Robert Frost

‘THE NEED OF BEING VERSED IN COUNTRY THINGS’

- Farmhouse burns down and so the sky again has “a sunset glow” – first was natural, at sunset: this one is at midnight. Watching a sunset could be beautiful appreciation of nature at odds with the feelings surely evoked by watching a house’s destruction. The destruction is viewed, and referred to in the same way, as a natural occurrence.

- Only the chimney is left after the fire. In the simile, its shape and relic-like status are compared to a pistil, the regenerative part of the flower. Frost is playing with ideas and teasing a little as the house, unlike a flower, will not be renewed just because this part has been left. The simile is therefore paradoxical, likening something manmade to something natural but the analogy is spurious: it will not, as Frost is playfully aware, stand up to much examination.

- The wind is personified, as if it is a capricious human. On some whim, it chose not to burn down the barn. Again, Frost is playing in the way that this personification is at odds with the poem’s basic message.

- The description of the barn seems like a deliberate touch of ironic sentimentality, the word “forsaken” evoking feelings that the barn surely cannot have.

- Frost continues this sentimental tone with the indulgence of a memory, an emotional enjoyment of nostalgia, which is a very human tendency.

- In a dilapidated state, the barn is now used by birds and Frost continues to blend the human with the non-human, the birds’ “murmur” being likened to the sound that “we” (humans) make when melancholy or grieving or saddened.

- Despite its desolation and lack of human presence, it is a hospitable place for the phoebes. Nature continues to renew itself, regardless of what has happened to the humans. Whether natural (the elm) or a vestige of the old human life (the dry pump), perches are available. There is a human, kindly concern for their welfare and well-being that they do not reciprocate: they do not care that humans have left in distress.

- “For them there was really nothing sad.” One-line unequivocal, indisputable sentence, dismissing the sentimentality of the pathetic fallacy. There is “nothing sad” here for these birds.

- The phoebes “rejoiced” in their nest-building. This personification continues the irony, the playfulness in Frost’s poem. He claims that they rejoice and do not weep. It is easy to believe that “the phoebes wept” if an observer is not accustomed to “country things.” Those who are “versed in country things” are more practical and unsentimental. Clearly, the birds carry on with their lives: human emotions should not be attributed to them.

- Human and natural worlds are linked throughout poem.

- Feature of personification, but all ironically done as Frost’s message is that there is no such thing:–
  - It was “the will of the wind” not to destroy the barn
  - Birds “rejoiced in the nest they kept”
  - “The phoebes wept” in sentimental people’s eyes

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• i.e. “those versed in country things” are dismissive of sentimentality about birds, or other creatures, having human emotions.

• Country people have to be more practical about life and death on a farm: it is all part of the natural cycle and part of survival of the fittest.

• Rather cartoon-like to think of birds and animals as having human qualities and emotions.

• He creates images which all blend the human and the natural worlds.
  ➢ Burning house like a sunset glow
  ➢ Remaining chimney like a pistil of dead flower
  ➢ The barn is “forsaken”, the reader’s inference being that it is lonely with no more “teams” of horses visiting
  ➢ The birds’ sound is like the murmur of a grieving human
  ➢ Birds rejoice in their nest-building

• But only those not “versed in country things” would think of the natural world as being in sympathy with the human world.

• Foregrounding in stanza five of “Yet for them”, followed by a list of how life continues pleasantly for the phoebes, despite how they seemed to sigh in previous stanza.

• These things did not happen “for them”: they happened anyway! So, simply and bluntly, “For them there was really nothing sad.”

• Images of sound – gone is the “drum on the floor with scurrying hoofs”, replaced by the birds’ “murmur”.

• There is a regular rhyme scheme:–
  ➢ a-b-c-b, d-e-f-e, g-h-i-h, et cetera

• Consistent throughout, becoming predictable in its pattern or perhaps this is in contrast to the unpredictability of human existence. Maybe it is in keeping with the predictability of nature: it will carry on, regardless

• Predictable rhyme schemes can be soothing and comforting, like a guarantee that something will happen, i.e. “the lilac” will renew “its leaf” and the birds will build their nests.

• The lexis is simple and accessible.

• Every end-word is monosyllabic.

• Frequent use of monosyllabic words.

• Six quatrains, each one end-stopped in its fourth line.

• Neatness and control of structure and form, perhaps sharing the same practical, no-nonsense approach as those “versed in country things”.

• Repetition of the definite article throughout makes a very specific picture – “the house”, “the chimney”, “the barn”, “the floor” etc.

• “From too much dwelling on what has been” is something that the birds cannot do, unlike the human who does just that in stanza three.