

Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

A Lone Striker (1936)

The swinging mill bell changed its rate
To tolling like the count of fate,
And though at that the tardy ran,
One failed to make the closing gate.
There was a law of God or man
That on the one who came too late
The gate for half an hour be locked.
His time be lost, his pittance docked.
He stood rebuked and unemployed.
The straining mill began to shake.
The mill, though many, many eyed,
Had eyes inscrutably opaque;
So that he couldn't look inside
To see if some forlorn machine
Was standing idle for his sake.
(He couldn't hope its heart would break.)

And yet he thought he saw the scene:
The air was full of dust of wool,
A thousand yarns were under pull,
But pull so slow, with such a twist,
All day from spool to lesser spool,
It seldom overtaxed their strength;
They safely grew in slender length.
And if one broke by any chance,
The spinner saw it at a glance.
The spinner still was there to spin.

That's where the human still came in.
Her deft hands showed with finger rings
Among the harp-like spread of strings.
She caught the pieces end to end
And, with a touch that never missed,
Not so much tied as made them blend.
Man's ingenuity was good.
He saw it plainly where he stood,
Yet found it easy to resist.

He knew another place, a wood,
And in it, tall as trees, were cliffs;
And if he stood on one of these,
'Twould be among the tops of trees,
Their upper branches round him wreathing,
Their breathing mingled with his breathing.
If -- if he stood! Enough of ifs!
He knew a path that wanted walking;
He knew a spring that wanted drinking;
A thought that wanted further thinking;
A love that wanted re-renewing.

Nor was this just a way of talking
To save him the expense of doing.
With him it boded action, deed.

The factory was very fine;
He wished it all the modern speed.
Yet, after all, 'twas not divine,
That is to say, 'twas not a church.
He never would assume that he'd
Be any institution's need.
But he said then and still would say
If there should ever come a day
When industry seemed like to die
Because he left it in the lurch,
Or even merely seemed to pine
For want of his approval, why,
Come get him -- they knew where to search.

ANALYSIS

“What Frost observed of the factory in ‘A Lone Striker,’ he may well be considered to observe of all institutions, of all organized and consciously directed culture and fairly coherent systems of thought. ‘He’ is the tardy worker, but here we must let the pronoun stand for Frost. (And ‘church’ means no traditional social institution but that which can mediate real significance. So Frost might as well say, ‘‘Twas not nature.’) As Frost, speaking for himself and for the worker, says of the machines in the factory: ‘Man’s ingenuity was good / He saw it plainly where he stood. / Yet found it easy to resist.’

It is easy to resist provided there is a forest one knows. It is a sound preference that puts contemplation of process ahead of work at a spinning machine.... So the factory (and all the factory implies) is ‘not divine,’ ‘not a church.’ The worker, in consequence, ‘never would assume that he’d / Be any institution’s need.’ Nor, to reverse the last phrase, would he be quick to assume that any institution would be his need. In fact, he is loth to brood long on either possibility--of being ‘rider,’ of being ‘guider’; it is best not to ask what one is as one gallops along on the ‘headless horse’ that is society or human history. With this entity, one must resist setting up any relation at all.... Whenever one catches Frost in a dialogue with society, one must perceive that much of his effort goes to keep himself from getting ‘bogged down.’... Skepticism is defensible; social experience is a tissue of contradictions.”

Harold H. Watts
“Robert Frost and the Interrupted Dialogue”
American Literature XXVII
(March 1955) 69-87

The word “lone” in the title introduces the theme of self-reliant individualism and the word “striker” sets the action in historical context: the Great Depression of the 1930s when the poem was written. Strikes had been effective in the labor movement until the collapse of the economy. The tardy worker in this poem is fortunate to have a job and yet he quits. His “strike” is just as ineffectual socially as those of workers during the Depression. And yet, ironically, he is better off.

In the first line the word “mill,” with oldfashioned pastoral connotations, extends the historical context back a century to the early industrial revolution, when many young women left their homes to work long hours in the mills of New England, with room and board subtracted from their meager wages. In the last stanza history loops back into the present when the word “mill” is replaced with “factory,” to which is attributed “modern speed.” Melville was more harsh than Frost in his criticism of the working conditions for women in the spinning mills in his “The Tartarus of Maids” (1855).

