UNIT 9: ROBERT FROST: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss the life of Robert Frost
- locate the importance of Robert Frost in the American poetic tradition
- identify the poetic works by Frost

9.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit shall deal with another famous American poet, Robert Frost. Robert Frost is the most influential poet writing within the American poetic tradition after **Walt Whitman**. A major poetic voice following Whitman, Frost appealed to the American reading public through his unpretentious and simple treatment of such central subjects as man and nature, love and isolation. The strength of his poetry lies in its simple lyrical expression of the subjects of universal significance. When he came to write there was no commanding voice in American poetry. Whitman was not as forceful as earlier, Emily Dickinson was not as famous, as she eventually became. Let us gain an idea on the biographical details of the poet.

9.3 ROBERT FROST : THE POET

Frost was a modern poet who represented the disillusionment of modern man through his poetry. He anticipated symbolism which was to become characteristic of modern poetry. It must, however, be remembered that his poetry does not have a modern style which we find in Eliot, Pound, Auden and Yeats. Let us now look at Frost's life and works in order to measure his status as a poet.

9.3.1 His Life

Robert Lee Frost was born in San Francisco in the year 1875. His father was a political journalist. A descendant of New England through many generations, Frost after the death of his father in 1885, moved eastwards to Massachusetts with his mother. He finished his high schooling from the mill town of Lawrence in 1892. He studied at Dartmouth College and later at the Harvard University. As a student, he took an active interest in his studies but was somehow unable to attune his creative abilities to a routine-based course of study. However, his stay in Harvard was significant because he came under the influence of **William James** and **George Santayana**. As a teacher, Frost had a natural taste for originality and developed a methodology for teaching which proved to be very successful. But, Frost was a person whose creative abilities could not be restrained by regulations and as such, his stint as a teacher too proved irksome for him. For eleven years from 1901 to 1912, Frost engaged himself in writing poetry as well as in working in a New Hampshire farm which he inherited from his grandfather. However, both these pursuits yielded mediocre results. Therefore, he sold his farm in the autumn of 1912 and left for England with his family. In England, he met Ezra Pound and Edward Thomas. From here he started his literary career. Despite exercising his creative potential at his own will in his poetic compositions, he could not, however, escape the calling of formal education. After returning from England, he was again reinstated in his position as a teacher when he was called upon to teach in Amherst College from 1916 to 1919. After his resignation from that post, he was again summoned to serve at the University of Michigan in 1921-22. He died in 1969.



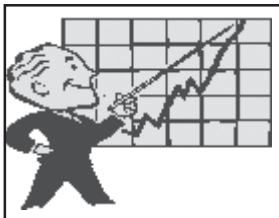
LET US KNOW

Walt Whitman : (1819-1892) American poet who wrote in a distinctively American idiom. E.g. *Leaves Of Grass*.

New England : The region consisting of six states of America, namely Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode island and Connecticut was called New England in 1616 by Captain John Smith. Frost wrote about New England in many poems, celebrating the spirit of optimism of the early settlers.

William James : (1842-1910) : A philosopher who founded pragmatism. His major works are *The Meaning of Truth*, *The Will to Believe* and *Essays in Radical Experience.*

George Santayana: (1863-1952) James's student at Harvard, remembered for his contribution to literature and philosophy.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Fill in the blanks:

a) Robert Frost is the most influential poet writing within the American poetic tradition after…….

b) Frost was a modern poet who showed the …….. of modern man.

Q2. What are the important subjects in Frost's poetry?

Q3. In what way was Frost's stay at Harvard significant?

Q4. Why did Frost leave his farm and move to England?

9.3.2 His Works

Let us now discuss the major works of Robert Frost. Frost settled in a village near London with his family and therein he planned the composition of his first collection of poems titled *A Boy's Will*, published in London in 1919. A second collection of poems, *North of Boston* appeared in the spring of

1914. It was warmly appreciated by Ezra Pound who wrote an enthusiastic review of the poems for his fellow American countryman. Frost returned to America in 1915 and soon found himself warmly praised in *New Republic* by Amy Lowell, another poet who wrote free-verse. After returning to his country, Frost published his third collection titled *Mountain Interval* in 1916, which attracted national attention and he was awarded with numerous honours, the most prominent among them being his election to the National Academy of Arts and Letters.

In the following years, he published further collections of poetry which confirmed his reputation as the 'national poet' of America after Walt Whitman. They included *New Hampshire*(1929), *West-Running Brook*(1928), *Collected Poems*(1990), *A Further Range*(1996), *A Witness Tree*(1942), *A Steeple Bush* (1947) and *In the Clearing*(1962). They won him a total of four Pulitzer Prizes. He also wrote two dramatic poems in blank verse, titled "A Masque of Reason"(1945) and "A Masque of Mercy"(1947) in which he portrayed biblical characters and explored the relation of man to God in the modern world. His works earned him honorary degrees from the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in 1957. Frost appealed to the American reading public through his unpretentious and simple treatment of such central subjects as man and nature, love and isolation.



LET US KNOW

Like T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost went to England where he found a publisher for his first book of verse *A Boy's Will* (1919). But, unlike Eliot who made England his home, Frost returned to America in 1915.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5. Name the poetry collections of Frost which established his reputation as the National poet of America?

Q6. What are the two dramatic poems written by Robert Frost?



9.4 LET US SUM UP

After reading the unit, you have become familiar with the works of Robert Frost. You are now able to refer to the life of Robert Frost and relate your reading to the poetic tradition of American poetry. You are encouraged to explore the poems of Frost whose poetry garnered a lot of attention and reputation in the literary field. In fact, America considers him to be her national poet right after Walt Whitman.



9.5 FURTHER READING

1. Boynton, Percy H.: *American Authors of Today: II. Robert Frost*. The English Journal, Vol. 11, No. 8, (Oct., 1922), pp 455-462.
2. Cox, James M. (ed.). (1962). *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, Inc.
3. Isaacs, Elizabeth. (1962). *An Introduction to Robert Frost*. Allan Swallow.
4. Mc Phillips, Robert T. *Diverging and Converging Paths: Horizontal and Vertical.*
5. *Movement in Robert Frost's Mountain Interval*. American Literature, Vol. 58 No. 1, (Mar., 1986), pp 82-98.
6. Poirier, Richard. (1977). *Robert Frost : The Work of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.
7. *The Poems of Robert Frost*. (1946) New York: Modern library.



9.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1. a) Walt Whitman.

b) disillusionment.

Ans to Q2. Frost appealed to the American reading public through his unpretentious and simple treatment of such central subjects as man and nature, love and isolation.

Ans to Q3. His stay in Harvard was significant because he came under the influence of William James and George Santayana.

Ans to Q4. For eleven years from 1901 to 1912, Frost engaged himself in writing poetry as well as in working in a New Hampshire farm which he inherited from his grandfather. However, both these pursuits yielded mediocre results. Therefore, he sold his farm in the autumn of 1912 and left for England with his family.

Ans to Q5. *New Hampshire*(1929), *West-Running Brook*(1928), *Collected Poems*(1990), *A Further Range*(1996), *A Witness Tree*(1942), *A Steeple Bush* (1947) and *In the Clearing*(1962).

Ans to Q6. The two dramatic poems are "A Masque of Reason" (1945) and "A Masque of Mercy" (1947)



9.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Give a description of the life of Robert Frost.

Q2. Write a short note on Robert Frost's poetry.

Q3. Discuss Robert Frost as a major American poet.

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