

Dualism and Philosophic Disharmony in Robert Frost's *A Roadside Stand*

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Abstract

This paper interprets symbolism in Frost's poem, *A Roadside Stand* through the philosophy of dualism. The poem presents two groups, namely 'country people' and 'city people', in opposition to each other. While this may appear too simple on the surface, Frost metaphorically employs them to represent 'consciousness' and 'matter', the fundamental principles of existence in duality.

Keywords: Robert Forst, *A Roadside Stand*, Duality, Disharmony

Existence can be understood as the interplay of consciousness and matter. The balance of the primal principles of dualism becomes the basis of all forms of harmony. Discord among these fundamental entities is the basis of all conflict. Matter constitutes all forms of physical existence that are subject to transformation and change. In contrast to matter, consciousness is the abstraction of the unchanging aspect of creation that cannot undergo mutation in time or space. The harmonious union of duality brings sheer bliss, yet this bond of balance is inherently unstable. When in a state of cohesion, the two seem not two, but one. But the inevitability of separation and disunion is a painful surety. All bubbles of attachment thrive and throng, only to burst. The disentanglement is liberation, which rather sounds grim, at least in thought.

Thoughts and expressions of thinkers radiate the fulcrum of duality in myriad shades and hues. Talking of a close instance evokes the poetic ideas of Robert Frost to my mind. Perhaps because he is a poet who brings philosophy to life. Even while his head seems to touch upon the highest formulations of the human mind, his lips reveal words in the sheer melody of simplicity and ring true for his time. A deep sense of yearning for transcendence can be felt in most of the melodies penned by Frost. However, a scathing sense of disharmony whose intensity rises to the level of being called one-sided is visibly evident in his poem, *A Roadside Stand*.

The poem describes the divide between the simple country folk and the urban elite, while tilting slightly and taking sides. Frost sonorously describes how poor country folk have put up a crude stall to sell their produce next to a busy main road that leads to a city. The simple folk wait in eager anticipation, and expect the city-people to stop over and buy from their stuff. But the busy traffic proceeds at its pace, and if at all a car halts, it crosses over to take a turn or to ask them the way. Apparently, the poet is extremely hurt and pours his heart out in burning words on behalf of the submissive country folk.

The poem embarks upon accentuating this divide through a portrait that seems a little starker than it may have been. The country folk are associated with being gullible, naïve, simple, rustic, trusting, hopeful and full of yearning. In contrast, the city people are ascribed qualities that connote opposition. They are assumed to be outwardly polished, sophisticated and cultivated, but unlike the seemingly crude country people, the city folk are selfish, mean and calculating, deep inside. This simplistic division of society into two opposite parts is perceptibly the poetic symbolism of representing duality.

The urban elite represent the manifestation of matter and materialism that is inherently prone to mutation. The poem presents the dilemma of existence, where, in order to

survive, one must upgrade in a multitude of ways- technically, economically, socially, materially and in many other forms. Even though the progression and expansion from the rural to urban is a matter of celebration, the poet seems to bemoan what society loses without a sense of clear hindsight. For all progress and progression linked with only one side of duality, is viewed as a sacrifice.

When matter rushes forth, riding on merry waves of change, the balance of harmony is lost. The cycles of change usher in more change, and in the sea of changes, the changeless face of consciousness is often lost.

The poet metaphorically seems to equate the force of urbanisation with the inherent property of matter, which is to evolve. The city people hardly recall their own association, however distant, with country life. They feel that they are superior and 'polished', and noticeably have no concern for those who lead a simple country-life.

The city people pass along the road in speeding 'cars' that represent motion, activity, transformation and change. They do not notice the 'roadside stand' that may be seen as a signpost of unchanging bliss and transcendence that simply serves as a witness to all activity, and which is ironically reduced to shambles in the materialistic pursuit of worldly existence. The people sitting in cars do momentarily look out of their windows, but when they look outside, they are enraged by the ways in which country people spoil the beautiful landscape.

The poet, too, is enraged by the behaviour of city people and ponders about a piece of news that had filled the gullible rustic folk with hope. It is apparent that the still 'roadside stand' is a symbol of a soul trapped in a body. While the body, as it is believed, is subject to several births, the soul has to hold on as a witness to countless cycles of change, until it is finally released. Likewise, the 'roadside stand' is hopeful that a day will come when it is finally alleviated. The poet, however, seems to know that 'the day' has not come yet.

Recalling what he read in the news, Frost reasons that the local political parties who have promised to shift the country people to a better 'home' are actually "greedy-good-doers" who would simply buy the people out of their land for a paltry sum of money. He realises that their real plan is to use agricultural land for profitable use by industry, and is filled with indignation at this deception.

The poet ponders over the possibility of a resolution that can bring an end to the misery faced by country folk at the 'roadside stand'. In the heat of emotions, he decides that the only resolution possible for the country people is death. However, he regains better sense, calms down, and reconsiders the situation. However, still being unable to arrive at a conclusion, the poet finally invites the reader to come to his rescue and suggest a resolution.

The poem thus ends on a note where the probability of annihilation seems to be the only resolution for bringing an end to the disharmonious nature embedded in duality.

The poem conforms to the philosophy of duality, where existence is explained in terms of two opposing fundamental realities, which in this case, are portrayed by the country and the city people. The country people at the 'roadside stand' represent consciousness. They are the embodiment of the unchanging part of duality that is akin to the soul, that serves as a mere witness, while the body, constituted of matter, assumes forms and lives. The roadside stand is aptly unchanging and maintains the status quo. It simply stands witness to the cars passing by, that are a representation of activity. Like the yearning soul waiting to be released, the roadside stand pitifully hopes for solace.

In contrast to the country people at the roadside stand, the city people symbolise matter. Just as matter is the manifestation of every material form, the city people are 'materialists' to the core. The urbane are clearly deluded and take pride in their 'material possessions'. They continue to feel superior, not realising how mistaken they really are in

their vain efforts at self-aggrandising expansion. They can be seen as acting true to their nature, which is to survive through adaptation. It is ironical, however, that their upgradation and progression takes them away from the real nature of Reality, and the divide between the two strains of duality continues to take them further apart with successive series of adaptation.

Thus, by means of the two parallels, Frost simply unveils the facets of life. The cessation of dualism is possible only by piercing the veil and unleashing the true nature of its ensuing Reality. However, as a modern poet, Frost sticks to the conventions and leaves the poem open-ended. By doing so, he actually imitates the reality of life, where one is more likely to not come to a resolution. The poet, through his conjecture, suggests that a resolution would also mean an end to life and existence. He finally leaves it to the reader to decide whether to opt for a resolution or to continue to stay and flow in the disharmonious series of life.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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