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## **A Critical revisiting of Robert Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep"**

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**ABSTRACT.** This article is going to revisit the poem of Robert Frost entitled "Neither Out Nor In Deep". The poem is open to and invites multiple interpretations. One of the element of the poem is sea which comprises a major symbol of the poem. The poem can be interpreted symbolically, philosophically, socially and politically. I will explore the themes of search and quest, the theme of life, consciousness, and existence, the theme of foolishness and folly, and the theme of Inertia. The poem will also be compared with other poems including "Stopping by the woods" by Frost himself, "Inlet Corson" by Ammons, 'Star' by Housman and 'Dry Salvages' by T. S. Eliot.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Robert Frost's often-anthologized poem, "Neither Out Far nor In Deep" is written in four stanza each stanza consisting of four lines with the rhyme scheme abab and using iambic trimeter. Making use of iambic meter Frost must have been pondering about the waves of the sea. The unstressed/stressed syllabic arrangement in a row permits us to understand and perceive the sea as we read. It's practically as if we're imbibed right into the hypnotic lullaby of the sea's repetitive surfs as the speaker calms us into the poem's curvy sound and rhythm. The poem begins with "people along the sand" gazing at the sea all day. They're all looking one way and they've got their backs to the land 'They look at the sea all day'(Frost.1916: 394). Sometimes they see a ship hovering its hull on the sea. Beside them there is a lonely gull. Despite the fact the water comes ashore, the people still look out at the sea. In the intervening time, they can't see far and they can't look in deep. But then again they continue looking out at the sea. However as the poet says 'They cannot look out far/ They cannot look in deep'.

### **2. SYMBOLIC AND PHILOSOPHIC INTERPRETATIONS OF THE POEM**

#### **Sea, the major symbol of the poem**

Artists in diverse countries and cultures have portrayed the sea. Symbolically, the sea has been observed as an aggressive location occupied by eccentric beings: the Leviathan of the Bible, Isonade in Japanese mythology, and the kraken of late Norse mythology. According to the well-known psychiatrist Carl Jung's, the sea represents the personal and the collective unconscious in dream interpretation.(Wikipedia)

The poem seems short and simple but full of deep meanings. It is the nature of Frost's Poetry to tell much in little. The poem is a dichotomy of Land/Sea. If we take a deeper look we see that people in the poem are turning their heads away from the land to the sea. They prefer the sea to the land and the poet is not satisfied with them. The poet describes their attention to the sea and their lack of attention to the land. They are near the sea and looking far at the sea. Why? To answer this question I pondered deeply over it till I came up with an idea. The idea is that both land and sea are symbolic. For me the land is the tangibility and solidity of life while sea is the other way round. Sea here stands for superficiality of life. People live on land rather than at sea. Therefore it is tangible and solid. The land also stands for one's homeland and country. The sea is not reality while the land is because of its tangibility. The sea attracts people but only for a moment and its attraction is not permanent. For the poet the sea in contrast to the land is not preferable simply because it stands for the superficiality of life. The poet criticizes "The people along the sand" who "All turn and look one way."

The individuals depicted are those who all look only in one direction 'All turn and look one way' and therefore wear blinders to keep from seeing anything else. They watch the sea, while their backs are at the land symbolically ignoring it, and in doing so they ignore and deny something significant and great. Nonetheless the state defined is not a general human state. Frost is not censuring all individuals. He chooses a specific type of person, a definite group of people for disapproval and reproach.

The individuals along the sand are similar to those in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where the people bound inside the cave are powerless to turn their heads and are consequently incapable of seeing anything but the shades and shadows on the wall of the cave. (Fagan, 2007: 233) They accept these shadows to be reality. The individuals in Frost's poem also take the shadows for reality; the reflection of the standing gull on the "wetter ground like glass" is presumably a reference to Plato's allegory. However Deirdre Fagan argues that :

The reflection may be the people's own reflections. What they are seeing could be themselves, only they are unaware. The people along the sand are fixated on a particular perspective from which they cannot break free. They are narrowly focused. There is variety on the land, but there is safety in looking at the sea, which is strangely constant. It provides security and predictability in a way that the land cannot. Frost suggests that what we should all be looking for is the truth, wherever that may be. But for these people looking "out far" or "in deep" is not a goal. It never was "a bar / To any watch they [have] ke[pt]." The truth could be anywhere, but they have only been willing to look for it in one direction because of the assumptions of their particular kind of watch. It is comparable to looking toward the sky in the hopes of finding answers when in truth the answers could be right here on Earth. (ibid).

