

## STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE POEM "THE ONSET" BY ROBERT FROST

Abdul Bari Khan, Summara Raffique & Ghazala Saddique  
Department of English, University of Lahore  
Sargodha Campus, Sargodha, PAKISTAN

### ABSTRACT

The present study aims to analyze the stylistic features of the poem "The Onset" written by Robert Frost. The Onset has multilayered meanings which is analyzed through different tools of analysis. The poem is interpreted through diction, imagery and sound devices to elucidate the themes. The analysis will help to comprehend the basic themes that are conflict between good and evil, pessimism and optimism, and life and death.

**Keywords:** Style, stylistics, pessimism, optimism, conflicts, imagery, diction, sound devices.

### INTRODUCTION

Style is a Latin word 'stylus' it means "anything to write with". Style is the way in which the writer uses language, his choices of words, arrangements and form of sentences, use of poetic devices to present his thoughts to the readers. The writer's style affects the manners how it is interpreted. Style also depicts writer's personality. The distinctive style of Robert Frost is being observed in his writings as he uses plain narrative language but he builds deep philosophy through different objects of nature.

#### Style

Thomas S. Kane in describes style, in *Writing Prose*, as pattern of linguistic features that distinguishes one work from to another. It means style includes how the writer thinks about his subject, characteristic and how he has presented it for a particular audience and purpose. So style is the complete analysis as it is the voice or tone of the writer. It is not only the discovery for writer but also for the reader. The style, as Buffon puts it, *is the man*.

#### Stylistics

The study of style variation in use of language is called stylistics. It is an analytical science which covers all the expressive aspects of language phonology, prosody, morphology. Syntax and lexicology. Stylistic is actually is the violation from set patterns of language. Leech explains stylistics as a linguistic approach to literature, clarifies the relation between language and artistic function. K.T.KHADER describes stylistics is an in-depth study of text to produce the particular effect through particular choices of words. The aim of stylistics is not only to describe the formal elements of texts , but also to show the functional importance for the text interpretation; or to show the relation of literary text to linguistic effects where these are considered relevant.

## INTRODUCTION OF THE POET, ROBERT FROST (1874-1964)

Robert Frost, an American poet, was born in San Francisco, California. He is a well-known modern poet. He is generally regarded as a poet, teacher, and a man of wisdom. He had a profound knowledge of literature, history, science and philosophy. Hence he can be termed as a classicist of very high order. Frost neither describes the situations and conditions of life of the modern society, nor he writes about political and economic problems of his age. He does not aloof himself from the contemporary society. He has penetrated from social actions to intellectual problems of his age.

Frost is a philosophical poet from the start. His aim was not writing poems for charming rustic but philosophical anxiety, stoical sadness which were obvious in his later work. Philosophical poetry deals with questions about life, death and man's destiny in the universe. Frost also raises such questions though his answers are vague and often equivocal. Frost does not have any coherent and systematic philosophy to preach so it is the reason that has made his philosophy ambiguous. It means, it is not possible to solve the mystery of universe. Frost believes that universe has three orders of being – man, Nature and God. These three orders are not absolutely detached from one another but have tendency of configuration. Man builds wall. Nature establishes zones and seasons. God constructs cosmos. Nature and divine both restrain man's efforts.

As a nature poet Frost does excel many other poets but he does not deify nature. He does not believe that nature is all benevolent and benign. Natural disasters are unpredictable. Nature provides comforts and it is at the same time indifferent to man. Dual characteristic of nature is found in Frost's poetry. Frost was a working farmer. He took to agricultural activities as a vocation. As such he had to contend with various hardships and obstacles. Hence he cannot be expected to be romantic about nature.

## INTRODUCTION OF THE POEM "THE ONSET"

This poem is taken from the fourth volume "*New Hampshire*" published in 1923. This volume was a prize winning, first time Robert Frost got the Pulitzer Prize. This volume comprises of well known poems as "*The Road not taken*", "*The Stopping by woods on Snowy Evening*" and "*ice and fire*". "*New Hampshire*" manifests peculiar qualities of Robert Frost as self-consciousness, talking about himself and aphorisms. The subject matter of the poems in this collection shows depth and subtleness. This work depicts his maturity. Frost restrains his emotions even when he is personal. He does not indulge in his feelings. A critic speaking of Frost, says: "It would be going too far to think of him as a religious poet, but his work tends towards wholeness, thus towards Catholicism at heart".

The poem "*the Onset*" is one among the lyrical poems of Frost. The poem is considered the remaining part of "*The Stopping by woods on Snowy Evening*", the conflict is represented between commitments of life and peacefulness of death so one cannot decide whether to go to fulfill promises or to stay among woods and result is uncertainty and melancholy, on the other hand the poem "*the Onset*" presents consentment of poet about the realities of life and death. Here the poet is optimistic about the life though it has miseries and adversities. The idea is

implicit through the seasonal cycle of nature. The poet narrates his feelings about winter and changing feelings about spring how winter causes destruction and spring comes for reconstruction and spring, after all, leads back to winter. The poem has different themes and interpretation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Stylistic analysis will be used to explore the themes through different poetic devices and vocabulary items to understand the poem. The study will examine how the poet has presented the deep philosophy by using simple narrative language.

### **Theme of the Poem**

The theme of the poem is death and life, good and evil and human limitation, that he cannot escape from impending doom so there is no way only to accept it. Man power is limited he cannot understand mysterious nature. The poem is dealing with two opposite extremes and contrasts as life and death. The subject of the poem is sufferings and comforts, beauty and horror, pessimism and optimism.

