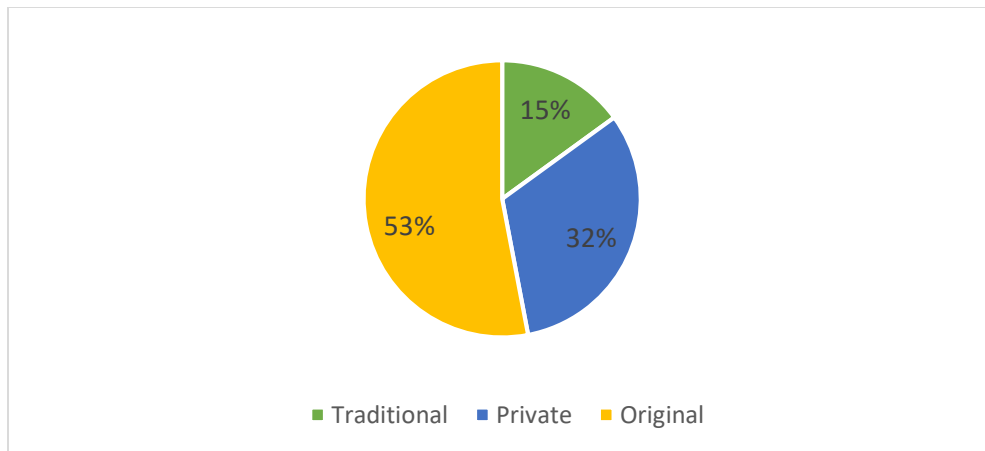


Figure 2: Percentage of Symbolism Found in the Sample Poems

Based on Figures 1 and 2, the sample three poems of Robert Frost are mostly related to the original symbolism rather than private and traditional ones. It is because the poet himself is so well-known in applying symbolism in his poetry and another major factor is concerned with the theme of these poems. According to Table 14, the sample poems 2,3 and 6 have the same theme about nature and the same dominant symbolism. Sample poems 1,4 and 5 are different in dominant symbolisms but they are also the same in the theme of self-discovery and observation. For this reason, it can be assumed that the theme of the poems is closely related to the use of symbolism. Furthermore, the attitude, perception, and mood of the poet concerning the themes of the poems are also not ignorable in considering whether there is any direct or indirect relation between the theme and the use of symbolism. These possibilities take vital roles in speculation of the connection between theme and use of symbolism.

Table 4: Themes Found in the Sample Poems

No.	Poems	Themes
1.	Into My Own	<u>Self-discovery</u> , independence, personal journey, identity, growth
2.	Stars	<u>Nature</u> , wonder, eternity, beauty, cosmic connection
3.	A Late Walk	Nostalgia, change, seasons, <u>nature</u> , endings, reflection

In the following table 5, it can be observed that visual imagery is the most dominant one, which is 51 times and its percentage is 48%. Kinesthetic imagery can also be found 34 times as the second dominant one and its percentage is 32%. Organic imagery could have occurred 16 times as the third dominant one and its percentage is 15%. It can be said that 3 times for tactile imagery, 1 time for olfactory imagery, 4 times for auditory imagery, and no gustatory imagery is found, respectively. Apart from sample poem 1, all 5 sample poems rely on visual imagery. Kinesthetic imagery is found only in

sample poem 1. It can be concluded that the poet himself and the way he composes or chooses words are closely related to the sense of sight or visualization. It is because the poet would like to make the readers visualize and feel the poems easily and comfortably.

Table 5: Total Frequency and Percentage of Imagery Found in the Sample Poems

No.	Poem Name	Types of Imagery							Total
		VI	AI	OI	GI	TI	ORI	KI	
1	Into my own	14	-	1	-	-	6	17	38
2	Stars	17	-	-	-	1	4	7	29
3	A Late Walk	20	2	-	-	2	6	10	40
Total		51	2	1	0	3	16	34	107
Average Percentage		47.7%	1.9%	0.9%	0%	2.7%	15%	31.8%	100%

In addition, the poet's use of kinesthetic imagery is also able to awaken the readers' sense of physical movements while his skillful uses of organic imagery enable to make them cry or laugh in terms of the sense of internal sensations or emotions. It means that such kinds of imagery helps the readers in order to have smooth feelings, visualizations, and internal sensations as well as effortless comprehension of the poems. Nevertheless, it is impossible to neglect the roles of other imageries even though their presence in these poems is weak. Moreover, it can be generally assumed that most of Robert Frost's poems have a very good and strong relationship between the theme and the words he used in terms of symbolic uses or imagery.

