

## Mordecai Marcus: On "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep"

The once-neglected but now much-admired "Neither Out Far nor in Deep" focuses its nature symbolism so sharply on human concerns that its haunting picture tends to dissolve into a contemplation paralleling that of the people described. The initially detached speaker observes people by the sea who make a uniform mass as they gaze away from the commonplace shore toward the depth and mystery of the ocean. Few sights are visible; a ship rising on the horizon and a gull standing on the soaked beach provide contrasting images of hypnotic motion and uneasy stasis. Implied commentary having begun with "They turn their back on the land," the speaker now philosophizes consistently. The people turn from the varying sights of land towards the distances of water, representing mysteries they hope to grasp, though the water may not really possess any more such truth than does the land. But the people continue to prefer this attempt at further vision, just as they do at the poem's opening. Despite their determination and persistence, they cannot achieve a penetrating vision of reality--nature and human nature--or what lies behind it. But they will not stop looking. In the last two lines, the speaker calmly withdraws, balancing admiration and skepticism, glad to see human speculation continuing but confident that it will not achieve much. The poem has been seen as a harsh commentary on human limitations, a charge Laurence Perrine answers by stressing Frost's insistence on the truly impenetrable depths that challenge human knowledge and the demonstrated capacity of the people to see part of the way as they strive to see farther (212). Similarly, Elizabeth Isaacs thinks the poet "joins forces with the rest of the human race when he climaxes the deceptively flat, calm poem with a grandiose, dignified ascent at its end" (34:150). Randall Jarrell takes a middle position, granting the poem a certain unpleasantness but insisting that the conclusion shows "careful suspension between several tones," making "a recognition of the essential limitations of man, without denial or protest or rhetoric or palliation" (98:43). In an elaborate comment on the poem, Daniel Pearlman boldly asserts that it is a covert allegory expressing Frost's anger at the conformism of 1930s American radicals who turned away from the solidity and complexity of their native shores to the monistic simplicities of foreign socialist ideologies. Thus, the people Frost attacks do indeed fear to look out far and in deep. Pearlman supports this view with a close analysis of details and by citing parallels between the poem's message and conservative views evident elsewhere in Frost's writings.

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