

A Study on Ecological Consciousness of Robert Frost

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As a writer of unusual honor, Robert Frost has been the subject of many fine studies about his relation to the New England environment, his poetics, his symbolism, and his profound philosophy. This thesis intends to explore how eco-conscious his representation of nature is and proves that his ecological thinking is significant particularly in that it is demonstrated in full range.

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Nature: The Source of Spiritual Ecology

Although spiritual ecology is an emerging subject, the practice of treating nature as a source of spiritual ecology was far from new. It had long been held by Romanticists and Transcendentalists like Wordsworth and Emerson. They had embraced nature as ennobling and restorative forces. They urged that man should communicate with nature and read nature as a book, an instructive and didactic one. Apparently, Frost adopted the view. He had put it in *Time Out*, "...make him realize / The mountain he was climbing had the slant / As of a book held up before his eyes / (And was a text albeit done in plant)". Also, he strikes a typically Wordsworthian attitude to rambling through the countryside: A walk in the woods and meadows will be not only joyous but also revealing. Man will get purified and enlightened by getting close to nature and distant from cultural cities. Such a stroll leads to an enlightened soul in "The Wood Pile", "Come In", "Two Look at Two", etc. In "My November Guest", nature was particularly depicted as edifying:

My sorrow, when she's here with me,
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain
Are beautiful as days can be;
She loves the bare, the withered tree;
She walks the sodden pasture lane

Her pleasure will not let me stay.
She talks and I am fain to list:
She's glad the birds are gone away,
She's glad her simple worsted gray
Is silver now with clinging mist.

...

Not yesterday I learned to know
The love of bare November days

Before the coming of the snow,
 But it were vain to tell her so,
 And they are better for her praise. ("My November Guest") (Poirier & Richardson, 1995, p. 451)

The speaker "I", the epitome of all common people, is sad and low in spirits because autumn in "my" eyes is bleak and an even gloomier winter is following the steps of autumn. But "autumn", which is personified as an elegant and intelligent young lady, is much wiser and perceptive. In her eyes, "these dark days of autumn rain are as beautiful as days can be"; "the bare, the withered tree" is as lovable as "the sodden pasture lane". "Birds are gone away", trees are "desolate and deserted", earth is faded, and sky is heavy. These are the beauty she so truly sees and "I have no eye for". She is speaking in the voice of nature and casting light on the earthly people by "vexing for reason why" "I" am not able to appreciate the beauty of nature on display. Finally, "I" was enlightened and began to "know the love of bare November days" and feel things "are better for her praise".

One does not have to be an enthusiastic ecological critic to find the ecological thoughts in this poem. Humans are depicted here as insensitive and numb, yet nature as instructive and edifying. Humans are often restricted by some norms set up by themselves and thus are kept from the plainest truth, while nature uncovers that truth right before us. It seemed that nature provides human beings with not only beauty but also the wisdom to understand and appreciate the beauty.

Nature functions as a source of spiritual ecology also in the way that it heals the hurt and pain of human beings. The "Birches" is a good illustration of it.

...
 And so I dream of going back to be.
 It's when I'm weary of considerations,
 And life is too much like a pathless wood
 Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
 Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
 From a twig's having lashed across it open.
 I'd like to get away from earth awhile
 And then come back to it and begin over.
 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.
 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. ("Birches") (Poirier & Richardson, 1995, p. 162)

In the modern life, characterized by fast pace, uncertainty and fierce competition for inadequate resources, people often find themselves "weary" and their life "too much like a pathless wood, / where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs / broken across it, and one eye is weeping / from a twig's having lashed across it open". Once or more in their lives, people felt like "get(ing) away from earth awhile". But Frost told us: 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". Such is a manifesto of Frost that there should be no escape from the reality because nature could offer "a momentary stay against confusion". Perplexing and frustrating as life might be, there is always a force in nature which helps us regain our lost confidence and passion

in life and move on.

Kent C. Ryden noticed that the theme of some frequently studied poems of Frost, such as “Mending Wall”, is also ecocritical in that it discusses some issues that spiritual ecology concerns, like how human activities in manipulating the natural world influence interpersonal relationship, cultural identity, and sense of belonging to a cultural community. He asserted in “Robert Frost, the New England Environment, and the Discourse of Objects” that:

Stone walls provided the ongoing necessity and opportunity for neighboring farmers to order nature together for their mutual benefit, to be not just two separate and independent husbandmen but partners. Through the act of maintenance and repair, neighbors were brought together in space, their mutual membership in the local community and culture emphasized and reiterated to them through the shared act of applying their shaping hands to the landscape, overcoming the natural forces that tear walls down by bringing the recalcitrant stones under control once more, and redrawing straight lines on the rugged land. As it provided a meeting point and a site of mutual labor, the wall literally made good neighbors, constructed neighborly relationships as an agent in an active process. (Ryden, 2001, p. 306)

The speaker in “Mending Wall” could not understand the meaning of mending wall, which, to him, is only symbolic of erecting figurative barriers between people. However, as if to refute the notion that stone wall is only symbolic of barrier between people, the stone wall in another poem “A Time to Talk” bears witness to a friendly communication realized by both parties making a point of communicating.

