

The Ecological Consciousness in the Poetry of Robert Frost

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Robert Frost is one of the world-widely known American poets in the twentieth century. Many of his poems are nature poems with philosophical profundity conveyed in simple language. His description and use of nature is as skillful as his view of nature is intriguing. This thesis chooses the eco-critical approach to Frost's poems and is intended to add one more perspective to various understandings of the poet and his view of nature: his ecological thoughts.

Keywords: Robert Frost, poetry, eco-criticism, ecological thinking

Literature Review

Robert Frost has evoked great interest of readers and scholars. A very heated discussion is on the categorization of Frost. Is Frost a conventionalist poet or a Modernist? A nature poet or regional poet? A realist or a romanticist? Some critics avoid commenting on the literary category of Frost, but call him "farm poet" (Rubinstein, 1988, p. 600), "new England poet" (Li & Chang, 1994, p. 47), "a pastoral poet in the age of Industry" (Peng & Ma, 1994, p. 75), "a transitional figure—between Romanticism and Modernism (Yang, 2002, p. 139).

Among all the different voices about Frost's literary category, the two most often heard and most contradictory are that Frost's poetry affirms with Romanticism—for his most poems are lyrics with romantic subject matter and consistent natural New England imagery—and that Frost is a Modernist—for his poetry is marked by modernistic features in his favored themes like uncertainty, disillusionment, disorder and fear.

Going by contraries: Robert Frost's Conflict with Science (2004) by Robert Bernard Hass is full of interesting readings of many overlooked poems and full of arguments that place Frost in the tradition of American nature writing more squarely. Hass argues that the central problem of Frost's career is his conflict with science and he examines the ways in which the conflict affects the development of Frost's career.

In this thesis, I shall prove ecological thinking gleams in many poems by Frost. Of course, not all of his poems are eco-poems; indeed, I should say that only a minority of them fall into this genre. Nevertheless, his poems which reflect or conform to the ecological thinking are much more than most of prior commentators of his natural poems had assumed.

An Ecological Approach to Frost's Poetry

Frost's interest in nature and man's relations to the natural world as well as their relationships to each other persisted throughout his career. The natural and rural context provides not only a source of subject matter but also the standpoint from which they are seen.

Ecological Thinking of Frost in a Full Range

Unlike Rachel Carson or Robinson Jeffers, whom we can safely label as eco-writers, Frost is far more ambiguous in terms of his ecological consciousness and stance. He may be found swinging between contradictory views of nature from eco-conscious one to something less. But there is no doubt that ecological thinking glimmers in Frost. Covert or subtle in expression, it used to be hidden from some of his readers who failed to pay attention to that dimension of his poetry. However, if reading closely and consciously enough, one is to be surprised to find that Frost's ecological thoughts are not only rich but also various in kind, almost in a full range.

The Chinese scholar of eco-criticism, Prof. Lu Shu-yuan in *Space of Eco-criticism* (2006) divides ecology into three spheres: natural ecology, social ecology and spiritual ecology. Natural ecology is a natural science about the relationships between organism and their environment. It deals with the man-and-nature relationship. Social ecology is a result of an often overlooked fact being widely recognized: nearly all our present ecological problems arise from deep-seated social problems and the way human beings deal with each other as social beings is crucial to solving the ecological crisis. Social ecology is an interdisciplinary effort in addressing economic, ethnic and cultural problems from the environmental conservation perspective. Therefore, social ecology focuses on the man-and-man relationship. When we find that the environment of human beings is not only a physical environment but also an emotional and spiritual one and when we realize that the disturbance of the physical environment is bound to be reflected as a spiritual problem, the emergence of spiritual ecology is only too natural. Prof. Lu explained that the environmental crisis would definitely lead to a keen competition in mankind for survival. Such spiritual unbalance caused by natural or social environment is what spiritual ecology mainly concerns. In a word, spiritual ecology is about man-and-self relationship. Only when the above three relationships maintains harmonious will a truly balanced ecosystem be realized. In the following sections, I'm going to show Frost's eco-consciousness falls into all the three aspects.

Duality of Nature and Human-nature Relationship.

The styles, manners and tones in which Frost deals with nature or rural subjects vary greatly: some are nostalgic, some prove the harmony of the man-nature relation, others savor of the pastoral pleasures, still others bring out the most dreadful nature or highlight the mutual hostility between man and nature. What is consistent in Frost's view of nature is that nature is inconsistent because it is dual-charactered or paradoxical: on the one hand, it is a realm of ideals where all beings are pure and innocent; on the other, it is an inferior world where life is crude and suffering. Worse, however, is that nature is separated and indifferent.

Beautiful and heuristic nature humans love and explore. Although Frost seldom acclaimed nature solely as cheerful and bright without the slightest suggestion of uncertainty and skepticism in certain poems, his description of nature is filled with affection which readers can almost feel, touch and hear. Nature there is innocent and sweet as it is in *Going for Water*.

The well was dry beside the door,
And so we went with pail and can
Across the fields behind the house
To seek the brook if still it ran;

...

We ran as if to meet the moon
That slowly dawned behind the trees,

The barren boughs without the leaves,
Without the birds, without the breeze.

