



## A Study on Galway Kinnell and Robert Frost Selected Poems

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### ABSTRACT

This scholarly inquiry scrutinizes a curated selection of poems by Galway Kinnell and Robert Frost, investigating the thematic domains of nature, spirituality, mortality, interpersonal relations, and aesthetic craftsmanship. Kinnell’s poetic oeuvre is distinguished by a primordial, symbiotic affiliation with natural world, whereas Frost’s verse epitomizes a stoic and detach perspective. The two illustrious American bards are renowned for their fervent, introspective, and frequently unmetered excursions into self-examination. Their stylistic and thematic nuances furnish an erudite apprehension of ontology, transience, and human intersubjectivity, thereby exhorting readers to meditate upon their existential position within the cosmos of nature.

### Introduction on Poets

Galway Kinnell, born on February 1, 1927, to Irish and Scottish immigrants in Providence, the capital of the U.S. state of Rhode Island, grew up in the adjacent town of Pawtucket. As an introverted child uninterested in formal schooling, he spent considerable time wandering through the nearby Seekonk Woods. At the age twelve, exposure to Francis Turner Palgrave’s collection of the poem *Golden Treasury* published in 1861 found on his mother’s bookshelf ignited his fascination with poetry, an influence he associated with Edgar Allan Poe’s hypnotic poems verse. Upon reaching eighteen, he commenced purposeful poetic composition, eventually producing eleven poetry collections. Although, his first collection, *First Poems* was written between 1946-1954 with twenty poems, Kinnell’s first published collections was *What a Kingdom It Was* first appeared in 1960 with thirty four poems. His thematic concern encompass nature, religion, death, human relationship, political consciousness, and



his works are predominantly autobiography. He has been honoured with numerous prestigious awards including the Shelley Prize from the Poetry Society of America, the Medal of Merit from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Kinnell also won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for his *Selected Poems* in 1983. He was also rewarded as the poet of Vermont.

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California on 26 March 1874, to journalist William Prescott, Jr, and Isabelle Moodie. His mother was a Scottish immigrant, and his father descended from Nicholas Frost of Tiverton, Devon, England, who has sailed to New Hampshire in 1634 on the *Wolfrana*. During high school, Frost cultivated an interest in writing and reading poetry and published his first poem in the school magazine. His first poetry collection *A Boy's Will* was published in 1913 and second collection *North of Boston* published in 1914. His first published poem "My Butterfly: An Elegy," appeared in the Independent newspaper in 1894 shortly after this, Frost married his wife Elinor White in 1895. Frost's poetry is largely autobiographical and earned him numerous prestigious awards. He is the only poet to have received four Pulitzer Prizes for poetry : *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Note* in 1924, *Collected Poems* in 1931, *A Further Range* in 1937, and *A Witness Tree* in 1943. He also won Congressional Gold Medal in 1960 and was named Poet Laureate of Vermont in 1961.

### **Galway Kinnell and Robert Frost as biophiles**

Generally, a biophile is an individual who possess a profound affinity with nature. The word nature originates from the Latin word "natura" which signifies the inherent qualities of the natural world. In ancient times, nature was equated with birth. Nature encompasses plants, animals, landscapes, birds, and human. The treatment of nature varies among poets according to their personal experiences and perspectives. Nature functions as an emotional mirror for sensitive souls. Both poets are ardent lovers of nature. Their poetry explores the theme of nature which includes greeneries, mountains, streams, animals, birds, and plants. They examine nature's dual aspects of preservation and destruction.

