CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Literature is always affected by the physical, cultural, social, political, psychological and literacy background of the country but in the present study there has been not attempt to offer a comprehensive survey of so vast a field; rather the intention is only to have superficial touch to history of American literature only in order to determine the correct place of Robert Frost in the American literature.

The history of American started with the settlement of James town in 1607 when the most American writers were Englishmen and their main themes were colonial. Colonial literature became a great reservoir of material and inspiration for that of the 19th century, but actual American literature came after the declarations of American independence. The Americans were an off-shoot of the Europeans, but very different from them. The combination of this old sophisticated culture with a constantly receding wilderness produced a unique people, who come to called
typically American. However, America's first Renaissance came in about 1840's which brings forth writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, Hawthorne and Poe. The American Literature can be described as the Colonial Period (1607-1765) is primarily of travel and exploration with the work of Benjamin Franklin brings to a close; the Revolutionary Period (1763-1820) deals with the political liberty established for the first time in human history on 4th July 1776, with the result that the United States had somehow appropriated the progress of liberty to itself. The literature of the age was influenced by political issues.

The first National Period (1800-1860) began when America was a free nation. So the literature is called that of first national period. The literature flourished Romanticism, love for nature and love for America. James Cooper, William Bryant, Edgar Allen Poe, R.W. Emerson, Thoreau and Nathaniel Hawthorne are some of the major practitioners of the period. In this period, few important works also took place about the civilization when Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, 'Democracy in America'(1935), that Anglo America
civilization had been given its distinctive character by a combination of the “Spirit of religion” and spirit of Liberty" few Americans would have disagree with him.

In the second part of Democracy (1840), Tocqueville used the term “individualism” to describe the salient American characteristics. The term had some currency before Tocqueville used it, but it was the Frenchman who gave the word a prominence that it has never lost in subsequent discussions of American thought.

In 1841 Channing gave a lecture entitled The Present Age in which he defined its most prominent characteristic as the tendency in all its movements to expansion, to diffusion, to universality. The Second National Period (1860-1900); the literature of the age was influence by new culture, myth and civil war, love for America, political aspects, humour, realism and regionalism are some of features of the literature of this period.

Walt Whitman also belonged to the same period, a great poet of mysticism, nature, symbolism, and imagery, above all these he was the poet and prophet of democracy.
Emily Dickinson, another famous poetess of that period mostly wrote on the themes of Death and immortality, love, nature etc. Stephen Crane, Mark Twain are few other writers of the same period.

Modern Age (since 1900) began with new concepts have been developed by the writers of America. Complexity, Industrialism, democratic ideas, science and technology, the influence of two world wars imagery, rise of drama, vitality of novel and literary criticism are the salient features of the literature of this age. The relevant literary figures of this period are Robert Frost, Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Faulkner, Arthur Miller, Ernest Hemingway and the critics like Kenneth Burke, Allen Tate and Emerson.

It is right that people are still too much in the midst of some social, religions and political changes to the venture on estimate of their meaning for American literary life. Perhaps Sydney A. Ahistron is correct in describing the recent period as the end of the Puritan era in America and the beginnings of a new and radical pluralism. It is clear, whether the future holds, that no comprehensive religious
synthesis, such as that which supported Dante in the fourteenth century, has emerged as an utterly persuasive world view for writers and readers.

The present thesis is chiefly concerned with Robert Frost who has been called the Finest American poet of twentieth century. He has been called “the voice of America”, and more honours have been showered upon him than any other American poet of the century. He has won worldwide fame and recognition, and has already established himself as a great poet.

