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A Comparison Between
Robert Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep"

&

Roo Borson's "Waterfront"

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On the surface, Robert Frost's "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" (Geddes, 55) and Roo Borson's "Waterfront" (Geddes, 691) describe people by the sea. Deeper analysis reveals themes about society's close-mindedness. Frost says people refuse to look; Borson says they do not care. Both poets arrive at their themes with contrasting imagery, form and tone.

Just as in "Birches" (Geddes, 50) and "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening" (Geddes, 52), "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" contains images of nature charged with connotation. "The people along the sand" who "turn their back on the land" (ll. 1, 3) is plurisignation for society's group mentality and refusal to face reality. Pointing out the reflection of the standing gull (l. 8), not the gull itself, suggests the public's capricious behaviour and blurred perception. Even though reality "var[ies]" (l. 9), people look away every chance they get (whenever "the water comes ashore" (l. 11)). Not being able to look out far and deep (ll. 13-14) describes people's short-sighted shallowness. An abundant use of the third-person "they" (as in Borson's "Waterfront") indicates the poet is as detached from the people as the people are from society's concerns. Frost's theme about an uncaring society is also found in other works such as "Departmental" (Geddes, 54):

And heaving him high in the air,
Carries him out of there.
No one stands round to stare.
It is nobody else's affair. (ll. 38-41)

Frost supports his theme in "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" with a concise and geometric form. The four boxlike iambic trimeter quatrains contain variations where two unstressed words float together: "[t]hęy túrn thęir báck ön thę lánd" (l. 3). Squeezing the syllables together quickens the pace, thereby pushing the message onto the reader. Assonance, such as the "ā" sound in "takes" and "raising" (ll. 5, 6), also compels the poem forward. Besides shaping the meter, Frost's form intensifies the angular image of the standing gull's reflection (l. 8) "The people along the sand" (l. 1) and "they look at the sea" (l. 4) combine near the end to make "the people look at sea" (l. 12). This incremental refrain seals the mechanical structure and highlights the poet's frustration about society's insularity.

The tone of this poem would be frustrated contempt if not for the playful rhythm. The alternating masculine end rhymes alleviate the negativity in the poem's sweeping judgements and rhetoric. (ll.10, 15-16) The rhythm's paradoxical airiness, rather than diminishing the speaker's conviction, provides concessionary illocutionary force. Why complain if things can not be changed?

In contrast to Frost, Borson uses finely detailed connotative imagery to elicit a theme of an apathetic society. As all age groups are represented, the poet suggests the problem is endemic. Everybody is doing something to block out the world around them: the men are staring at the women lying down, the fishermen are focusing on their produce, and the middle-aged women are shutting their eyes. The only people without blinders on are the babies. Since "they [have not] yet finished / materializing" (ll. 17-18) they have yet to be conditioned to ignore the world around them. They are being "pushed along" (l. 14), however, so it is only a matter of time. Borson uses imagery to describe societal indifference in other poems, such as "Spring" (Geddes, 695):

Beside the run-off line: the skeleton

of one of last year's cows.

The other cows just walk around it
as if it weren't there. (ll. 20-23)

With some evolution in theme she posits that perhaps behind the indifference there is a light of recognition:

Or maybe somewhere in those eyes
like bells too far away to hear
they already know. (ll. 24-26)

"Waterfront" relies on an unanchored, syntactical free verse form to elucidate society's indifference. This creates line breaks that "accentuate... [the] space between images and ideas" (Borson, qtd. in Geddes); one break suggests "Middle-aged women / ... [as] going nowhere" (ll. 9-10). Alliteration such as the "m" in "middle-aged women / in magenta" (ll. 9-10) mocks people's fascination with the mundane. The prominent use of simile ("women's bodies... curved like shells" (l. 1)), objectifies the people, thereby portraying them as unthinking. Instead of using metric rhythm and end rhymes, parallel phrasing ("The women... / The men... / The seawater" (ll. 1-3)) sets a measured pace; the use of enjambment ("eyes closed and pretend / they are dissolving" (ll. 17-18)) also floats the poem along.

Negative construction ("can't take" (l. 2), "don't see" (l. 4), "don't care" (l. 5)) and criticism (ogling men (l. 2), inconsiderate fishermen (l. 6), "women / ... going nowhere" (l. 10)) reflect the speaker's disdainful tone towards the people. By imagining the fishermen working under the sun and the women "dressed too warmly for the weather" (l. 11), the reader almost feels the poem burning off the page. This hot irritation let's the reader relate to the speaker's feeling. By insinuating the babies will also turn out like the other people, the end of the poem is spiked with pessimism.

"Neither Out Far Nor In Deep" and "Waterfront" both portray a close-minded, apathetic society. Frost uses marginal but powerful imagery, a highly structured form, and a frustrated, but conceding tone to describe the whole of society. Borson presents

finer detail, a free-verse form, and a pessimistic, derisive tone to describe the parts that make up society. The slightly different themes can be discerned by looking at the actions of the people in each of the poems. Frost portrays what the people are doing (turning away); Borson portrays what they are *not* doing (caring).

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