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Treatment of Nature in Robert Frost: A Study of Select Poems

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ABSTRACT

Most of Frost critics follow the prevailing customary convention of comparing the new nature poetry with the philosophical and pro-religious concept of nature which flourished in the previous centuries. With the advent of the twentieth century scientific discoveries moulded the conventional view of nature. The old conception of nature widened its horizons to include 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 ridden with misfortunes, malevolence and calamities. Frost conceives nature to be '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 visualizes Man and Nature standing under a neutral scheme which is devoid of divine sanctity. The present paper examines Frost's treatment of nature with reference to select poem.

Keywords: Nature, Philosophy, Pro-religious concepts, Determinism, Divine sanctity, etc.

Critics have differing opinions about considering Robert Frost as a nature poet. Such opinions arise out of their varying 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." Some other critics 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". Most of the critics follow the prevailing customary convention of comparing the new

nature poetry with the philosophical and pro-religious concept of nature which flourished in the previous centuries. With the advent of the twentieth century scientific discoveries moulded the conventional view of nature. The old conception of nature widened its horizons to include 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 ridden with misfortunes, malevolence and calamities. Frost conceives nature to be „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 visualizes Man and Nature standing under a neutral scheme which is devoid of divine sanctity.

Despite the 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. 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 centres around man's plight against the unfathomable 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 limited.

No sooner does he get away from earth than he thinks of „fate”—rather than God. 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, „earth is the right place”. 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.

But, at the same time, despite all the apparent moralizing the poet cannot turn his back completely to the tantalizing charisma of

„heaven” and a fleeting desire to get perfectly unified with the divine and says:

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,

And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk

Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,

But dipped its top and set me down again.

“After Apple Picking” is another poem where an object of nature becomes a medium of poet’s rise toward „heaven”. The persona in the poem says: My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree toward heaven still....” The task of apple picking symbolizes any other empirical task that a common man engages himself in with a lot of enthusiasm and positive zeal. The momentary touch with

nature gradually transports the poet to a state of spiritual perfection. The poet’s selection of the words „Toward heaven” suggests the place of man’s rewards, the abode of his aspirations and the deposit of protection and ideal values. The persona experiences a strange sensation. He describes his feelings as he is gradually induced into a state of enraptured drowsiness:

I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight

I got from looking through a pane of glass

I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough....

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“ manifests itself when he compares his sleep with that of a woodchuck.

The poet clearly discriminates his state of drowsiness as a momentary state of rest during which he always remains conscious of his responsibilities of the real world. 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 hostile. The design of cosmic things appears sinister to him. In a letter to Lincoln Macueagh he says, “Something hates us and likes to spoil our fair beginning.” Frost perceives nature as a mighty force actively obstructing man's journey. This immense, impersonal, and dynamic force is wildly destructive, annihilating, terrifying 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 accurate expression in the poem “The Onset”. The frightening reaction 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 stupefied 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. 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". Against the immense fury of the immeasurable strength of natural forces, human efforts to resist and retaliate seem to be puny and ineffective. The force of nature and its violence are again emphasized in "Once By the Pacific". The towering 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 obliterating everything. Similarly, 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. The poems "Design" and "Neither Out Far Nor in Deep" also feature an absolute blackness, devoid of purpose or meaning. The inexplicable mystery of nature also 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. When the unerring routine is applied in "Design", however, it is imbued with metaphysical horror; the implications are sinister. In a sequence of questions the poet wonders at the causes and effect of a scheme. In an accidental meeting of a white heal-all, a moth and an Albino spider the poet finds "a design of Darkness". 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 poem the tension rises between the simple fact and the mystery which surrounds it. The mysterious point occurs when the scene and the unseen cross 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

unseen factor. The persona says:

surrounds the woods is the invisible and

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. 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 separating man from nature. The design of darkness may govern the universe, but Frost

endeavours to find an order in natural anarchy. Reginald Cooks sums up Frost's attitude in the words: "Frost accepts Hardy's hostile universe no more than Emerson's benevolent one". Frost discards 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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