

Literature And Nature: An Ecocritical Study Of Select Poetry Of Robert Frost

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Abstract

Ecocriticism studies literature and nature. Of the radical criticisms that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, ecocriticism has been the prominent in the academic humanities. There is a flux of interest on environmental affair in the present time. Many critics suggest that ecocritics must study the authors who wrote much before the advent of the ecocritical theory. The American poet, Robert Frost (1874—1963) seems an ideal poet for such enlistment.

This paper deals with Frost's vision of natural world. It investigates the ecological implications in his major poetry. I will read his poetry from an ecological point of view to draw the attention of the readers to the significance of the environmental concerns embodied in the poetry of Robert Frost.

Keywords: Nature; environment; human; nonhuman; pastoral.

John Keats, W. H. Davis and the Pre-Raphaelites simply perceived the nature: for Keats ‘ a thing of beauty is a joy forever’. Others like Walt Whitman, P.B. Shelley and Dos Passos stood tall to record the bird's eye view of nature and culture simultaneously. Others like Wordsworth, Hardy, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Henry James devoted nature, to them nature displayed an important voice and blended within them the philosophical overtone. Robert Frost's outlook to nature was the amalgamation of all. Sometimes, he merely observed beauties of nature: at times he found spiritual echoes in it, some other times he found nature a reflection of man's soul. But he did not see nature out of nature. He said, “I guess I am not a nature poet. I have written no poems without a human being in them”. Nitché has pointed out: “Frost is ultimately not very much concerned with developing a philosophically consistent concept of nature...what really interests him is not definitions but attitudes, not that nature is in itself but how man responds to it in a world he never made.”

Frost is a great lover of nature and his love is local and regional. It is the region that lies to the north of Boston, which forms the background to his poetry. It is the hills and dales, rivers and forests, trees, flowers and plants, animals, birds and insects, season and seasonal changes, of this particular region, which have been described in one poem after another, and his descriptions are characterized by accuracy and minuteness. As Isidor Schneider says, “the descriptive power of Mr. Frost is to me the most wonderful thing in his poetry. A snowfall, a spring thaw, a bending tree, a valley mist, a brook, these are brought not to, but into, the experience of the reader.” The method is simple and can be analysed. What he describes, is never a spectacle only, but an entire adventure. Numerous poems of Frost, written at different periods of his life, are devoted to the descriptions always reveal minuteness of observation and fidelity of description.

His “North of Boston” poetry, *Mending Wall*, proves how man is pervasive and extensive. He does not like to be confined within limited walls that fenced him for protection and privacy. In this poem, Frost accurately portrays human conflict in nature, how they avoid neighbours building fence walls but his intuition regarding life and neighbourhood is something different contradicting his civilized activities:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard

My apple trees will never get across

And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

He only says, “Good fences make good neighbours.”(*Mending Wall*)

Frost studied nature ecocritically and scientifically and tries to reach into the very core of natural issues which exert a profound influence – controlling and regulating human activities. That is why Shelley says, ‘a poet is an unacknowledged legislature.’ Frost has changed the vision of man and has asked them to look at nature ecologically not spiritually.

Frost’s another “North of Boston” poetry, *After Apple Picking* comes before us as a sensuous poetry of nature which fully brings out poet’s sensuous enjoyment of the scenes, sights, sounds and scents of nature. It is also a reverie of monologue of a tired and drowsy apple – picker. The apple-picker has been picking apples for quite a long time and now, he is tired. His long, two pointed ladder is still sticking through a tree towards heaven:

And there’s barrel that I didn’t fill

Beside it, and there may be two or three

Apples I didn’t pick upon some bough.

But I am done with apple picking now. (*After Apple Picking*)

Throughout “The Road Not Taken” in Mountain Interval, nature is used as a metaphor for the life of the speaker. The speaker contextualizes a major decision by writing about it as if it was something he encountered while walking in a forest in the fall. This metaphor helps us wrap our minds around the complexities of a choice that will decide his future:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
 And sorry I could not travel both
 And be one traveller, long I stood
 And looked down one as far as I could
 To where it bent in the undergrowth; (The Road Not Taken)

The poet does not moralize in The Road is Not Taken. He remained tight-lipped about which road is good. He leaves it to the readers to decide. The neutrality is nothing but a natural tendency which man should take as the poet feels.