Kinnell poems "Two Seasons" and "Earth Sparrow" depicts of nature's duality. "Two Seasons" envisages of two seasons; winter and summer embody the speaker's fluctuating affection. Winter intensifies their love as seen in the image of a winter morning "I spoke to you that winter morning / Watching the wind smoke across the ice, / Told you the beauty of your spirit flesh (11-12). Whereas, the summer exposes the lover's negligence causing the speaker sorrow as she becomes silent. The lover's heart transitions to a dying summer, symbolizing a heart that is withering and love is fading. The speaker's grief is expressed in the lines "Your eyes replied your worn heart wished it could / Again be



white and silent as snow” (19-20). In “Earth Sparrow” the poet portrays winter as a destructive force that renders earth barren. Gog shrouds the trees, stifling growth; the oak become leafless, personified as a human praying with outstretched branches to halt the fierce wind that snaps the tree’s limbs “Arms lifting ribbons of fingers and prayers” (7). Kinnell admired Frost and dedicated his poem “For Robert Frost” to him, engaging with predecessors who depict solitary winter landscapes.

Similarly, Frost glorifies nature’s seasons in his iconic poem “Stopping by woods on a snowy evening.” The traveller is drawn to the tranquil, dark, deep woods, mesmerized by the lustrous, serene beauty of the woods and frozen lake describing them as “lovely, dark and deep” (13). “Dust of Snow,” is a poem of realization where nature assists the speaker in recognizing his ruined day. A crow and snow become a salvation when a crow shakes snowflakes onto the speaker “a crow / Shook down on me / The dust of snow/ From a hemlock tree” (1-4). The speaker realizes his half ruin day “some part / Of a day I had rued” (7-8). In “Dust of Snow” and “Fire Ice,” Frost uses nature as a setting for intricate human emotions. “Dust of Snow” depicts a transformative moment where the falling snowflakes shift the speaker’s mood from despair to optimism. “Fire and Ice” addresses the destructive impulses of desire and hatred through elemental imagery, symbolizing conflicting emotions. Frost contemplates the world’s demise, implying that passion and indifference can both cause annihilation. Thus, Kinnell and Frost admired rural existence that intertwines everyday life, deeply rooted in New England scenery especially Vermont. Rural motifs such as seasons, woods, fences, and apples are emblematic of New England.

### **Antitheistic**

Kinnell regarded religion as illogical. Though raised in a Christian family, he viewed religion merely as a code of rules. He rejected the Christian belief in eternal life, asserting that the earth is the ultimate reality.

The poet’s notion contradicts the Biblical teaching that faithful Christians inherit heaven while the disobedient perish in hell. Kinnell’s view of religion draws primarily on the ideas of Carl Jung, Friedrich Nietzsche, Immanuel Kant, and Shelley. In his poem “First Communion” Kinnell rejects the worship of the image of Jesus Christ:

Jesus, it is a disappointing shed

Where they hang your picture

And drink juice, and conjure



Your person into inferior bread

I would speak of injustice. (29-33)

Kinnell feels disappointed to see people worship the picture of the bearded man displayed on church and home walls. In reality, the image is not of Christ but of British actor Robert Powell, who portrayed Christ in the 1977 film “Jesus of Nazareth.”

The poem “To Christ Our Lord” exposes the widening practice of Christians illustrating the popular earthly Christian tradition of sacrificing innocent animals and birds to complete their Christmas celebration. A boy kills an innocent bird for his “Christmas meal. The Christmas grace chilled / The cooked bird, being long-widened and the room cold” (7-8). Kinnell’s “The Supper After the Last” is a reversal of the Biblical “The Last Supper.” The title “The Supper After the Last,” is itself ironic. In Kinnell’s version of the last supper, he depicts the last supper as merry making where “They eat chicken, drink rose. The chicken head” (19). His last supper is attained by a bearded man, a host, and a dog who “Cracks chicken bones” (22). The poem also depicts Kinnell’s rejection of Christ resurrection. The furious wild man declares:

Your

Lech for transcendence?

