

## AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF ROBERT FROST'S SELECT POEMS

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Literary eco-criticism is motivated by environmental activism and focuses principally on representations of the physical environment, especially of nonhuman nature. The dualistic separation of human from nature, promoted by Western Philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of human beings and ecosphere. While nature is not a subject, it has a language of its own. It has been talking to us and its natural signs portend danger and perhaps catastrophe. Whatever happens Nature will go on without us. And so, we are the ones who must act wisely to sustain and value the present living ecosystem and our position in it. In my paper “An Ecocritical Reading of Robert Frost’s Select Poems”, I have made an attempt to read some of the select poems of Frost on the basis of the above mentioned views. Robert Frost, though not a high priest of Nature like Wordsworth or a Pantheist like Emerson or Thoreau, is a person who has a deeper understanding of nature. Being a true realist and a strong advocate of individualism, Frost saw man as learning from nature, the zones of his own limitations. Conversely, Frost saw man becoming more “ego-centric” due to his preoccupation and less “eco-centric”. Neither a radical nor conservative, Frost searched for an ideal reconciliation between the opposing claims, of the individual and the group and also between man and nature. Thus nature, to him, was at once harsh and mild and man’s relation to nature, as to his fellows, is both “together and apart”. His poems have overtones of deep ecology which offers a philosophical basis for environmental advocacy which may, in turn, guide human activity against perceived self-destruction.

Frost’s poems create a memorable impression by the overwhelming presence of nature. Mountains rearing high above man’s head, valleys curving to man’s inquiring eye, roads, open or leaf-strewn, crowded trees, dense dark woods, hills of snow caving in heavily, tufts of flowers and many more – this memorable world of Robert Frost is all-pervasive and constant. But Frost’s vision expands beyond its focus upon man and society. He uses nature as a background to reveal his concept of the human relationship to this planet upon which the human race is destined to live out its days. Rural scenes and landscapes, homely farmers and the natural world are used to illustrate a psychological struggle with everyday experience faced by men but met with courage, will and purpose to keep moving on.

The principle champions of nature and interpreters of things natural in the nineteenth century were Emerson and Thoreau and they had been called Frost’s “intellectual and spiritual god fathers” (21). “The stars”, declared Emerson, “awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence” (5). And he also avers that all things are symbolic and the

seasons provide analogies with human life. Those familiar with the poems of Frost can hear the echoes of these principles ringing loud and clear in his poetry.

Nature, according to Frost, is at once 'together and apart' with the human workings. And this unflinching honesty in revealing the facts between man and nature becomes the recurrent theme in Frost's nature poetry. And as John F. Lynene avers, "it is this that he sees the basis of man's power and indeed of his spiritual being" (145). Moreover we can understand Frost's philosophy of nature and man in his remarks to John F. Lynen thus, "Man can never find a home in nature, nor can he live outside of it. But he can assert the reality of his spirit and thus can exist independently of the physical world in the act of looking squarely at the facts of nature" (146).

Though it is commonly acknowledged that Frost considered nature as a separate and independent entity, he was far too much like Emerson, visualizing man always cradled within nature, totally immersed in environment. Nature, to him is an open book with lessons of mutability which is taught by repetition of days, seasons, years etc. Man learns his limitations, and his lessons for survival from nature. But at times, out of his unquenchable desire, he tries to break the decreed limits of nature. Frost in one of his poems talks about the peach tree, being carried perhaps too far north to survive the intense, cold of winter and hints at the farmer's passion and nature's will thus, "Why is his nature forever so hard to teach/that though there is no fixed line between wrong and rights/There are roughly zones whose laws must be obeyed" (155). Thus Frost feels, that, man learns quickly that he cannot range beyond what his own physical nature permits, and that he is inevitably guided towards his destination by some force that keeps working on man. This inevitability is brought out in his poem "The Road not Taken" where man recognizes to his sorrow that he cannot travel both roads being one traveler, and also learns not only that choices must be made but that his decisions also will prove irrevocable. Time, space and capability set the zones within which nature allows man to harvest. "After Apple-Picking" too brings out the same theme, where the harvester finds himself blocked from success, before his plan is carried out, by winter's approach and physical weariness. "I am overtired/of the great harvest I myself desire" (400). Thus nature imposes her zones dragging across man's path, roadblocks. But out of his failure man learns painful lessons from nature. And, of course, if he is willing to accept the pain and gain profit, he obviously will have moments of happiness and rejoice in his life:

May something go always unharvested  
May much stay out of our stated plan  
Apples or something forgotten and left,  
So smelling their sweetness would be no theft (156).