## **HANDLING OF THEME**

Theme is handled through different vocabulary items. "Fated night" suggests the doom of the person that he cannot escape from the "dark woods" means death. "Snow" is evil- because "hiss of snow" suggesting serpent- that has occupied the forest with its white clack. It creates terror, so the speaker stumbles as he is totally captured by the gloom of death.

Sadness arises in the first stanza when the poet "Gives up his errand, and lets death descend" manifests that he has surrendered himself before evil because he has no other way to except to surrender. It shows that man cannot overcome death and evil. He can only accept it with stoic resignation.

The feelings of fear and sadness which are appeared in first stanza, now in second stanza turn into hope. Optimism is shown when Frost says "Yet all the precedent on my side". It is a hope with the arrival of spring that winter has failed to vanish the life from the earth. "The peeper's silver croak", "the snow all go downhill" and "like a disappearing snake" potray that hiss of snow has melted away into slender stream and winter has disappeared like snake. Winter and snake represent death and vice, which have gone, now spring has come to regenerate the life.

"April" again emphasizes the revival of life. It is the month of spring. "Nothing will be left white but here a birch / And there a clump of houses with a church", these lines shows that evil is not completely vanished from the earth. It disappears from the sight for a time. Evil does not really leave the world it will again come because symbol of whiteness is linked to snow, winter and colour of church which threatens that winter will come again. It means triumph of spring is not complete. So there is always a tug between evil and good, nothing exists for ever.

## POETIC DEVICES

### Symbolism

Symbolism represents ideas indirectly, in it thought or meaning is not conveyed directly. In the poem 'night` symbolizes sadness due to fated doom. Dark woods represents evil and mystery of life, one cannot comprehend mysterious things of the world. The symbolic interpretation of 'winter and snow` stands for destruction and eventually causes death. The awareness of death and evil must persist expression in "The Onset". The most striking of these symbols is found the comparison between the rill's of melted snow and a disappearing snake. The transformation of the snow into a serpentine stream suggests the fact that evil, though it disappears from sight for a time, does not really leave the world. The symbol of 'church` stands for hope and faith that exits in this imperfect world. The world is imperfect because of every period is transient whether it is good or bad. It is symbolized through the seasonal cycle of winter and spring. Life and death symbolise spring and winter respectively.

### IMAGERY

Image is the representation of sense experience through language. It appeals human senses to create specific description. *Visual imagery* is shown through "gathered snow", "dark woods", "snow may heap", "four feet deep", "houses with a church" in poem (lines 2, 3, 14, 15 and 23). The words "hissing" and "song" signify *auditory imagery* (line 3 and 5). *Kinesthetic imagery* is linked to movemen that is shown (line 18 and 21) for example "the snow all go down hill", "disappering snake".

### Simile

It is the comparison of two different things having one feature common, but using some word and phrase such as *like, as*. Melting snow is compared to snake in line 21 "like disappearing snake".

### Metaphor

It is the comparison of two different things. It is an implied simile without using words such as *like, as* or *so*. The "hissing of snow" in line 4 and 5, is compared to sound of serpent that refers to the evil. This is the hiss of Satan which is mentioned in Paradise Lost by Milton. Frost too uses it in the same way.

### Hyperbole

Hyperbole is the exaggeration of detail to render truth. The example of hyperbole can be seen in line 14 and 15 , the snow may heap /In long storms and undrifted four feet deep". Frost here, is giving exact measurement of falling snow.

## SOUND DEVICES

The following sound devices are used in the poem "The Onset".

### Alliteration

The repetition of initial consonant sounds is called alliteration. In this poem alliterations are "woods and with" (line 3), "four feet" (line15), "see the snow"(line 18),"been begun" (line 11).

### Consonance

When the final consonant sounds give the same sound, it is consonance. "It shall not make again all" (line 4), "uncovered ground" (line5), "It cannot check the peeper's silver croak" (line 17), "In water of a slender April rill" (line 19), "And dead weeds" (line 21) these consonant sounds are used in the poem.

### Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of similar vowel sounds in words or syllables. "The Onset" presents striking repetition of vowels sounds as "Always the same" (line 1), " At last the gathered" (line 2), "feet deep" (line 15), "mesured against maple" (line16), the snow all go" (line 18).

### Rhyme scheme

The poem consists of twenty three lines and it is divided in two stanzas. The rhyme scheme in first stanza is AABBCCDDEEF.

Second stanza has AABBCCDDEEFF rhyme scheme.

### CONCLUSION

Apparently the poem seems about the seasons but when it is analyzed stylistically it reveals deeper meanings like death and life, by using the symbols of winter and spring. The theme of the poem is foregrounded through diction, symbols, imagery and metaphors. Frost has depicted the seasonal cycle of nature. In this process destructive side transforms into creative form. This is the power of nature that controls both forms.

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**APPENDIX****The Onset**

Always the same, when on a fated night  
At last the gathered snow lets down as white  
As may be in dark woods, and with a song  
It shall not make again all winter long  
Of hissing on the yet uncovered ground,  
I almost stumble looking up and round,  
As one who overtaken by the end  
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend  
Upon him where he is, with nothing done  
To evil, no important triumph won,  
More than if life had never been begun.

Yet all the precedent is on my side:  
I know that winter death has never tried  
The earth but it has failed: the snow may heap  
In long storms an undrifted four feet deep  
As measured against maple, birch, and oak,  
It cannot check the peeper's silver croak;  
And I shall see the snow all go down hill  
In water of a slender April rill  
That flashes tail through last year's withered brake  
And dead weeds, like a disappearing snake.  
Nothing will be left white but here a birch,  
And there a clump of houses with a church.

**Robert Frost, *New Hampshire* (1923)**