I came to prove you are

Intricate and simple things

As you are, created

In the image of nothing. (42-47)

The above reference asserts that human beings are made from the image of nothing and will not experience resurrection or eternal life. Likewise, the eminent philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in his work *The Antichrist*, contends that people possess a misguided consciousness regarding eternal life:

People erect a concept of morality, virtue, of holiness upon this false view of all things; they ground good conscience upon faulty vision; they argue that no other sort of vision has value any more, once they made their sacrosanct with the names of “God,” “salvation” and “eternity.” (36)



Nietzsche states that people live in false faith; they ground good things upon the wrong vision. They are reluctant to believe in anything accepts God, salvation, and eternity. If anyone transcends religion and opposes these antiquated ideas, society will condemn him “an enemy of God, as a scoffer at the truth, as one possessed” (40). He also remarks that people have false assumptions about him that:

“Nietzsche proposed to derounding commendable actions on an incorrect visionstroy Christianity altogether, and so rob the plain people of the world of their view, their spiritual consolations, and their hope of heaven. Nothing could be more untrue. The fact is that Nietzsche had no interest whatever in the delusions of the plain people----- that is, intrinsically. It seemed to him of small moment *what* they believed, so long as it was safe imbecile.” (14)

In the poem “The Olive Wood Fire” Kinnell used the word God as a metaphor for his son. He used it as an emblem of love. In “Being with Reality: An Interview with Galway Kinnell,” the poet replies:

“however, the language of Christianity remains with me.

It’s a language that wasn’t invented by Christianity; the Christian borrowed it from somewhere else. So I don’t feel that in using Christian language I am appropriating Christianity or implying that I still am a Christian.” (175)

In his essay “Necessity,” Shelley points out that is no evidence of God’s existence. H objects religion that ties up with tradition and politics rather than the concept of theology. While asserting this, he also does not mean to promote atheist but Shelley theoretically argues that no one can prove the existence of God.

Frost also rejects religious belief. In his poem “Demiurge’s Laugh,” the speaker voices disbelief in God and condemns faith in God as absence. Frost ridicules Christian orthodoxy by portraying religion as an uncaring observer who merely enjoys watching a suffering man. In “A Prayer in Spring,” the farmer offers a prayer for an abundant harvest amid the uncertainty of spring which symbolizes rejuvenation. The speaker appeals to an absolute creator who governs the universe yet has abandoned it, leaving uncertainties in cosmos. The speaker believes that God has forsaken mankind consigning him to his fate. Frost argues in his allegorical poem “Trial by Existence” that there is no chance for man to be in communion with God in a world where God appears indifferent to humanity. In his critique Tyndal grapples Frost’s “Fire and Ice” as a destructive agent. He points out that Frost may be implying that God once used water to annihilate the world in Noah’s and fire to destroy in Sodom and Gomorrah; and now



retains only ice. He depicts the Christian God as cruel desiring to exterminate humanity through elements like water, fire, and ice. The poet questions God's character, traditionally described as merciful in the *Bible* now appearing heartless.