Frost often emphasized in his poems, the contrast between man and nature as well as the conflicts that arise between the two entities. He recognized the harsh facts of the natural world and viewed these opposites as simply different aspects of reality in his poetry. Frost saw nature as an alien force capable of destroying man, but he also saw man's struggle with nature as, a 'heroic battle,' As Lynen says:

Man's physical needs, the dangers facing him, the realities of birth and death, the limits of his ability to know and to act are shown in stark outline by the indifference and inaccessibility of the physical world in which he must live. (150)

Frost in accord with this statement considers nature essentially as a symbolic philosopher and guide disseminating subtle and secret lessons of life to mankind. His poems, thus, puts man to the test and thus brings out his true greatness. His poem "To Earthward" showcases this:

When Stiff and sore and scarred  
I take away my hand  
From leaning on it hard  
In grass and sand  
The hurt is not enough:  
I long for weight and strength  
To feel the earth as rough  
To all my length. (150)

In his "Two Tramps in Mud Time" he mirthfully chats about the genial April weather but he intervenes in between to offer advice too as:

Be glad of water, but don't forget  
The lurking frost in the earth beneath  
That will steal forth after the sun is set  
And show on the water its crystal teeth. (412)

Thus in his poems the love of natural beauty and horror at the remoteness and the indifference of the physical world are not opposite but different aspects of the same view.

Frost uses nature as an image that he wants us to see or a metaphor that he wants us to relate to on a psychological level. The most lucid interpretation of Frost's lyric, perhaps, is that based upon the Emersonian pattern of natural analogies, "things admit of being used as symbols because nature is a symbol, in the whole, and in every part" (56). The predominant image of darkness recurs like a major theme in most of his poems. Dark woods, mixing fear and desire, typify the great concern of man for knowledge of the unknown that awaits him. They do their best to suck him in. Frost uses nature in his poem "Desert places" to express the thoughts and feelings of the speaker who sits in his room looking outside into a dark snowy night. The last two lines of the poem formulates the thesis of the entire poem, when the speaker realizes that he is not worried about the places outside but is scared of his own empty lonely places in his mind, that causes distress in his life. By 'home' the speaker is referring to his own mind which is a much more dangerous place than the woods or outer space. The poem "Stopping by woods on a snowy Evening" reproduces a scene almost identical to "Desert places". Here the traveler is enticed and mesmerized by the black trees. The horse in the poem is confused and wants to keep going. But the traveler with his "promises to keep" has a ready rationalization for withstanding the bait" (169). He does not need to look far to find misery and loneliness.

Snow, is yet another traditional symbol employed by Frost to depict his thoughts of the eternal. For Frost, all seasons lead out from winter. The poems could not exist without winter and its flood of white snow. It stands a symbol for the paradoxical life-in-death without which spring can never awaken. His poem “The Trail by Existence” puts forth the religious connotations of this snow:

The light of heaven falls whole and white  
And is not shattered into dyes  
And binding all is the hushed snow  
Of the far-distant breaking wave. (166)

Frost, like a true environmentalist reverts and revels in water, the elixir of life. Like Eliot, Frost equates water with fertility and vigor. In his “West Running Brook” the stream is presented as an emblem in which a young couple recognize the running water as completing the triumvirate of their marriage. It becomes the stream of life for them.

It is from that in water we were from  
Long, long before we were from any creature  
It flows between us, over us, and with us.  
And it is time, strength, tone light, life, and love. (409)

Water, from whatever source or by whatever means we receive it, is, of course, very essential and necessary to man. Frost’s dedicated concern for the preservation of water becomes apparent through his words, “We love the things we love for what, they are” (161). Here he refers to the brooks. Frost’s clarion call to his readers, being an enthusiastic ecologist, to participate in the form for tending the fount of life, water, is vividly showcased in his epigraph for *A Boy’s Will*. In “The Pasture” he invites:

I’m going to clean the pasture spring;  
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away  
And wait to watch the water clear, I may  
I shan’t be gone long – You come too. (162)

Frost, while highlighting the inevitability of preserving nature for the well-being of our future generations, poignantly and vehemently explodes on man’s depredations, that degrade the sanctity of nature. He points out the callous nature of man in disposing of a brook’s “immortal force” by running roughshod over it with his houses, curbs and street, throwing the brook, “Deep in a sewer dungeon.” Frost talks about man’s irresponsible playing with bonfires which is equally destructive, as with man’s perversity in toying with gunfire. In his “Range Finding” Frost conveys the ominous upheaval of the entire ecology caused by shells as its poison spreads over hill and pasture like a creeping fog. Bill Mackibben in his “The End of Nature” has discussed about the imminent threat for nature thus:

Nature is not merely threatened by the possibility of apocalypse, but in some sense already beyond it, for if nature is inflected as wilderness, the very thought of human interference is enough decisively to contaminate its purity. (106)

Frost, thus being a realist to the core, uses nature as a vibrant and educative tool to lay bare the secrets and the inner workings of man's mind, only with a view to transforming him into a better human being. Frost's nature poetry thus contains "decipherable dimensions beyond physical nature" (164). His affinity towards life and the universe as a whole can be summarized thus:

The universe may or may not be very immense.  
As a matter of fact there are times when I am apt  
To feel it close in tight against my sense  
Like a caul in which I was for and still am wrapped. (164)

At the outset, Frost's poems give us an impression that he considers nature and man as two separate entities, but a deep and a close reading of his poems reveal to us the enigmatic subtlety and inseparability of man and nature.

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