But once within the wood, we paused
Like gnomes that hid us from the moon,
Ready to run to hiding new
With laughter when she found us soon. (Poirier & Richardson, 1995, p. 34)

Such is a picturesque scene of mild nature and a harmonious human-nature relationship. "We ran as if to meet the moon... but once within the wood, we paused like gnomes that hid us from the moon, ready to run to hiding new with laughter when she found us soon." Here, the moon, an archetype of nature is personified as a young girl, mild and naughty on occasion, playing the joyous game of hide-and-see with man. She remains friendly and intimate with her human friends.

Since nature is friendly and delightful, a life on farm is an ideal life style with nature providing not only a means of living but also a source of spiritual comfort. Therefore, another important way that Frost manifests his love for nature is to show how attractive farming area is and how healthy life there is. For quite a long time in his life, Frost expressed overtly his preference for a traditional rural life over the modern city life. Frost's poems are New England country in their setting. He wrote about what happened there and everyday rural events. He regards a rural life as a healthier life. Therefore he invites his friends and readers to the country of New England and experience the simple and peaceful country life.

I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may);
I sha'n't be gone long.— You come too.

I'm going out to fetch the little calf
That's standing by the mother. It's so young,
It totters when she lick it with her tongue.
I sha'n't be gone long.— You come too. (The Pasture) (Poirier & Richardson, 1995, p. 34)

Life on farm is plain. While you do the labor work of cleaning and fetching calf, you feel an inward serenity and become able to appreciate the clear water and the lovely scene of licking. The speaker, also Frost himself is voicing an invitation to both a simple rural life and spiritual tranquility. In this aspect, Frost does bear certain resemblance to transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau, who strongly advocate that man should maintain a life close to nature and that leading a self-supporting life by laboring in the field is an ideal way to realize a free and noble life.

Sinister and mysterious nature humans hold in awe. Frost is never recognized as a Romantic poet like Wordsworth, Shelley, Emerson and Keats, in whose eyes nature is solely lovely, communicable and benevolent. The more frequent and characteristic presence of nature in Frost's poems is a mysterious and formidable one. The human-nature relation is far more complicated than a harmonious coexistence and inter-dependency. Rather, conflicts and tension run all along man-nature relationships: nature is hostile and even sinister to human as it is in *Storm Fear*, *Once by the Pacific*, *An Old Man's Winter Night*; humans are separated from nature and nature has no oversight for human affairs as is found in *The Stars* and *The Most of It*; human efforts to know about and even control the world were only to be frustrated or mocked at in the way that they were in *The Stars* or *Neither Out Far Nor In Deep*.

As if with keenness for our fate, Our faltering few steps on To white rest, and a place of rest Invisible at dawn,--

And yet with neither love nor hate,
Those stars like some snow-white
Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
Without the gift of sight. (*The Stars*) (Poirier & Richardson, 1995, p. 23)

Frost is telling people that it's merely human illusion that stars are keen eyes in the heaven for human fate. On the contrary, the universe is unfathomable and "those stars like some snow-white Minerva's snow-white marble eyes [are] without the gift of sight." Stars are of no awareness or concerns about human fate. They neither love nor hate because the whole universe is mindless and therefore careless about humans. Wind blows and snow falls all for its own sake.

Another important poem about the awesomeness of nature and loneliness of mankind is *The Desert Places*:

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it--it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less—
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places. (Poirier & Richardson, 1995, p. 375)

The desert place is described as barren and numb. The "snow falling and night falling" and the "whiteness of benighted snow" make the world a colorless waste land. In such a world, emptiness is all that hung in the wintry air. "The ground is covered", "animals are smothered" and "nothing is expressed". Nature is incomprehensible, alien and hence hostile and scaring in human eyes. That "they cannot scare me with their empty spaces/ Between stars" sounds rather like a fear cloaked with bravado. His "own desert place", if there is any, is the mind "paralyzed by the desert places surrounding it. The hostile landscape had transformed the mind from a sanctuary into a source of terror" (Hass, 2004, p. 100).

In the panorama of the natural world, Frost presents both the beautiful and the fearful, with the latter not in the least negating the former. As John Lynen had put it,

The charm of many of the nature lyrics results from the vividness with which sweet, delicate things stand out against the somber background. You cannot have the one without the other: love of natural beauty and horror at the remoteness and indifference of the physical world are not opposites but different aspects of the same view. (Lynen, 1960, p. 150)

And “the view”, the duality of nature, or the dialectic attitude by name, is a rather eco-conscious attitude to nature. Nature is not to be loved as an Arcadia where man expects a life free from fear or worry. Nature is to be respected for what it is. Nature does not exist to intoxicate the humankind but serve as an intricate network, in which each creature goes about his life in close relation to others. It’s natural that human beings, as a plain member of the bio chain like other species, are subject to law of nature and feel awesome to its mighty forces. The acknowledgement that nature is dual-charactered is a reflection of ecological wisdom.

Conclusion

A close analysis of Frost’s sophisticated and delicate use of nature shows how much more a poet can achieve than simply rendering a literary nature. One of the important findings is that his view of nature is very eco-conscious and his ecological thinking is significant particularly in that it is demonstrated in full range and it is not radical.

The dialectic view of Frost’s ecological thinking is equally significant. Unlike most romantic poets or writers, Frost never regards nature as solely friendly to humans, benevolent or pure. He often demonstrates how brutal or merciless nature is. Too idealized view of nature as an all-good one is to deprive nature of its relevance to ordinary experience and is ultimately shallow and unacceptable.

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