### **Mortality – Aware**

Kinnell embrace death as an unavoidable companion, having experienced it intimately through the loss of his sister and brother, which profoundly shook him. For him, death is universal and even Jesus Christ could not evade it. His poems "Easter," "The Supper After the Last," and "The Descent" meditates on Christ's death. In "The Descent," Kinnell reveals that even the Holy Spirit could not rescue His son Christ. The line "In the cry / Eloi ! Eloi ! (94) alludes to Christ's crucifixion in the *Bible*, Mathew27:46) where Jesus exclaims, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachtani?" meaning . "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" thus, Kinnell shows that even the Christian God is subjected to death and cannot escape it. In the poem "The Sadness of Brother," Kinnell documents his brother's death recalling an old photograph of his brother Derry "of a tractor ploughing a field" (16). Kinnell also remembers his brother's aspiration to become a pilot, illustrated by photographs and drawings of aircraft in the sky "photographs and drawings he had hoarded up / of all the aircraft in the sky" (18-19). The poet reminiscence about "Heinkel HE70s, Dewoitine D333 "Antares," Loire-et-Oliver / H24-2" (19-20). He also asserts that Derry "raced his big car" (30) and suffered a night accident in the "desert" (31), preventing him from fulfilling his "dream life" (35) of becoming a pilot. He left his memories with "these photographs of airplanes" (38) and a "tractor" (40). The poem "Neverland" echoes a subtle resemblance to Emily Dickinson's remarkable poem "Because I could not stop for Death," wherein death is personified as a gentleman and groom who arrives in a carriage to escort his beautiful bride, who cannot halt death's approach. In "Neverland," the poet sister is similarly unable to prevent her own death and thus embraces it. She comforts her brother Kinnell by declaring "I want you to know I'm not afraid of dying, / she said. I just wish it didn't take so long" (36-37). Kinnell desires to rescue her by saying "Seeing her appear so young and yet begin to die / all on her own" (38-39). Wendy was eager to leave, urging "Let's go home" (40) as if death awaits her. The poet shattered by his young sister's death and affected by a near death experience "She closed her eyes. / She was entirely white, / as if freshly powdered with twice-bleached flour (44-45). In his article, "Poetry Chronicle; Varieties of Religious Experience New York" by Galway Kinnell, Jane Hirshfield, and Rodney Jones. Peter Harris notes that Kinnell discusses a nephente, a drug of forgetfulness originating in Egyptian mythology and reference in Greek literature. Kinnell describes nephente as a "flaw" (32), an imperfect thirst for "what is not to be had here" (33) the longing to "drink / and drink and yet have most of my thirst / intact for the water



table” (33-35). The poet succumbs to sister’s death and wishes to drink nepenthe to alleviate his pain. Though heartbroken by a familial loss, Kinnell accepts death as inevitable and natural. Experiencing family deaths taught him to embrace mortality, evident in his this poem revealing his awareness of death “Knowing death will comes, sensing its onset, / may be a fair price for consciousness” (3-4).

Similarly, Frost embraces death as an inherent aspect of existence. In his own life, he endured profound sorrow and emotional chaos losing two children in early childhood. Peter Davison notes the sadness and turmoil Frost experienced in his personal life. Frost “lost two children to death in early childhood, another to insanity, another to death after childbirth, and still another (after the death of his wife, Elinor) to suicide.” (Ningrum, 64) Given these personal tragedies, it is unsurprising that grief and bitterness permeates his poetry. The poem “In a Disused Graveyard,” examines humanity’s awareness of mortality and the desire to evade death. The speaker describes the living who visit, read, and leave the graveyard, choosing to ignore the shrinking reality of death and instead imagine the dying has ceased. The verse “say and say” conveys that the living will eventually become “The Ones who living come today / To read the stones and go away / Tomorrow dead will come to stay” (6-8). Although “Men hate to die” (14) indicates that men cannot escape death. In “The Death of The Hired Man” one of the Frost’s longest poems, a farmer and his wife argue whether to allow their aging farmhand Silas to return. The farmer, Warmer, reluctantly offers Silas another chance, while his wife, Mary, sympathizes with the terminally ill Silas. Warren is moved by his wife’s compassion “But, Warren, please remember how it is: / He’s come to help you ditch the meadow. / He has a plan. You mustn’t laugh at him” (163-165) and goes on to check Silas but unfortunately Silas is dead “Warren, she questioned / Death was all he answered” (174-175).

### **Human Relationships**

The poetry of Kinnell and Frost is profoundly anchored in human relationship, encompassing bonds such as husband and wife, brother and sister, brother and brother, father and son, father and daughter. Kinnell’s poem “After Making Love We Hear Footsteps” explores the sensuality and domestic affection between a man and his wife, also celebrating the joy that this son, Fergus, was conceived through intimacy. In “Neverland,” Kinnell conveys his affection for his sister Wendy, who lay on a sick bed and passed away; his grief is unimaginable as he attributes immense significance to their relationship. “The Sadness of Brothers” elaborates Kinnell’s mourning over a brotherly tragedy in the Wyoming desert, where his brother Derry aspired to become a pilot but died before fulfilling his dream, leaving his



ambition incomplete. In “Little Sleep’s Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight,” the poet embraces his daughter Maud and acknowledges that a father’s love for his daughter is incomparable.