Robert Pack states that "On the one hand, the lines can be read in tones of astonishment implying wonder at how dumb the people can be; on the other hand, the lines can be heard to suggest heroic perseverance and determination; the people will not be discouraged from believing in some kind of transcendent truth, like God, even though neither Truth nor God can be known" (186). Nonetheless suggesting that Frost offers the two positions equally seems false. Positively the final question comes in the form of mockery. Frost ridicules and makes fun of the people's narrow-mindedness. The critique is that the viewpoint of the individuals on the sand is narrow and shallow and that they should struggle to look far and deep in all directions. They must learn as an alternative to evaluate and assess what they do in line with where the truth lies. It must be noted that Frost evades capitalizing the word *truth*, permitting it to be diverse and all-encompassing. Nevertheless he is trying to say at what is eventually precise in any case.

Reginald Cook maintains, "Just as this is not a cozy poem softening the blow of human inadequacy, neither is it a shrill one exhibiting the plight of man in a scornful way" (289). Nonetheless there is strong criticism in Frost's lines. Cook also believes that ". . . this is not a pessimistic poem. It faces the dual facts of human limitations and destiny unblinkingly. No matter how formidable the situation, the poet withholds judgment as to the ultimate outcome. Men may yet make the best of a difficult situation" (287). Perhaps that is why the title of the people is 'neither and nor'.

What is of significant is that Frost uses the auxiliary word 'cannot' when he declares that 'They cannot look out far./They cannot look in deep' rather than saying 'They do not look out far/They do not look in deep' making it a matter of determination rather than will. This indicates that there is a limitation, perhaps self-imposed, put on these individuals along the sand, and Frost never clarifies what prevents the individual.

In spite of their determination and persistence, the people on shore cannot accomplish a all-pervading vision of reality. They watch away from the ordinary shore toward the depth and enigmatic side of the ocean. Few sights are noticeable; a ship and a gull offer conflicting images of mesmerizing wave and troubled stability. Indirect explanation having begun with "They turn their back on the land," the speaker now speculates steadily. The people avert the variable sights of land to focusing the distances of water, characterizing ambiguities they hope to understand, although the

sea may not actually have any more such certainty than does the land. Nonetheless the people carry on preferring this effort at further vision.

### **The Significance of the title**

Neither *Out Far Nor In Deep* make us think about limitations, in particular when it comes to human perception and understanding. Insofar as sight is concerned, the people in the poem can only see the surface of things, and at a relatively close distance to boot. The same goes for truth-seeking, as it turns out. The people can only grasp bits and pieces of life's mysteries and truths. Just the tip of the truth iceberg, as it were.

And of course by the last stanza, the speaker drives home the point of the poem's title by plainly stating, "they cannot look out far" and "they cannot look in deep." So by the end we're able to see the folly of mankind a bit more clearly as they stare at the sea, and are only able to see the ship that bobs along the surface. Silly people along the sand are in fact like gulls and dupes who are not that much broadminded. They are narrow-minded.

### **Themes of the poem.**

#### **Man's calm acceptance of his limitations,**

As a didactic poem, it teaches a lesson to the reader and it is the calm acceptance of his limitations. If we take Jung's interpretation of sea as personal consciousness, therefore paying attention to it equal narcissism and pride. Therefore the poet Robert Frost is bringing home a lesson to readers to accept limitation and avoid pride as much as possible. Looking at the sea is a kind of egotistical daydreaming. Since the sea is unfathomable, it is beyond our reach. Land in comparison to the sea represents, in fact, the limitations we face. Too much attention to the sea, the poem teaches us, will make us drowned metaphorically.

### **Themes of search and quest**

Man's incessant hunt for knowledge notwithstanding the mystery which surrounds it, and that man can arrive at truth, at times, with what's before him without stretching his mind too profoundly. Robert Frost's mysterious little lyric "Neither Out Far nor In Deep" is as indefinable as "the truth" that is so persistently followed in the poem itself. The poem is to a great extent "about" this exploration into truth, and scholars, for the most part, determinedly believe that such exertion is both essential and honorable, adding gradually but inevitably to the storehouse of human awareness. However such an interpretation might be evocative, it misrepresents Frost's intentions--as a close inspection of the enquiring image of "a standing gull," positioned deliberately at the very core of this mysterious work will disclose.

