

**Frost and Wordsworth**  
**Similarities and differences**

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**Abstract**

Both Frost and Wordsworth are, by all consent, considered as nature poets. Nature finds a unique expression in their poems of requisite beauty. Wordsworth is the high priest of nature whereas Frost's attitude towards nature is sometimes described as modern. Wordsworth, on the one hand, experiences the presence of a Divine Spirit behind all the objects of nature and Frost, on the other, does not spiritualize nature. On the contrary, Frost does not glorify or idealize nature. He strongly believes that nature is beautiful and enjoyable but the duties and responsibilities which we have on our shoulders are more important than merely the enjoyment of nature. Moreover, being the pioneer of the Romantic Movement in England, Wordsworth is rightly given the credit for being a romantic poet of the first water. His nature poems bring us to the airy-fairy world, to the world of imagination and make us feel the romantic aroma therein. The condition is a little different in case of Frost's treatment of nature. Since Frost harbors a modern sensibility, his treatment of nature is realistic, and as a realist, he does not find any benevolent spirit pervading in nature. Frost's portrayal of the disintegration of values in modern life and disillusionment of the modern man through his nature poems make him essentially a modern poet with an acute modern sensibility. Apart from this, Frost has a tendency to philosophize but is free from didacticism, which is sometimes not so in case of Wordsworth. Well, all this does not mean that Frost and Wordsworth have only these points of differences. As a matter of fact, both Frost and Wordsworth bear a great affinity with each other. For instance, for both of them, what is necessary for creative power is a kind of 'detachment', which seems quite perceptible in their poems. Besides this, both of them go parallel in their use of the language of common people for poetic expression.

**Keywords** : Detachment, Romantic Movement, Didacticism, Airy-fairy World, Disintegration, Disillusionment.

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Although some critics like Alvarez, in their over-worked zeal for saying something original and subtle, argue in vain to deny Frost as a nature poet yet most of the critics are of opinion that Frost is first and foremost a nature poet. It is interesting to observe that in accordance with their view, it is Frost's treatment of nature also which confirms him to be a modern poet. In order to go deep into the matter, a few lines of John F. Lynen need to be quoted:

“For Frost, nature is really an image of the world of circumstances within which man finds himself. It represents what one might call “the human situation...The relationship between man and nature represents the whole problem raised by the opposition of mind and matter, of man's actual experience with its feelings, purposes, and intuitions of value and a scientific scheme of reality in which everything is reducible to matter and process. Frost's persistent concern with the remoteness of nature manifests his desire to accept the scientific scheme. Such acceptance would seem to be dictated by common sense as Falstaff says, “Is not the truth the truth?” But poetry is concerned with the very elements of experience which the scientific scheme excludes, and the poet who wishes to be loyal to scientific truth is faced with a difficult problem. If the “real” world is the world as science describes it, are feelings, purposes, and values “unreal”? Or is the actual lived experience in which they are infused a mere illusion? The unique form of Frost's nature poetry represents his way of resolving the problem, and it is, I suggest, an essentially modern solution.”<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact, the importance and the use of the Frostian treatment of nature is debatable but it has to be acknowledged that Frost's poetry is a living tribute to his capacity for minute observation and accurate description. The descriptive power of Frost is, in fact, the most wonderful thing in his poetry. A snowfall, a spring thaw, a bending

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<sup>1</sup> *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*, Chapter 6- *Frost as A Modern Poet*, John F. Lynen, First Printed 1960, Yale University Press Inc., pp. 162-163.

tree, a valley mist, a brook - these are brought not to but into the experience of the reader. The simultaneous description gives the reader almost a sensory instrument with which to share the perception; and since it is natural, anyway, for the reader to identify himself with the author, the result is to bring the reader into closer touch with this aloof poet than with many poets who directly seek such a companionship. To quote a few lines to have a better comprehension:

“One theory might claim that Frost’s main themes are the trinity of Nature, Man and Deity and that physical nature appears to be the dominant theme among the three. Frost might ultimately have used “Nature” to include all creation. Frost was a remarkable observer of all aspects of Nature, from flowers to stars. A remark that he was “wise” in Nature’s ways he might have considered a complement. His knowledge consisted in a great part of an awareness of the diversity and complexity of Nature, however, with the result that his views are realistically ambiguous rather than consistent. And he appears to have felt the ultimate mystery that lay beneath whatever knowledge men might have. Such a respect for ignorance was perhaps as devout a definition of Deity as Man could devise.”<sup>2</sup>

Any attempt to systematize what one wants to say about Frost’s nature poetry would remain a futile effort without any illustration of Frost’s rare descriptive powers. In *Birches* as in many other poems, we find Frost constantly chasing and tracing the flickering nuances on nature, in the following lines, he gives almost a picturesque, vivid description of Birches and the changes that wind, ice and storms bring upon them:

“Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning  
After a rain. They click upon themselves  
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored  
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.”<sup>3</sup>

Soon, the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystal shells-

“Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust-  
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away  
You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.”<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact, the poem begins in the tone of easy conversation and the poet says that when he finds birches bending themselves to left and right across the lines of dense tress that seem to be standing in straight lines, the poet begins to suspect that some boy must have been swinging the birches. The poet soon corrects himself by means of

<sup>2</sup> Frost – *Centennial Essays*, University press of Mississippi, *Nature*, Rexford Stamper, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost, *Birches*, lines – 6-9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*- 11-13.

another supposition that swinging does not bend down the birches and only the storms are capable of doing that. The poet addresses his readers and thinks that they must have observed the phenomenon of birches being loaded with ice on a sunny winter morning after rain. When the wind blows, birches become many colored and as the sun grows warm, they begin to shed crystal shells which fall on the snow-crust like avalanches. The poet imagines that this phenomenon of many coloured birches falling like avalanches on snow-crust appears to be like the inner dome of heaven that has fallen. It appeared that even those inner domes of heaven which were rather unbreakable begin to fall. In the following lines, the poet's imagination sees the birches in a new way and says that they bend themselves to such extent that the arched trees are transformed into girls on hands and knees that throw their hair before them over their heads to dry in the sun:

“You may see their trunks arching in the woods  
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground  
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair  
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.”<sup>5</sup>

The poet passes on from this fancy to another thought that some boy who had gone to fetch cows must have been bending the birches – some boy who had gone too far from the town to learn baseball whose only play was what he found himself, summer or winter, and could play alone. This boy succeeded in bending down all the trees planted by his father and he climbed on them over and over again to such an extent that the stiffness of those trees was considerably affected. Not a single tree was left which had been bent down by him and which did not hang limp. No tree was left unconquered by this boy. He had learnt all that was necessary for him to learn in connection with bending down birches, he never made it a point to launch out too soon and so he never carried the trees away clear to the ground when he had reached the top branches of the trees, he always kept his poise and he used to climb with the same ease and pains which one shows in filling a cup up to the brim, and even above the brim. The poet recalls that he himself had been a swinger of birches and so dreams of going to be a swinger of birches once again in the later part of his life. When the poet feels weariness owing to the numerous considerations of life which appears to be like a pathless wood, he has frequently longed to be a swinger of birches, at least for some time, he has felt the desire of going away from the earth to spend his time in swinging birches and then to come back to the earth once again the poet wishes that fate may not grant only half of his wish, that he may be allowed to swing birches but not to return to the earth is intense because he thinks that the Earth is the right place for love. The poet cannot imagine a better place to go to than the earth. He would like to climb a birch tree and its black branches up a snow-white trunk toward heaven but he would not like to reach heaven. He wishes that if the tree could bear no more and dipped its top and set him down again, that indeed would be better for

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid – 17-20.

him because “that would be good both going and coming back”. The poet concludes that if he did not engage himself in swinging birches, he would be doing something worse.

