

Conflict of Man and Nature in Robert Frost: A Study of Select Poems

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ABSTRACT

The prevailing convention of viewing the new nature poetry in the light of the philosophical and pro-religious concept of nature which flourished in the previous centuries is still put into practice by many of Robert Frost's critics. With the advent of the twentieth century the conventional view of nature underwent a considerable transformation due to the scientific discoveries. The earlier conception of nature extended its scope to take into its sphere an all encompassing cosmic design, of which the visible physical nature is only one manifestation. The new conception of universe or cosmic scheme is seen to be replete with all sorts of misfortunes, malevolence and calamities. Frost visualizes nature as 'the other', a remote force, unconnected and unconcerned with human suffering. He observes an inherent determinism in the cosmic scheme which leads to negation. He observes Man and Nature standing under a neutral scheme which is devoid of divine sanctity. The present paper examines the theme of conflict between man and nature with reference to Frost's select poem.

Keywords: *Nature, Philosophy, Pro-Religious Concepts, Determinism, Divine Sanctity etc.*

Critics have diverse views about considering Robert Frost as a nature poet. Such perspectives arise out of their different individual experiences and outlook. Some critics consider Frost as "our best nature poet since Wordsworth". Barry D. Bort feels Frost to be "the only major contemporary poet writing convincingly about nature." Though, some others like Joseph Warren Beach and Carlos Baker feel that Frost is "not a nature poet since he writes more about country things than about conventional natural objects". Another critic John Freeman points out the difference of "the steady grey light" of Frost's poetry from Wordsworth's poetry and says, "It is distinguished finally from the light of Wordsworth's verse by its raylessness". The prevailing convention of viewing the new nature poetry in the light of the philosophical and pro-religious concept of nature which flourished in the previous centuries is still put into practice by many of Robert Frost's critics. With the advent of the twentieth century the conventional view of nature underwent a considerable transformation due to the scientific discoveries. The earlier conception of nature extended its scope to take into its sphere an all encompassing cosmic design, of which the visible physical nature is only one manifestation. The new conception of universe or cosmic scheme is seen to be replete with all sorts of misfortunes, malevolence and calamities. Frost visualizes nature as 'the other', a remote force, unconnected and unconcerned with human suffering. He observes an inherent determinism in the cosmic scheme which leads to negation. He observes Man and Nature standing under a neutral scheme which is devoid of divine sanctity.

Despite the formative influence of romantic nature poetry, the poets of the transitional period differed in an essential way from their romantic predecessors. The transitional poets were firmly convinced that there was no spiritual force in nature. The Spiritual powers had gone altogether beyond their comprehension, neither present as a separate divinity, nor immanent in nature. Therefore, The gulf between man and nature seemed dark, inscrutable, and almost beyond man's powers to cross. Despite the austere outlook, the transitional poets tried to bring order into the chaotic realm of nature. Their fervent appeal was for a glimpse of benevolence inherent in nature and of sustained power and courage in man to transcend the barriers to reach oneness with nature. As the sensuousness and worship of beauty featured in the poetry of Keats and Wordsworth were discarded by transitional poets, Frost has to devise a new way of delineation to cope up with the uneasiness, hopelessness, and despair of the new cosmos. A new style is adopted by Frost to reflect the intense suffering seen in the natural world.

To Frost the central and main point of concern is man. His vision of nature is bleak. It focuses on man's plight against the mysterious and inscrutable forces of nature. Frost finds nature a vital personality, and man's encounter with it is balanced delicately. His is a carefully chosen middle path of dualism which permits creativity.

This idea of Frost finds expression in several of his poems. In his poem "Birches", he contemplates a moment when the soul may become completely absorbed into a union with the divine. But he is earthbound, afraid and confined to his worldly limits. The moment he imagines himself getting away from earth, he thinks of 'fate' instead of God. His psychological apprehension of what might be a mystical experience turns into a fear of death, a fear that he would be snatched away 'not to return'. So, he rejects the unknown and clings to the finite world, 'earth is the right place for love'. He says:

**May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:
I don't know where it's likely to go better.**

As the poet observes the magnetic pull of the infinite, he feels afraid and is reminded of his worldly duties. His fear of being 'snatched away, not to return' also manifests itself in the poem "After Apple Picking" where he deliberately makes a comparison of his sleep with that of a woodchuck to clarify any confusion in the mind of the reader. The poet clearly discriminates his state of drowsiness as a transitory phase, a momentary state of rest during which he always remains conscious of his worldly duties. He says:

**The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.**

At times Frost finds nature very cold and hostile. The design of cosmic things appears terrifying to him. In a letter to Lincoln Macueagh he says, "Something hates us and likes to spoil our fair beginning." Frost observes nature as a powerful force constantly trying to impede man's journey. This impersonal, gigantic and dynamic force is wildly destructive and annihilating, and Frost is, as Lionel Trilling puts it "not a poet" who reassures us "by his a affirmation of old virtues and ways of feeling" but arouses fear by speaking of "a terrifying universe". Frost's fear of a terrifying nature finds an eloquent expression in the poem "The Onset". The paralyzing response of a dazed persona at the sudden sight of an ice storm finds expression in the lines:

**I almost stumble looking up and round,
As one who overtaken by the end
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend
Upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun.**

The persona is stunned to see the descending snow downhill. He stumbles and lets the overpowering sense of death descend on him. There is no apparent struggle on the part of the persona and he makes a passive surrender to the evil design of nature. Hence, the nature wins no great triumph. It looks as though life has never begun. "The deep rooted terror of a malevolent nature is seen in "Storm Fear". The human efforts to resist and retaliate against the immense fury of the immeasurable strength of natural forces seem to be frail and ineffective. The tremendous force of nature and its violence are again emphasized in "Once by the Pacific". The soaring waves and their shattered water represent kinetic energy. The poet warns the humble people "to be prepared for rage" as "it looked as if a night of dark intent was coming and not only a night, an age". Similar unsighted power stands mute in Frost's "Stars". A wanderer is completely lost on a wintry night with chilly winds blowing and white snow covering and annihilating everything. Frost finds a total void in the white blank snow in "Desert Places": "A blind whiteness of benighted snow with no expression nothing to express". Human despair increases with an awareness of cosmic meaninglessness. This sense of absolute blankness also exhibits itself in the poems "Design" and "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep". The inexplicable mystery of the persistent conflict between man and nature finds expression in the poem "Mending Wall" which embodies a constant confrontation between nature and man. When the persona finds the repaired wall repeatedly broken at 'the spring mending time', he says with astounding astonishment:

**Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly....**

Frost perceives of a design in the cosmic scheme. The poet wonders at the unerring scheme of cause and effect in "Design". He finds sinister implications, "a design of Darkness", in the accidental meeting of a white heal-all, a moth and an Albino spider. Frost is confronted with a natural scheme of things which is not apparently responsive to human pleas and cries. It is not easy to penetrate the barriers and probe the mystery of nature. It is ever an incomprehensible and inscrutable force. In a Frost's poem the tension rises between the simple fact and the mystery which surrounds it. The mysterious point occurs when the scene and the unseen confront each other. As in

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” the simple and visible fact is the persona stopping by the woods, and the mystery which surrounds the woods is the invisible and unseen factor. The persona says:

**My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year**

The persona is not only captivated by the physical beauty of nature, but he is mesmerized and baffled by the profundity and inscrutability of the universe which he finds underlying this sensuous manifestation. But again, the persona is earthbound and afraid. The moment he feels transported to a world of spirit, he is reminded of his moral determination to carry on his worldly duties. Despite the strong magnetic pull, a fleeting hunger for final rest, he at once reminds himself that he is a man of the world; he has to go on his defined path; and he has his obligations to tend before he can yield to the spontaneous, natural and passionate calls of nature. So, he says:

**The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep**

Thus, the theme of nature’s dualism runs throughout the poetry of Frost. Nature appears benevolent or destructive depending on the viewer’s point of view. But in Frost’s poetry communion with nature is not ornamented with any spiritual significance. He respects the limitations and accepts the boundaries that separate man from nature. The design of darkness may govern the universe, but Frost endeavours to find an order in natural anarchy. Reginald Cook sums up Frost’s attitude in the words: “Frost accepts Hardy’s hostile universe no more than Emerson’s benevolent one”. Frost rejects the conception of nature as a benevolent, divinely sanctioned cosmic scheme. The various emotional responses of man to a sense of isolation, alienation and nostalgia together embody his concept of nature. The haunting note of estrangement and the subdued note of acceptance engender a new artistic excellence.

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