As "the people" glare expressionlessly seaward in the hunt for "the truth," fascinated by the secretive, unbounded sea, they thoroughly bear a resemblance to standing (as opposed to flying) gulls. Never openly specified, this comparison, so critical to the poem's significance, is obviously inferred, and it works to a great extent to the people's detriment. Since the gull is doing what comes obviously, gaping into the swarming sea that is its source of life and food and it is simply inactive from its life-sustaining efforts. "The people," suggests Frost, in factually and figuratively turning their backs on their province, the land, to gaze ceaselessly seaward, are atypical. Their efforts are life-denying in the extreme. They are like the gulls because the gulls are exactly doing the same thing that the people are doing. They are on land instead of being at their sea (now are landward) men are seaward (sea oriented) rather than land oriented. But they are gulls and not human beings.

Frost stresses the life-denying nature of their monotonous watching by presenting not a herd of standing gulls, but a solitary gull only. It is very surprising because standing gulls or, more precisely, terns, which characteristically locate themselves all together beside the water's edge are not infrequently found alone. The lonely gull points up just what "the people" are doing and how isolating and dehumanizing such activity is. So absorbed are they in their quest for "truth" that they have become oblivious of all else but their own solipsistic pursuit. They have cut themselves off from the land world and all that it represents (struggles and suffering, commitments, obligations,

responsibilities) and from one another as well. These types of people are perhaps egotistical, individualistic, self-centered and narcissistic. Because by looking at sea they are not paying attention to other human beings who might need their help and affection. They have become separates, similar to the solitary gull that they bear a resemblance to. Additionally, Frost put emphasis on not the bird itself but only its mirrored appearance in the shiny surface of the shore; it is the reproduced image that concerns us and occupies our mind, for it bears significantly on "the people" themselves.

Therefore we can certainly come to this inescapable conclusion that the individuals are without a doubt gulls--that is, "dupes." In their quest for final reality they have been deceived, beguiled, bamboozled. It is completely a deception, maintains Frost since what they all see is the infrequent passing vessel stated in lines 5 and 6, and he obviously hates and detests their ineffective labors. As the closing stanzas make vividly clear, they are wasting away their lives in a worthless and meaningless search, for whatever it is and wherever it might be, "the truth" is certainly not here. In a nutshell, they can look very deep and very far as the title of the poem beautifully, significantly, and dramatically declare it "Neither Out Far nor In Deep".

In an ironic form of Plato's allegory of the Cave, these persistent followers and hunters of truth have deliberately turned their backs on the only "reality" they can ever know--the land world and all that it stands for--and in so doing have been reduced to weak images, mysterious reflections of factual human beings involved in honestly fruitful human attempt. Anonymous, unidentified, mind-numbing, they have become pale and insipid copies of the real thing.

### **The theme of Life, Consciousness, And Existence**

Because those people along the sand look profound in thought, it's not dangerous to accept that the significance of life is going to play a part in "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep." But the poem isn't unavoidably looking to describe life and existence for us. Reasonably the speaker appears to call attention to the fact that we waste too much time contemplating about what it all means rather than living the life that's right in front of us. Simply we theorize about life rather living it. The speaker thinks the meaning of life is enjoying it with other people rather than theorizing it. He advocates practice not simple theory of life.

### **Foolishness And Folly Theme**

The speaker of the poem uses imagery of gull to make the people along the sand appear somewhat foolish. By playing on the word 'gull' Robert Frost is putting emphasis on the foolishness and folly of human being. The people along the sand look entirely unwise and foolish searching for the sea all day and imagining life's mysteries to throw themselves at their feet. In "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" the foolishness in man's existence rests seriously and deeply in the fact that he often forgets that he, you know, exists. Instead of living a good social life they are looking at sea.