It is interesting to observe in regard to Frost’s treatment of nature that in some of his poems, there are the barriers, between man and the immediate natural world – the barren and desert places – which man must conquer, reclaim and cultivate. He must constantly wage a war against such wildernesses, if he is to survive in an environment which seems hostile to him, which at least, is not meant for him and in which he is an alien. There are those souls, of course, who are content to have a barrier stand as a continual challenge which they never quite accept. Such is the old teamster of *The Mountain* who lives and works in the shade of the mountain he always intends to climb but never does. In fact, *The Mountain* is a narrative poem written in the form of a dialogue. However, it is not a story that is remarkable for its plot. The chief interest of the poem is in the contrast of two characters. The traveler represents the inquiring inquisitive mind, while the man of the mountains is more or less complacent, smug and contented. The grandeur of the mountain does not arouse any mountaineering ambition in the man who lives at its foot. He regards the mountain as merely a wall behind which he is sheltered from the wind. He has been on the sides of the mountain deer-hunting and trout-fishing. He has heard of a brook which is cold in summer and warm in winter. The brook is, according to him, worth seeing though he has never seen it. He looks upon the mountain as a huge barrier which prevents his village from growing:

“We were but sixty voters last election.  
We can’t in nature grow to many more:  
That thing takes all the room!”<sup>6</sup>

There is certainly something unusual about this man’s attitude towards the mountain at the foot of which he lives. He seems to be a symbol of the inquisitive and unadventurous type of the human temperament. The beauty of the alliteration, Frost is so fond of, can be seen in the following lines:

“Good grassland gullied out, and in the grass  
Ridges of sand, and driftwood stripped of bark.”<sup>7</sup>

The simple homely style of the poem is noteworthy. Though the poem reads like prose, yet it has its own charm. The pictorial quality of the poem is also noteworthy. We get a picture of a landscape. The land is vertical and stony; the few hill intervals are already under cultivation. There simply is no room for expanding the agriculture needed to sustain the population.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Frost, *The Mountain*, lines – 26-28.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid – 94.

Apart from this, mention should also be made of Frost's famous poem entitled *The Wood Pile* which is in the form of an address by a dramatic character on seeing a wood pile propped on one side by a tree and on the other side by a "stake and prop./ These latter about to fall".<sup>8</sup> The speaker wonders why the wood pile was left in a place so far away from any fireplace where alone it could have been of some use. The labour can be the work only of "someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks"<sup>9</sup> who alone "could so forget his handiwork on which / He spent himself, the labour of his ax".<sup>10</sup> In Frost's description, the weathered wood pile becomes a cosmic symbol of the cycle of the labour and decay. The person who piled the wood was willing to forget his labour in the hope of achieving larger end by "turning to fresh tasks"<sup>11</sup> and could leave the fruit of his labour, the wood pile in the forest,

"To warn the frozen swamp as best it could  
With the slow smokeless burning of decay."<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to observe that Frost's capacity for nature description easily invite comparison with Wordsworth. There are many points of similarity despite certain very prominent differences, as a matter of fact, detachment for Frost, is a necessary condition of the creative power. It is worth noticing that his most consistently successful work, *North of Boston* which is concerned throughout with the New England landscape and character was written while he was living in "Gloucester-shire". This is as clear an example of 'emotion recollected in tranquility' as the line in *Tintern Abbey*. A few lines of Herold Bloom, describing Wordsworth's impact on Frost, are worth mentioning in this regard:

"Given their mutual attraction to nature pastoral and ballad, it is unsurprising that Robert Frost saw in Wordsworth a primary influence. His famous claim that *North of Boston* "dropped to an everyday level of diction that even Wordsworth kept above" shows that influence; it also shows the competitive stance which Frost always adopted toward this ancestor. Consider the turns of a lengthy speech – "Tribute to Wordsworth" given at Cornell University's 1950 symposium commemorating the centennial of Wordsworth's death. Frost starts by noticing the brevity of Wordsworth's major period but quickly protests, "I'm not here to take away from him at all." Yet he persistently deflects attention from Wordsworth, either by digression (protracted quotations from other poets) or by diffusing Wordsworth's prominence in the occasion let alone in poetic tradition:

<sup>8</sup> Robert Frost, *The Wood Pile*, lines – 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid – 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid – 36-37.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid – 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid – 39-40.