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don't stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven't hoed,
And shout from where I am, What is it?
No, not as there is a time talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly talk. (“A Time to Talk”) (Poirier & Richardson, 1995, p. 166)

In both poems, Frost was addressing issues of communication and interpersonal relationship. Although “I” know there are “all the hills I haven't hoed” and “there is no time talk”, “I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground” and “go up to the stone wall / for a friendly talk”. In modern society, that “I have all the work not done yet” and “no time to talk” is the commonest situation people find themselves in, or rather the commonest excuse people find for refusing to reach out for others. As a result, people living in the same community become estranged. “A Time to Talk” might be a good illustration that it's not the stone wall but reluctance to “slow our horse” or put down our “hoe” that prevents social interaction. As long as people are willing to reach out for others, things like stone wall or building a stone wall could be the best place or occasion to have a nice talk with people around us.

However, the speaker in “Mending Wall” is not awakened to it. He is kept from understanding that it was shared experience of neighbors, even that of building up a wall when it is a common part of rural culture in New England, that more effectively forged and strengthened social links. The act of mending wall is not socially destructive but facilitating social relationship as a means of communication. By refusing to participate in a local-culture-valued and community-accepted social activity and dismissing it as a tradition of no use, the speaker represents a large group of modern people who distance themselves from community life and dismiss time-valued traditions for having no practical purposes and therefore lost their cultural identity or sense of belonging which

is closely tied to culture of the place.

Also according to Kent C. Ryden, the theme of distance between people in the same community and lack of communicative consciousness was dealt with in this poem also by virtue of the speaker's tone and comments on his neighbor. He wonders if he "could put a notion in his head", but he seems unwilling to speak to him directly and to try to understand him, hoping he will say the desired things for himself. He compares his neighbor to "an old-stone savage armed" who "moves in darkness as it seems to me" (Ryden, 2001, p. 306).

In such a skillful way, Frost does concern himself with the issue of human spiritual balance, or spiritual ecology.

Non-anthropocentrism in Frost's Poems

Anthropocentrism is the belief that humans must be considered at the center of, and above any other aspect of, reality. Anthropocentrism means human chauvinism.

Ecologists and some environmentalists firmly assert such human chauvinism is a root cause of the ecological crisis, human overpopulation, and the extinctions of many non-human species. Contrary to the wishful thinking that human beings are the crown of creation or center of the universe, humans are not dominator of biotic community but plain members of it.

Such an eco-consciousness is referred to as ecocentrism or ecological holism, the keystone of which is decentralization or non-anthropocentrism.

Frost conveyed or suggested such eco-consciousness of non-anthropocentrism in many of his poems, among which "A Minor Bird" is probably the most outspoken expression.

I have wished a bird would fly away,
And not sing by my house all day;
Have clapped my hands at him from the door
When it seemed as if I could bear no more.
The fault must partly have been in me.
The bird was not to blame for his key.
And of course there must be something wrong
In wanting to silence any songs. ("A Minor Bird") (Poirier & Richardson, 1995, p. 321)

As Frost well knows, people consciously or unconsciously think and behave with anthropocentric arrogance and dominating attitude toward other natural creatures, as the speaker used to: wish the bird would fly away and not sing by my house and clap hands at him to scare it into leaving. Human is so accustomed to considering his need the primary and judging by nothing other than his own benefit or loss. When in high spirits, men enjoy the singing of birds; while in low spirits, they resent it as an unbearable nuisance. In the latter half of the poem, the speaker admitted his fault straightforwardly: "Of course there must be something wrong / in wanting to silence any songs". The wrong thing is the very fact that men regard themselves as the source of all values, the measure of all things: anthropocentrism by name. Such a shift of the speaker from anthropocentric consciousness to an eco-conscious one, as Fridjof Capra noted, is "a shift from self-assertion to integration, a shift from the rational to the intuitive, from analysis to synthesis, from reductionism to holism, from linear to non-linear thinking" (1995, p. 24). Matthias Schubnell puts simply yet clearly: Humans represent only one strand in the intricate web of life; that all forms of life have a right to continued existence; and that humans must integrate ecology into their sense of identity and learn to relate intuitively and effectively to the world around them in order to achieve a sustainable

existence.

Conclusion

If Glen Love (1996, p. 237) is right in saying “the most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world”, Robert Frost fulfilled such function in his own way of merely suggesting his environmental ethics and aesthetics in his poems, reshaping or redirecting the readers’ before they have realized it. Therefore, to appreciate Frost’s poetry from the eco-critical perspective will enhance our understanding of the poet and promote the philosophy of eco-literature.

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