### **The theme of Inertia**

In "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," we comprehend that people by standing around and overlooking how to get out and live makes us look as if they are less than human. The people end up looking like that lonely gull, all lonely and out of sorts. The people are standing. It means there is not activity on their part. Simply standing and looking at the waves is mere passivity. This is reinforced by the image of gull too, because the gulls instead of flying and seeking food in their home which is sea are out of sorts. They look passive too. This is also indicated in the sea itself, because the sea too is not that much active. Only infrequent sight of a ship is seen there. Even though the sea is continuously moving, there is also a symbolic component of inertia to it, simply because nothing happens there.

### Comparison of 'Neither Out Far nor In Deep' with Stopping by the woods

The poem 'Neither Out Far nor In Deep' lends itself very well for a comparison with Frost's most famous work, his personal favorite, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.". Two choices in the 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' are the woods and the home. Woods is like sea, it is mysterious and ambiguous. It is also seductive 'lovely, dark and deep' like the sea in this poem. Unlike the people who are individualistic and egotistical, the narrator is socialist and sociable and prefers to turn his head on the woods. The sea and the woods in my book stand for the narcissism in man. They are alluring and not that much meaningful. The writer places a great emphasis on commitment and activity because there is no activity at sea and in the woods in comparison to the land. The people in 'Neither Out Far nor In Deep' are not committed while the man in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is committed and has promises to keep. He realizes how treacherously tempting and interesting the woods are. He understands that he has "promises to keep," that he cannot "sleep" in spite of his societal responsibilities, and so he soon turns homeward. "The people" of Neither Out Far nor In Deep', however, continue to "look at the sea all day," beguiled by its deep, dark, mysterious depths. Turning their backs on the land world, their world, they have dishonored their promises; they are asleep to their human responsibilities, as their contrast to the reflected image of a lonely gull proposes, because they surely are "gulls" and dupes.

### Comparison with Inlet Corson by Ammons

The speaker in the Poem Inlet Corson by Ammons is different from the people in the poem 'Neither Out Far nor In Deep'. He comes to sea to recharge his batteries and does not let himself be seduced by the alluring sea as the people who are watching it in the poem of Frost. The sea and the land in the poem of Frost are opposite that when we choose between land and sea in actual fact we choose between the human and the inhuman, the finite and the infinite, the sea *has* to be the infinite that overflows over us boundlessly, the mesmerizing tedium of the cosmos that is incommensurable with us. But in the poem of Ammons the speaker narrates his walk along Corson's Inlet and designates everything he sees along the way. He begins by relating that he is absconding the unyielding walls of our human world into nature when he says, "I was released from forms,/from the perpendiculars/straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds/of thought" (13-16). This is perhaps how most of us feel when we are confined to the unbending thought processes of our world.

There is a kind of pantheism in the poem of Ammons a sort of looking at nature and worshiping its creature. This is evident in the way the narrator capitalizes the letter 'o' in the line:

but Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events  
I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting  
beyond the account:

Unlike the people in the poem of Frost the narrator sees his own limitation and confinement when he says:

in nature there are few sharp lines: there are areas of  
primrose  
    more or less dispersed;  
disorderly orders of bayberry; between the rows  
of dunes,  
irregular swamps of reeds,  
though not reeds alone, but grass, bayberry, yarrow, all ...  
predominantly reeds

The speaker sums up his walk at the end of the poem and sums up the poem itself in the last few lines, "I will try/to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening/ scope, but enjoying the freedom that/Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision,/ that I have perceived nothing completely,/that tomorrow a new walk is a new walk" (123-128).

Ammons, like Emerson, repels the city for the reason that the city reduces vision and insight. Emerson thoroughly recognized the near-pointed responsibilities of city work with the Understanding. He declares in his journal that:

the City delights the Understanding. It is made up of finites; short, sharp, mathematical lines, all calculable. It is full of varieties, of successions, of contrivances. The Country, on the contrary, offers an unbroken horizon, the monotony of an endless road, or vast uniform plains ... the eye is invited ever to the horizon and the clouds. It is the school of Reason.

Ammons, hundred years later, reverberates Emerson when he declares in an interview shortly after the publication of the *Collected Poems 1951-1971*: "I identify civilization (the City) with definition. . . . That's why I'm not in the city; that's why I am not an urban person. The city represents to me the artificial, the limited, the defined, the stalled." Like Emerson, Ammons too associates the shortsighted and myopic vision of city life with constrictive methods and manners of thought and weakened intuition.( Schneider, 81)

Both poems are poems of nature, in both poems natural images predominate, sea, water, gulls. The people in the poem of Frost are like gulls but the man of the poem of Ammon is not a dupe person.

