People and the concept of discovery

◊ ‘The Tuft of Flowers’

The individual—this poem from 1896 begins with the persona entering a field to turn the grass that has been mowed there. He appears alone and then he sees a butterfly, which then leads his eyes to a tuft of flowers that the mower left standing. The sense of pleasant surprise and admiration that led the mower to spare the flowers is shifted, through the sight of the flowers, to the speaker. A connection is formed between the persona and the mower who spared the flowers that drives out his loneliness. He now feels as though he and the mower have a common sense of purpose and of humanity.

‘The Tuft of Flowers’ is a return to the old-fashioned labour of hay-making. The isolation experienced by the persona resonates deeply with the responder as it is the loneliness of the entire human condition: we are all alone, he says, whether we ‘... work together or apart’ (line 10). This is a mournful message about human isolation, even if we are surrounded by others. The speaker is lonely ‘As all must be’ (line 9). The poet is alone and he cannot rely on the companionship of others. Frost is commenting here that the true nature of life is a solitary journey for all. There is a sense of poignancy in these lines, highlighted by assonance in the long vowel sounds in ‘mown’ and ‘alone’ (lines 7–8).

However, just as the persona appears to accept his loneliness a butterfly captures his attention. This change of mood is signalled by the use of the word ‘But’ (line 11). The butterfly acts as a messenger to the man, ‘A leaping tongue of bloom’ (line 23), reminding him of his role within society and of humankind’s obligations to one and other. He feels a connection between his ideals and the mower’s ideals, between his work and the other man’s work, and in doing so is reminded of his greater purpose. The tuft of flowers itself acts as a representation of the beauty and potential of human relationships. The poem illustrates how discovery can include the experience of discovering something for the first time or rediscovering something that has been lost, forgotten or concealed. The discovery in this poem is sudden and unexpected.

The persona is moved to delight and begins to look more closely at his environment. He hears the ‘wakening birds’ and almost believes he can hear the mower’s ‘... long scythe whispering to the ground’ (line 32). He no longer feels alone. He views the flowers as an indication that the mower has ‘... a spirit kindred to my own’ (line 33). Now he and the mower share a common purpose.

The final couplet of ‘Men work together’, I told him from the heart / ‘Whether they work together or apart’ (lines 39–40) reminds the responder that no matter how alone or isolated you may feel there is a common bond of experience to be shared with other humans, and that life is enriched through these connections.