The mill bell is the opposite of the Liberty Bell. It is “tolling like the count of fate”--enforcing absolute conformity. Ironically, failing to make it through “the closing gate” is analogous to failing to make it through the pearly gates, in that a job is social salvation. But the mill is no heaven and by turning his back on it the tardy worker saves his soul. The spinning mill operates according to “a law of God or man,” representing society--“many, many eyed.” Society’s *puritanism* of regulations and restraints on freedom are sanctioned as if divine. The worker is a *pastoral* figure because he is tardy and breaking a rule. Actually he will only be locked out and his pay docked for half an hour. Nevertheless, the lock-out provokes him into the choice that Frost himself made, to take “the road less traveled.” Actually, in this poem it is the “path” less traveled--his natural way of life, Frost’s equivalent to the Tao.

The mill full of machines is a metaphor of the City, the *head* constrained and to some extent enslaved by society, Frost’s “machine in the Garden.” When he gets shut out, “He couldn’t hope its *heart* would break” because society, in its economic system, has no heart. Melville had dramatized this theme in his famous “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (1853). Workers flocking and filing through the mill gate evoke the conformity of sheep: “The air was full of dust and wool.” As automation progresses, the machines do most of the work and the workers are mechanized. “The spinner still was there to spin. / That’s where the human still came in.”

The “human” is portrayed as female, recalling the young women who worked in the mills: “Her deft hand showed with finger rings / Among the harp-like spread of strings.” The “finger rings” suggest marriage to the mill rather than to a man. The ironic reference to a harp evokes the icon of the Angel in the House, embodying the ideals of the Victorian 19th century--innocence, purity, femininity, grace, divinity, redemption and salvation in the home--matriarchal ideals here displaced by those of commerce in the patriarchal workplace. The mill is replacing the pastoral way of life dominated by Victorian women with an industrial way of life dominated by machines run by men. The spinning mill was replacing the spinning wheel, the rattle of machines replacing the heavenly music, the genteel culture and social harmonies symbolized by the harp. In the home women synthesized extended families, in the mill they “blend” yarn. Of course, many of the female workers had no harp at home and were trying to work their way to independence, much like the servant girls who indentured themselves for a limited time to Puritans in the 17th century, except that the later servitude in mills and factories was often lifelong. All these implications subvert Frost’s accepting tone with more irony: “Man’s ingenuity was good.”

The tardy worker chooses a greater good represented by the woods--Nature in contrast to the mill and society. The duality of mill (head) and woods (heart) creates a psychological allegory of individuation, true to the archetypal pattern that recurs throughout world literature. The mill is “not divine,” implying that he seeks divinity in the woods. Individuation is lifelong and the worker has just begun to free himself from conditioning. In effect he is reborn. Now he is free to climb. The woods are in a higher place, bordering Wilderness and closer to the Sky, the space of transcendence. In this poem Frost synthesizes all four archetypal spaces in the Model of Metaphors: City (mill/factory); Garden (woods); Wilderness (cliffs “tall as trees”) and Sky (“among the tops of tree”). In contrast to the mill, the woods inspire holistic “thinking”--a synthesis of head with heart--as well as “love” and independent “action”: “Enough of ifs!” In spirit he is already experiencing *at-onement* with Nature as he anticipates climbing into the trees: “Their upper branches round him wreathing, / Their breathing mingled with his breathing.”

The poet is pastoral in his tolerance, accepting rather than opposing existing society, unlike the Communists who organized strikes during the 1930s. He affirms the capitalist factory: “He wished it all the modern speed.” He even offers to help the factory if he is ever needed. Frost is the opposite of a collectivist. For himself he rejects all societies, like Thoreau. “A Lone Striker” is comparable to *Walden* (1854) except that unlike Thoreau, Frost is tolerant of society, respects his neighbors and is willing to help them if needed. Frost is a conservative, Thoreau a radical. In a literal sense neither of them offers advice or sets an example in these works that is practical for a parent or for any worker with someone to support. Yet both *Walden* and “A Lone Striker” offer much to enrich the life of any reader.

The posture of Frost in this poem is also comparable to that of the countercultural hippies of the 1960s, in that the worker “drops out” of society to “get back to the Garden.” But again, Frost was a conservative

farmer. He and Hawthorne probably would have agreed that the hippies at Woodstock in 1969 regressed to the childish frivolity of the Maypolers at Merry Mount in 1628.

Michael Hollister (2015)