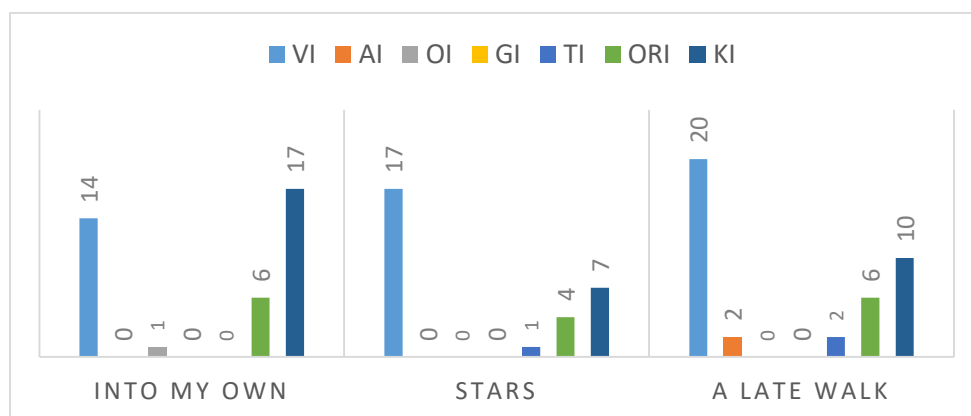


Figure 3: Imagery Found in the Sample Poems

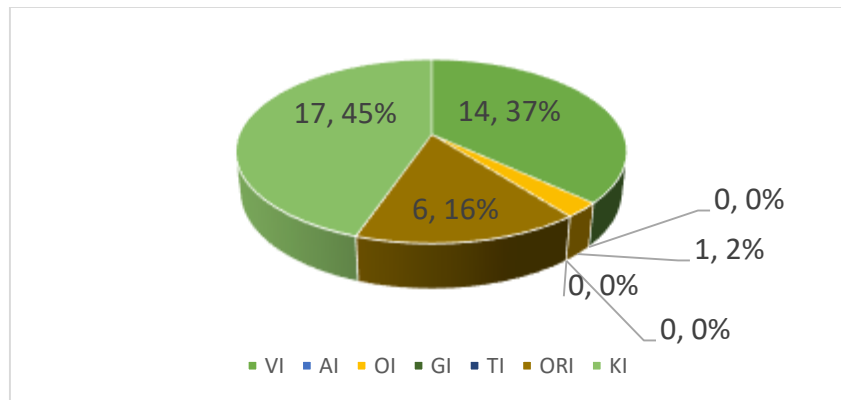


Figure 4: Percentage of Imagery Found in the Sample Poems

In this study, it can be noted that the roles of both symbolism and imagery are closely related to each other and they are also able to serve the theme of the poem. Symbolism and imagery often go hand in hand in poetry, producing layers of meaning and emotional resonance. Symbolism uses objects, actions, or ideas to represent larger concepts or abstract themes, while imagery evokes sensory experiences through vivid and descriptive language. Besides, themes can be assumed as the foundation while symbolism is used as tools to express the theme and imagery engages the senses with them together. In short, the theme is about the central idea and symbolism is a layered representation of that idea while imagery is a sensory experience that makes this idea resonate.

The findings indicate that Robert Frost skillfully combined traditional, personal, and original symbols in alignment with the themes of his poems. Consequently, his emphasis on original symbols is more pronounced in these sample poems than in the others. This is due to Frost's adept manipulation of precise and effective symbolic language that aligns with the themes of his work. This focus on original symbols is a key reason for their dominance in his poetry. Furthermore, his frequent use of original symbols reflects his desire to create a unique, personal mythology capable of conveying complex ideas and exerting an interwoven impact on both personal and traditional levels. Frost often explored intricate concepts, perceptions, and thoughts regarding society, politics, religion, and beliefs. Boy's Will his first published poetry collection, is filled with youthful, fresh, energetic, independent, and profound ideas. The sample poems drawn from this collection exemplify his distinctive and natural approach to poetry. Frost's innovative spirit and creativity with symbolic language, evident in all his poems, effectively convey multiple layers of meaning and thematic depth.

At the same time, Frost's use of imagery is significant when considering how he connects to the themes of his poems. His brilliant and skillful use of imagery engages various sensory modalities. The nature of poetry can be challenging to grasp within a limited timeframe due to its condensed and profound linguistic descriptions. It is not always easy to identify which senses are evoked by the

imagery in poetry, as they typically align with the poem's overarching theme. Depending on the themes, the use of imagery may vary. In Frost's works, it is evident that the themes are intricately intertwined with the use of imagery, which effectively depicts a range of sensory experiences. For instance, in the analysis of six sample poems, over half of the imagery (54%) consists of visual imagery, reflecting the nature-based themes and the relationship between internal sensations and external phenomena.

According to these results, it can be concluded that Frost's straightforward and clever use of language in his poetry effectively portrays themes and meanings while also facilitating effortless comprehension and appreciation for readers.

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