Frost poem “Home Burial” depicts the shattered communication between a husband and wife following the death of their child. It reveals the diverse emotions and sentiments both parents experience regarding their child’s demise, depicting the husband’s overt grief while the wife becomes silent obsessive in mourning. The poem also illustrates a patriarchal mindset in which the husband attempts to control his wife’s grief, further alienating her. “The Fear” is a narrative about a woman who abandons her husband to elope with another man. She exists in perpetual apprehension, constantly fearing that her husband is spying on her and will seek retribution, symbolically invoking the common law husband Joel will find her and take vengeance “

### **Style and Techniques**

The poet’s individuality lies in his distinctive stylistic and technical choices. It would be unfair to label Kinnell as inferior or to diminish his work. Kinnell’s poetry is abundant in stylistic and technical richness. His literary devices encompass free verse, autobiographical semi-autobiographical, biographical, elegy, epistolary, and fictional form. He is renowned for composing lengthy poems, yet also crafts concise ones. For instance, his longest poem, “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World,” consists of four hundred lines while, his shortest poem “Prayer” has three lines. Poetry characterizations hinges on stylistic markers. Kinnell employed dashes, double long lines, full stops, hyphens, italics, and semicolons. His used of dashes mirrors Emily Dickinson’s practice. Both poet used dashes in the mid-sentence and at line endings. Dickinson, in her poem “I Heard a Fly Buzz –, When I Died, – ” also in same position. Similarly, ““In Memory of Wilmington” Kinnell used dashes “his name – at the ferry now dead,– / of course, him / and also the ferry,–”(5-8) which alludes to a deceased vagabond while walking in Wilmington. Kinnell uses dashes for two purposes: first, to let to readers encapsulate the thoughts fully and second, to create a brief pause in the poem for reflection. His used various literary techniques such as allusion, assonance, symbols, metaphor, onomatopoeia, repetition, simile, paradox, and personification. The poem “First Communion” contains an allusion to the Lord’s Supper or the Last Supper where Jesus and His twelve disciples shared their final meal before His crucifixion. The poem “Burning” exhibits assonance in the line “I brought him boiled eggs and broth / He coughed and waved his spoon” (5-6) where the vowel ‘o’ in brought and broth creates a resembling sound effect. The quotation indicates that the poet offers boiled eggs and broth to a persona. Symbols are conventional marks or characters that represent an object, function, or process. In poetry, they convey



deeper meanings; for instances, the initial C in “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World” symbolizes Christ with capital letter C “This God-forsaken Avenue bearing the initial of Christ / Through the haste and carelessness of the ages...Where the drowned suffer a C-change, / And remain the common poor” (469-473) while, “Hai Ram” in “Calcutta Visits,” signifies the Hindu god Ram.

Frost poems are rich in literary devices and techniques employing autobiographical, biographical, free verse, and pastoral. His biographical poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” that captures a traveller’s quiet and introspective pause in a snowy and rural landscape inviting contemplation of the dark woods. Literary techniques such as alliteration, assonance, metaphor, symbolism, and assonance are applied in Frost poems. In the poem “The Onset,” the poet used alliteration; “Wood, With” (3), “Been, Begun” (11), “Four, Feet” (15), and “See, Snow” (18). Assonance can be found in “Mending Wall,” the vowel ‘e’ “Frozen and Under” (2) and ‘a’ in “Have and Balance” (18).

## Conclusion

Therefore, the poetry of Galway Kinnell and Robert Frost presents an enriched and profound investigation of the human experience, probing deeply into the complex interrelations of nature, faith, mortality, and the myriad ways humans connect with one another. The oeuvre of these two poets can be seen as a layered tapestry that weaves together ecological insight, spiritual inquiry, and existential contemplation, inviting readers to scrutinize their own predicament in the broader scheme of life and the natural universe.

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