Robert Lee Frost (Mar’ 206, 1874- Jan’ 29, 1963) is highly regarded for his realistic depictions of rural life and his command of American colloquial speech. His work frequently employed settings from rural life in New England in the early twentieth century, using them to examine complex social and philosophical themes. One of the most popular and critically respected American poets of his generation, Frost was honoured frequently during his lifetime, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes for poetry.
Although known for his later association with rural life, Frost grew up in the city and he published his first poem in his high school's magazine. He attended Dartmouth College for two months, long enough to be accepted into the Theta Delta chi fraternity. Frost returned home to teach and to work at various jobs — including helping his mother teach her class of unruly boys, delivering newspapers, and working in a factory as an arc light carbon filament Changer. He did not enjoy these jobs, feeling his true calling was poetry. Although he never graduated from college, Frost received over 40 honorary degrees, including ones from Princeton, Oxford and Cambridge universities, Frost was 86 when he performed a reading of his well-known poem “The Gift Outright” at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedys on January 20, 1961. Frost's virtues are extraordinary. No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men; his wonderful dramatic monologues or dramatic scenes come out of knowledge of people that few poets have had, and they are written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech. His seriousness and honesty; the
base sorrow with which, sometimes, things are accepted as they are, neither exaggerated nor explained away; the many, many poems in which there are real people with their real speech and real thought and real emotion all this, in conjunction with so much subtlety and exactness ... makes the reader feel that he is not in a book but a world. The grimness and awfulness, and untouchable sadness of things, both in the world and in the self, have justice done to them in the poems... but no more justice than is done to the tenderness and love and delight; and everything in between is represented somewhere too. Although he avoids traditional verse forms and only uses rhyme erratically, Frost is not an innovator and his technique is never experimental, instead he took up nineteenth-century tools and made them new. Free Verse was like playing tennis without a net, he (famously) said. In a sense, Frost stands at the crossroads of nineteenth-century American poetry and modernism, for in his verse may be found the culmination of many nineteenth-century tendencies and traditions as well as parallels to the works of his twentieth-century contemporaries. Taking his symbols from the public
domain, Frost developed, as many critics note, an original, modern idiom and a sense of directness and economy that reflect the imagism of Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell. Frost’s poetry, unlike that of such contemporaries as Eliot, Stevens, and the later Yeats, shows no marked departure from the poetic practices of the nineteenth century.

Robert Frost’s personal life was plagued with grief and loss. In 1885 when Frost was 11 his father died of tuberculosis, leaving the family with just eight dollars. Frost’s mother died of cancer in 1900, in 1920, Frost had to commit his younger sister Jeanie to a mental hospital, where she died nine years later. Mental illness apparently ran in Frost’s family, as both he and his mother suffered from depression, and his daughter Irma was committed to a mental hospital in 1947. Frost’s wife, Elinor, also experienced bouts of depression. Among six children only Lesley and Irma outlived their father. Frost’s wife, who had heart problems throughout her life developed breast cancer in 1937, and died of heart failure in 1938.
Frost is a great representative poet of America. He typifies country’s traditional, cultural inheritance in his poetry. He has absorbed the essence of what constitutes America. He represents the doubts, faith, joys and sorrows of the American people. We have noted that he is able to focus broad areas of experience within his sketches and anecdotes of Yankee life because the very remoteness of the rural scene suggests parallel. He has powerfully reflected the emotions, ideals and thoughts of a region that surrounds him.

Frost has written about New Englanders in the real speech of the local people. Most of his poems have a bearing on the New England situation. W.H. Auden once remarked: “The Nature in Frost’s poetry is the nature of new England.”1 Its weather and surroundings, its people and beliefs, its failures and successes are the contents of his poetry. It is true that at the centre of Frost’s poetry is the idea we find everywhere in Kant and romantics that our mental acts constitute the world of our experience but is
also true that his poetry is more centered on man\(^2\) and especially on the human beings of New England.

In Frost's poetry we witness all aspects of American life-its weather, its geography, its people, and its nature scenes. Frost's poetry contains typically American scenes of nature. In his poetry Frost has given expression to whatever is typically American. He transforms his New England universal in meaning and implication. More than most modern poets Frost need to have some sort of historical context deliberately constructed for him\(^3\), and especially the New England's historical contexts. He is a significant writer.