### **Comparison of 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep' with 'Star' by Housman and 'Dry Salvages' by T. S. Eliot.**

The short poem of Housman 'Star' is very meaningful. . D. Reed in *Time magazine* presents the poem with a reference of 'the precise passion, rigorously perfect meter and understated rhyme of Housman's work. There is little, after all, in English lyric poetry that surpasses one of his finest poems.'<sup>1</sup>

The poem refer to the original sin as indicated in the lines 'The toil of all that be/Helps not the primal fault' . "Primal fault" alludes to original sin, the fallen or immoral state of human nature. So the short lyric poem seems to be saying that no amount of energy can change human nature for the better or to ease human suffering or unhappiness. To this lesson of vainness, the first and last sections are supportive images or metaphors: the stars signify the limitlessness of human misery against which falling stars can make no difference; the salty sea of human suffering undiluted by rainfall. This poem is very pessimistic. The rain and the sky and the sea are highly symbolic in this poem as is the case with the poem of Frost. The sky is vast and full of star, but not beautiful in the poem of Housman simply because this vastness is the predicament of human beings' difficulties and problems. Rain is massive because it refers to the massiveness of problems which rain over the human being. The word salt is yet another metaphor. It is found in the sea. What is the function of the salt. It evaporates and the evaporation changes into rain and come back to the sea and the same cycle is repeated and never ends. Similar to this process the poem suggests because of the original sin the problems like drops of rain are poured and return back to us and never end. This poem is by far more pessimistic than that of Frost. Both however seem to be a description of futility of human effort. In Frost the people vacantly look at the sea and the people in the poem of Housman vacantly try to put an end to a sea of troubles.

<sup>1</sup> <http://garethrees.org/2007/09/28/housman/>

Like the poems of Frost and Housman the poem of Eliot entitled 'Dry Salvages' is a nature poem. Dry salvages is defined as a poem of water and hope. It starts with natural images of the sea, water, and of Eliot's past; this water later becomes a symbol for life and how humans act. This changes into an image of a ringing bell and a debate on time and prayer. Images of men drowning dominate the section before leading into how science and ideas on evolution separate mankind from properly understanding the past.

The conclusion of The Dry Salvages is a debate into how people try to see the future through numerous gullible means. This is perhaps the same with the people who vacantly look at the sea in the poem of Frost. The sea in Eliot is in fact a god which is within every one of us as he says: 'The river is within us, the sea is all about us;/The sea is the land's edge also, the granite/ Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses/Its hints of earlier and other creation'. The narrator in Eliot's poem is a kind of pantheistic personality who deeply look at nature and its elements. He studies the sea and full of hope. Perhaps the relationship of Eliot's poem and Frost is the line taken from Eliot which declares: 'Men's curiosity searches past and future/And clings to that dimension'. The people in the poem of Frost are very curious and adamant about sea perhaps they are searching about the past and the future. Like Housman Eliot invokes images of original sin and Adam's fall when speaking about the past and points out that such events can be forgotten but can still distress mankind.

### Political reading of the Poem

In an intricate observation on the poem, Daniel Pearlman confidently declares that the poem of Frost is a clandestine allegory articulating Frost's annoyance at the conventionality of 1930s American radicals who ignored and overlooked the solidity and complexity of their native shores to the monistic simplicities of foreign socialist ideologies. Consequently, the people Frost attacks do undeniably fear to look out far and in deep. Pearlman supports this interpretation with a close investigation of details and by mentioning equivalents between the poem's message and conservative interpretations apparent elsewhere in Frost's writings.

I think what Daniel Pearlman says holds true because the land stands for homeland and the people who turn away from it are in fact ignoring it. The people he is condemning are somehow non-conformist and many of the poems of Robert Frost are celebration of conformity and commitment.

The poem 'Stopping by the Woods' is a celebration of conformity and commitment and this poem too is celebrating socialism and conformity rather than individualism. The nature of Robert Frost poetry is social. He is a poet of all people. He loves all people. Therefore his poetry is a description of a bigger cause rather than petty individualism.

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