““People ask me what I read. Why, I read Shakespeare, and I read Wordsworth and I read almost anything”. The process of refocusing is generally ironic or left handed: “But I haven’t by dislike or distaste eliminated much of Wordsworth, most of it will do very well””.<sup>13</sup>

Almost a similar idea has also been expressed by Donald J. Greiner in the following lines:

“Any study of Frost’s relationship with William Wordsworth should begin with Frost’s “A Tribute to Wordsworth” (Cornell Library Journal, Spring 1970). This publication is the transcription of a talk which Frost gave at Cornell University on April 20, 1950, as part of the university’s exercises commemorating the centenary of Wordsworth’s death. Since Frost’s remarks are in the form of an informal talk they do not follow the lucid, orderly progression of ideas which we expect when reading literary criticism. They have, instead, a lucidity of another kind-Frost’s rambling but penetrating observations about both specific lines of poetry and Wordsworth’s general achievement. He begins for example like the poet he is and unlike a literary critic when he distinguishes between meditation and contemplation. Leaving meditation to those who would analyze poetry, he urges his listeners to contemplate glory.

Turning to Wordsworth, Frost reminds the audience that the English poet never attempted the “very rhetorical”. He describes Wordsworth’s verse as “simple simony” – by which he means a clarity and tone approximating the innocence of child-hood. To make his point, he quotes from Robert Southey and Wordsworth, for he believes that both poets “got up a theory” from Wordsworth’s spirit. Frost is especially impressed with the turn and “naive” accent of Wordsworth’s lyrics. He uses words like “insipidity” and “paternal severity” to describe why the lyrics are lovely in a “strange banal way”. The Wordsworth he cares for – whom he calls the essential Wordsworth – has a level of banality which penetrates “right down into the soul of man and always, always there’ll be one line in it that’s just as penetrating as anything anybody ever wrote” (1970. p. 86). The poetic tone may be sweet and insipid, but Frost does not use “insipid” in a pejorative sense. He apparently senses an affinity between his own poetry and Wordsworth’s lyrics”.<sup>14</sup>

Frost’s most remarkable affinity with Wordsworth, however, lies in the temper of his verse. Most poets, when the poetic impulse flags, attempt to conceal and compensate for this by a display of virtuosity, by passages of verbal decoration, by complicating the

<sup>13</sup> *Modern Critical Views – Robert Frost*, Edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House publishers, 1986, *Relation of Frost to Wordsworth, Heirs and Heirlessness*, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> *Robert Frost – The Poet and His Critics*, Donald J. Gleiner, American Library Association Chicago, Chapter 4 – *The literary Heritage of Robert Frost*, First Printed 1974, pp. 142-143.

verse – texture. Wordsworth never does this. His idiom is always so level that it can carry off even the ‘flat’ passages. The same, on a smaller scale, is true of Frost. By consciously and consistently maintaining a conversational tone, he keeps the texture of his verse remarkable even. In simple terms the points of divergence between Wordsworth and Frost are very important ones and should not escape the very reader’s mind that is alert and receptive to such subtleties.

Thus it can be said without the fear of contradiction that the themes of Frost’s nature poems are the usual themes of the twentieth century poets. His attitude to nature is essentially modern. The reason is simply that it is neither Epicurean, nor Renaissance but on the contrary, his attitude to nature is scientific. It is interesting to observe that the same point has been emphasized by John F. Lynen through the following words:

“By insisting on the gulf separating man and nature he directly opposes the Romantic attempt to bring the two together. While the Romantics sought a place for sensations, feelings, and values within physical nature, he conceives of the physical world as a distinct level of being. And just because of this, he is able to avoid the assumption that the physical world comprises the whole of reality. He can accept nature as the limited, purely physical world which science depicts and yet place it within a larger context which includes the realities of purpose, feeling, and value. His method is to unify scientific nature and the realm of human experience not by blending them, but by viewing reality as a visitor of distinct but parallel planes”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*, John F. Lynen, Chapter 6 – *Frost as Modern Poet*, Yale University Press, First printed 1960, p. 167.

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