Robert Frost absorbed the spirit of his country. He has depicted rural America in his poetry. It is also his poetic genius that in both his nature poems and his pastorals the poet portrays adverse human experience by projecting it into a world remote and distinct.\(^4\) His poetry is imbued with the American tradition. He gives in many of his poems a universal significance to the New England landscape and the Yankee peasant character. His poems are classical in tone and traditional in nature. He represented the time
when America was emerging from the old into the new order. As far as his sensibility is concerned, he is considered the most distinguished American poet of twentieth century. George Nitchie, after reading and examining his poems commented as "Frost's poetic sensibility is profoundly unified." According to his view, we cannot find any type of variety in his sensibility and his unified sensibility is about his nation and New England. Robert Graves hailed Frost as a great poet by world standards. The truth is that Frost was the first American who could be honestly reckoned a master-poet by World standards. Critics consider him an independent and integrated poet, a poet who is like no one else, a major poet and not only in regard to this age but in regard to our whole literature, a great American poet.

About his returning home Frost wrote sadly to Sidney Cox: "The war is an ill wind to me, It ends for the time being that though of publishing any more books..." The war referred in above lines is the war which took place at the same time when Frost was in Britain and it was among Germany, Russia, France and England. It was in 1913,
Frost was introduced to Ezra Pound, and then living in London Pound hoped to cultivate Frost as member of his Imagist group. Ezra Pound once commented about him that—

This man has the good sense to speak naturally and to paint the thing as he sees it; He is without shame and without affectation."\(^7\)

It was in 1912, that Frost decided to make poetry his vocation in life. He sold his farm and with his wife and four children went to England where they settled in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. He was eminently successful as a poet. His first volume of lyrics, *A Boy's will* and the next book of dramatic dialogues, *North of Boston* (1914) attracted so much attention that it was also published in America. The editors raised a "hoot of disbelief" at such extravagant claims for a book of verse.\(^8\)

On returning back Frost was seen at the highest peak of his fame. Upon the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, Frost was honoured by a Resolution of the United States Senate. The resolution called attention to the poet's
significant achievement in writing poems "which he enjoyed, repeated and thought about by people of all ages and callings", and which "have helped to guide American thought with humour and wisdom." Affirming that Frost's position in American literature was secure, the resolution closed with "felicitation of the Nation which he has served so well."  

Frost received more honours than any other contemporary literary figure in America. He was elected to the membership of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1916, to membership in the American Academy in 1930. Four times he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. On his eighty fifty birth-day again United States Senate adopted a formal resolution extending felicitations to him. He was given honorary degrees by more than forty colleges and universities, including oxford and Cambridge. In 1961, he was called upon to recite his patriotic poem, the Gift Outright, when the late President Kennedy took office. On the occasion Kennedy said: "I have never taken the view
that the world of politics and the world of poetry are so far apart," finally on January 29, 1963, Frost was dead.

A poem begins with a hump in the throat; a homesickness or a love sickness. It is a reaching-out toward expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words... "My definition of poetry (if I were forced to give one) would be this: words that have become deeds." Frost has been able to win the admiration and respect of opposed individuals even while he has stoutly refused to take sides in the controversies. A glance at his Sojourn among poets will reveal the Paradox of his friendship. Before the turn of the century his early verse was praised by Richard Hovey; before the First World War, he had earned and returned the warm affections of such English Poets as Edward Thomas, W.W. Gibson and Lascelles Abercrombie.

The two volumes of his poetry were published in England, i.e., *A Boy’s Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914). The other volumes were published in America, i.e., *Mountain*
*Interval* (1916), the two previously separated modes of the inner lyric vision and the outer narrative contemplation get combined in this volume; *New Hampshire* (1923), the volume contains many poems of humorous, witty and relaxed social satire, particularly aimed at the American glorification of big business, materialism and commercialism. Reflection and colloquialism, simplicity and reticence are qualities that are distinctly visible in this collection. His other collection of poems, entitled “West Running Brook” (1928) contains the theme of resistance and self-realization and his interests in religion, astronomy and philosophical reflection.