In Hyla Brook, the poet portrays the stream in a lively manner. It is an ordinary stream but does extraordinary work echoing the various natural sounds through frogs and insects. It is shown that the river is a breeding ground for frogs and other insects that keep on singing and continue the song of the earth. When the river gets shrink into a rivulet in the summer due to lack of flowing of water, the frogs cease as they hibernate. Whoever has seen the stream once swelling in the summer cannot forget its beauties throughout his life:

A brook to none but who remember long.
 This as it will be seen is other far
 Than with brooks taken otherwise in song.
 We love the things we love for what they are. (Hyla Brook)

Hyla Brook is a combination of the local and the universal – in fact the poem is also an example of the poet’s habit of ending his nature – lyrics with amoral tag. Hyla Brook succeeds in projecting Frost’s fast and enduring belief. Frost gives way to his personal feelings by using the plural “we”.

Stooping by Woods on a Snowy Evening is a poem which has been largely evaluated by modern critics like Malcolm Cowley and Lionel Trilling from an ecocritical point of view. Both the critic analyse how the poet likes to remain within the fold of nature even till late evening. His horse, however, is very much opposed to halting in the midst of dark forest. Although the poet derives beauty from the snowy evening, it is painful to the horse for which it rings its bells to bring the poet to consciousness. The poet enjoys nature even in its raw form but he is made conscious of the duties and obligations that lie before him. The poet

describes the woods as deep, dark and lovely creating an atmosphere of wonder and enchantment. The poet describes the beauty of the forest, here the beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder who could derive beauty even from the most awkward situations. The poet 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. (Stooping by Woods ... Evening)

Here nature and life are intermixed with each other. Man has to toil throughout his life for survival and success but his success depends on his coexistence with nature and its approach to it. Every line either portrays nature or contains the hidden meaning of life that universally exists.

Frost is a great poet of nature. His love of nature is characterized by the hard, matter of fact realism of a farmer who is intimately acquainted with the ways of nature and has no illusions about her. Tree at My Window well illustrates the point. There is a tree outside the window of the poet's bedroom. At night the "sash" is lowered to keep out the wind. But the poet does not draw the curtain over sash, for he does not want to lose sight of the tree. The tree seems to fascinate him. This is so because the poet has discovered close similarity between himself and the tree. Just as he himself, is torn and agitated by inner conflicts, worries and anxieties, so also the tree is torn and tossed about by the wind:

Tree at my window, window tree

My sash is lowered when night comes on;

But let there never be curtain drawn

Between you and me. (Tree at My Window)

Frost is a lover of nature. And natural objects like bird etc. The Oven Bird is significant in the sense that here the poet's love of the bird is manifest to the full. Birds appear in many poems of Robert Frost. In this poem Frost describes the habits of the oven bird. The bird has an uncanny knowledge and can tell which season is about to come. This bird never appears before the people when the spring season comes. This is the time when most other birds start singing. But the oven bird is a later comer in the forests:

There is a singer everyone has heard,

Loud, a mid- summer and a mid – wood bird,

Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again. (The Oven Bird)

Come In is another version of stooping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. The poet at the edge of the woods in a dark world resists the invitation of the bird to go into the still greater dark and lament. He resists, too, in the poem's final line, the temptation to read the world as inviting him to anything. He is out for stars and he maintains his quest in the face of darkness and indifference. The leaf treader, in the poem so named, rejects a similar invitation extended by the falling leaves, stamping them underfoot:

Too dark in the woods for a bird

By sleight of wing

To better its perch for the night,

Though it still could sing. (Come In)

The Need of Being Versed in Country Things is the last poem of New Hampshire. Here, Frost tells us about his love of nature and things pastoral in the simplest possible words. Only people who are well versed in country things can have any idea of the loveliness and beauty of nature. Birds and other creatures there is no reason to be sad because the world of nature renews itself and everywhere one could see life and activity. They are happy in their nests. But this truth can be realised only by one who is well-versed in country things. The truth is so succinctly described in the last lines:

For them there was really nothing sad.

But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept,

One had to be versed in country things

Not to believe the phoebes wept. (The Need of ... Country Things)

Frost is a great and original natural poet. His nature-treatment is unique and distinctive in many ways. He does not take any theory of nature for granted. Rather, he writes from his own personal experience and observation. His approach is pragmatic and realistic.

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