His Sixty volumes of poems entitled “A Further Range” (1936) reveals Frost’s habit of moralizing and sermonizing and this volume shows – Frost’s power of combining psychological perception and visual imagination. His volume of poems entitled “A Witness Tree” (1942) contains some of the best lyrics. It also contains the poem, “The Gift. Outright” this was recited by the poet himself at the time of inaugural of President Kennedy. The next volume “Came in
and other Poems" (1943) was published. The eighth volume “A Masque of Reason” (1945) is a verse play, based on the Biblical story of Job. This volume is written to justify the ways of God to men. It depicts man’s relation to God. It explores some of Frost’s basic metaphysical assumptions. The Volume “A Masque of Mercy” (1947) is reminiscent of Milton’s ‘paradise Regained’. It is concerned with the psychosis of fear. It is in the form of dialogue. Its central theme is the wisdom or un-wisdom of man fearing God. The next volume “Steeple Bush” (1947) contains some lyrics of great merit. The last volume of Poems entitled “In the Clearing” (1962) contains poet’s seeking of a lasting clarification of his beliefs, an enduring rather than a momentary stay against confusion. This final collection represents the ripe, wisdom of the poet.

As Frost’s poetry originates in the experiences of an original, ordinary man, it clings to the raft of existence and is not an account of the glorious possibilities of life. Hence, it is essential to have a backward glance over the long span of his life to know what made Frost, Frost. It is all the more
indispensable because, like many celebrated American writers, e.g., Henry James and Mark Twain, Frost made himself the centre of his poetic world.

What he lived through – enjoyed or suffered – what he was is what he creates. Frost could not only disregard the basic factor of life in his poetry, but also firmly believed that in the flux of life every moment is a revelation of something new. However, Frost’s poetry speaks of his life experiences only in parables, which are presented through a variety of personal with recognizable attitudes and characteristics. They actually stand for a many-sided personality and the moods of the poet who is known to be a man with meaningful inconsistencies and self-contradictions.

In spite of the great popularity, he enjoyed in a society that was basically hostile to poetry. Frost as a man of irresponsible, irritating moods has encouraged many critics to neglect the best in him. It seems as if he played a trick only to “Keep off” the undeserving ones to estimate his real worth.
Frost's personality was the result of self-cultivation as he had otherwise a precarious, tragic and anti-climactic family background with mismated parents, who were drawn together by momentary attraction and loneliness soon to drift apart because of differences and death. A study of Frost's biographies, letters and poetry with a view to understanding him and not to creating a myth of Robert Frost by taking extreme views, reveals three relevant phases of his character: (a) Frost as a kindly platform personality, a simple person whom one meets in public performances, personal meetings and feels sure of knowing him closely even after a brief acquaintance. Frost is full of affirmations, encouragements, tenderness, humour and wit, playfulness and joviality; (b) Frost as a time specimen of irritable genius, promoter of self, full of jealousies, obsessive resentments, nervous and vindictive retaliations, who has an unquenchable thirst for honour and glory. This aspect of his personality is full reflected in his private correspondence; (c) Frost as a secretly magnanimous man, who understands the diminishing tendencies of the matter and with his remarkable gifts and strengths makes "the world's evil"20
bearable. As a traveler through the vast world of men and nature, he acknowledges his human limitations unhesitatingly and takes his incompleteness with the rest; he has a deep faith in man’s ability and God’s mercy in spite of his recurrent sceptical leanings and lack of confidence in the Christian God. In his poems Frost disguises himself as anyone of a troupe of characters through whom he speaks and of whom he could be justly proud. He does it with a strategy so subtle and evasive that only a close, meticulous study of the biographical details reveals the truth of his life which went into the making of his poems.

During 1874-1914 the United States attained a prestigious position in Western Europe which gave it a new national consciousness and the young men like Frost a peculiar pride. Despite the Civil War, America had achieved enormous material prosperity, reasonable social satiability and bewildering advancements in science and technology. The political milieu of the day, with the high-tide of the progressive movements, was full of new social, intellectual and spiritual ideas which guided the average national life.
It was a period of renaissance, but it was unmistakably a period of decadence also as the thoughtful minds were equally aware of the promises unfulfilled, and the questions unanswered or partially answered. Above all, it was the materialistic culture of the age that made American poets restive about the recurrent problems growing out of the soulless, mercantile surroundings. They explored themselves for a solution and their quest automatically turned to be a quest for identity, for a new definition of 'self'. Hence, American poetry tended to be primarily egocentric. It was an attempt not to display the existing un-poetical cultural values but to remake and to revaluate them and to turn them positively human. Subsequently, it became the seed-bed for a genuinely American literature.

Like the great masters – Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Poe and Whitman, Frost's imagination too was steeped in the spirit of the age and he shared its impulses for a fuller communal and personal life as well as it doubts with equal intensity. Reginald L. Cook summarizes as:
"Frost's moral impetus originated in an epoch not yet filled with the sense of impending menace ... An affirmative thrust and stability came from a country, an atmosphere, a people and an epoch in which and in whom a democratic belief in man's potentialities, transcends doubts and tensions."

Moreover, Frost inherited from his parents - two singular and definite personalities - tough individualism, intensity of feelings, a keenness of vision and unyielding spirit.

Jean Gould’s *Robert Frost: the Aim was Song* incorporates interesting episodes and subtle details revealing Frost’s fecund imagination that made him enjoy his own dramatic performance, especially his habit of make-believe. Gould also records how the unorthodoxies of his parental background worked the other way too; it gave him “a strange, nomadic childhood, blessed by parental love, fraught with excitement and tragedy”\(^\text{13}\), that converted him into a series of strange and accumulative paradoxes.
However, the death of his father, which was for Frost the death of a hero, left him completely baffled and lost. The ritualistic pilgrimage of the three, his bereaved mother, little sister Jeanie and Rob—from California to Massachusetts bringing his coffin to its resting place in Lawrence—was so frightening an experience that its shadows lingered to the last moment of Frost's life and left in him a sense of insecurity and fear of darkness and death.

Frost's poem *My Butterfly*, which he wrote at a single stroke, was the beginning of his great career. It was the beginning of "me" as Frost put it. It confirmed his faith in his own poetic talent, and paved the way for his poetic aesthetic that poetry is "like a blush you can get something you didn't know you had" and that a poet's growth is life "a waterspout at sea. He has to begin as a cloud of all other poets he ever read".

Frost and Elinor experienced a new blossoming of their love as they had never felt before. Delicate poems like *Flower-Gathering* in which the lover brings an armful of flowers as "The measure of the little while/That I've been
long away”¹⁶, or the touching love sonnet *A Dream Pang*, or *A Line-storm Song* “When after doubt/our love came back a main”¹⁷, present the deeply cherished memories of those days. Elinor’s love shielded Frost from the unfeeling world outside, restored his faith in poetry but could not relieve him from the anxiety of the financial problems of a growing family.

It is extremely ironical that as Frost’s public life grew brighter his personal life turned darker. He felt that he was responsible for denying his children a roper upbringing, for family deprivations and un-mitigating sufferings for all deaths, diseases and distraction the poet. The mature love and understanding between Elinor and Frost, which later on found a very convincing expression in the dramatic dialogue in the *Home Stretch*, brought a strong resurgence of fresh creative force in him. His *Mountain Interval* (1916) which his wife Elinor – a staunch critic of Frost’s poetry – termed ‘Beautiful’. The poet’s extraordinary gift of the gab animated his teaching job and his poetry reading sessions.
The poet noticed that whenever the regained his balance something shocking occurred as if that was the only way to learn the higher truths of existence. He artist in him absorbed the shocks austerely till he could attain the objectivity to transform his grief into unforgettable poems like *A Servant to Servants* or the masterful sonnet *A Soldier*. One of his faithful student, E.A. Richards recalls:

*Here was a man more deeply sentiment, more solidly intellectual, with those qualities in finer and more equable balance ... and he let us a sense of value and longevity in our thinking. He never, or rarely, talked about his own work...*\(^\text{18}\)

The poems which Robert Frost composed or reworked in those days are basically philosophical and deal with familiar but remote themes.

*I Will Sing you one - O*, is actually an excursion into the heavens as it tells us of the "tower clock"\(^\text{19}\) "cosmic motes"\(^\text{20}\) and suggests divine harmony. *Looking for a Sunset Bid in Winter* expresses the vision beyond the fading golden sky.
and the bird. A star in a Stone—Boat, reveals his desire “to right the wrong.”

With the passing passage of time, Frost could talk of the ordeal and tragedies of his life with rare objectivity. Whenever he spoke of them a new philosophical note came into his voice, he once said:

*Time brings about a different attitude towards these matters. I feel far from the way in once felt about them. I have only two out of five children left. We set out stones and then go away to forget.*

Hence, after almost every loss Frost returned to poetry which encouraged him to discover new meanings in the bygone experiences, and led him to what can be appropriately termed a constant self-renewal.

As his biographies confirm, Frost, in the later years of his life read with a great enthusiasm the prophetic books of the Bible, especially the Book of Job, perhaps with the view to understanding the purpose of God in subjecting him to endless trials and to explore some meaning in these long trials.
Almost all of Frost's friends and critics were astonished to observed how Frost in his old age, was drawing immense vitality from the deep reservoirs of his inner strength, which kept alive his creative impulse till the end. Within a period of ten years after Elinor's death, he brought out four volumes: *A Witness Tree* (1942), which is known for lyrical fervor and profound sadness; *A Masque of Reasons* (1945) which is based on the forty-third chapter of the Book of Job; *Steeple Bush* (1943), that presents the poet as modern man, concerned with the future of humanity; and then *A Masque of Mercy* (1947) that as a companion piece to the previous masque based on the whole Bible. Thus Frost could satisfy his wish to dabble in religious drama. The Long poem *Directive*, which followed Masques, seems to be a revelation of the poet's deep explorations in the realm of life and religion, Frost knew shrewdly what life has to offer, and still he wished to live more. It shows his tremendous power of resistance. Frost observed himself, studied himself and analyzed himself.
The poet grew into a new poetic sensibility with outer humour and inner seriousness, within human limitations a 'whole'\textsuperscript{23} without 'confusion'\textsuperscript{24}. Only then he could "strike a line of purpose"\textsuperscript{25} on the "Chaos of experience"\textsuperscript{26}, and could give us the old poetry as young as ever, and new only in extending the bounds of sympathy through the recorded to the unrecorded knowledge of humanity.

The secret of his poetry his in the wide range of his study particularly the Bible, the classics like Homer and Virgil and English poets like Shakespeare and the Romantics. An area of Frost's thinking apparently shows the impact of the Romantic and Victorian sensibility but only to a limited extent. He began under the cloud of the Romantics to become a realist to the core, he began as a Victorian sharing their religious doubts and distrust of science, to be a modern in his mood and manner; he began realizing his poetic talent with the Georgians to take his withdrawal into the countryside a as a perspective and not an escape as some of them did. This acceptance and rejection is at the heart of his personality as well as poetry. He exhibits the
influences of the great masters like Emerson, William James and Henry Bergson, who have shaped his sensibility which, in turn, has assured him an important place in the modern intellectual history of America. Emerson and William James form the two opposite poles of the whole movement in American sensibility from Emerson's metaphysical optimism to James's skeptical leanings, and Frost was indebted to both for the streams of his thought.

Many of Frost's poems deal with correspondences between man and nature. The brief moments of contemplation or harmony are experienced when the actual, concrete and candid takes additional meaning and significant form, but in his more important poems which are dialectic, the man nature relationship poses a serious problem which he tries to resolve. William James's humanistic interpretation of man with fundamental faith in life had a strong impact on Frost's thinking.
References


17. Ibid. p. 39.


20. Ibid. p. 265.


