

MAN'S ENCOUNTER WITH NATURE IN THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST

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Abstract

Nature and its relationship with man plays a vital role in American literature because of the survival of the early settlers against the wilderness, rugged forest and adverse forces. The pioneer settlers in the period 1607, fought against the wilderness of a vast country and tried hard to convert rugged forest into cultivate land. So, nature has become one of the most important subjects of America, as the American continent and its wilderness were primarily in sullied by ravages of civilization. Contrary to the rationalism of the age of the enlightenment, the romantic poets glorified nature and depicted the unity between man and nature in the spiritual monistic way and they embraced the transcendental and pantheistic aspects of nature in their poetry. In this background it is imperative to study the American Poet Robert Frost's nature poems as man's encounter with nature in his poems achieves universal significance.

Introduction

The greatness of nature poetry of Frost lies in his ability to focus always on the survival of man against the bleakness and harshness of nature and explores man's attitude and reaction when he encounters with unexpected incidents and situations in the natural world. The uniqueness of Frost's nature poetry lies in not depending upon Emerson's Transcendentalism, Metaphysics of Milton and Pantheism of Wordsworth. Though Frost was influenced by Wordsworth and Emerson in his love towards nature, Frost treats man and nature as separate prime realities and explores the gulf between man and nature. But the poetry of Frost is not the revelations and he does not have the perception of nature in any of these spiritual romantic and transcendental ways.

Reginald Cook in his 'Dimension of Frost' (P.174-175) said that "Frost significance as a nature poet consists not only in the attribution of intrinsic values to spring pools or mowing fields, to dark woods or Winter bound Orchard, but also in his ability to communicate these values to the common consciousness".

Frost makes his association with nature without depending upon extrinsic accessories like mythological associations in Spenser, Pantheistic personification of Keats, transcendental and spiritualization of nature in Milton and Emerson. Frost is free of these derivations from traditional nature poets and his attitude towards nature is not the idealization or glorification as of Wordsworth, not that of realists, who attribute only the barest facts.

Frost said over and over "I am not a nature poet. There is almost always a person in my Poem". Frost uses nature as a background and his real subject is humanity. He uses rural scenes and landscapes in order to explore man's struggle with nature in everyday life. Though he begins a poem with a minute observation and fidelity of description of something in nature, he suddenly moves towards a connection to human situation or concern i.e., it shifts to relation to a composite sense of men and his potentialities.

The gulf between Man and Nature

While Wordsworth stresses the harmony that exists between the soul of man and the soul of nature, Frost constantly explores the difference of separateness of man and nature. Though he is a lover of nature and his descriptions are characterized by accuracy and minuteness, he must be seen as essentially anti-romantic. Despite his indebtedness to Romanticism, he directly opposes the romantic main belief of spirit immanent in nature and man.

The poem "The Most of It" explores the complex relationship between man and nature. It explores the gulf separating man from nature. A lonely man in a mysterious unidentified location seeks for a sign of love from nature. He surrounded by a lake. Despite his feeling of loneliness, he calls out across the lake. Though he expects counter-love, original response, he hears only echo of his own voice.

The protagonist represents every human being, who wants and needs to be in contact with others and expects the world to do too much for him. One day he receives reply, but it is not human. He heard a splash on the other side of the lake and very hopefully sees that something is moving towards him.

After seeing a “great buck” a large male deer appears out of the lake, he recognizes the grim reality of nature and realizes its remoteness and inhumanity. By giving this answer the nature shows its impersonal indifference. The vision of the “great buck” reveals “that was all” nature could give.

In “The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost” John F. Lynen said (P – 144) “This contrast between man and nature is the central theme of Frost’s nature poetry. Whereas Wordsworth sees in nature a mystical kinship with the human mind, Frost views nature as essentially alien. Instead of exploring the margin where emotions and appearances blend, he looks at nature across an impassable gulf. What he sees on the other side is an image of a hard, impersonal reality. Man’s physical needs, the dangers facing him, the realities of birth and death, and the limits of his ability to know and to act are shown in stark outline but the indifference and inaccessibility of the physical world in which he must live”.

Robert Frost and Lucretius: Similarities in Nature

In the poem “On the nature of things” Lucretius blends scientific inquiry with an ethics of leisure and he re-defines the universe in natural aspect rather than super natural terms. As Epicurean wants to free humanity from needless cares and anxieties, Lucretius also wants to liberate people from superstitions. According to Lucretius man is made up of material i.e., atoms and our earth with all its life forms came into being and evolved without aid from the Gods. Although Epicurean and Lucretius argue that neither God created nor interested in human affairs, they do not deny the existence of Gods. They are materialist but not atheists.

Lucretius cosmology can be seen as pre cursor to Darwin and his theory of natural selection and the survival of the fittest. By telling “All life is a struggle in the dark”, “After a while the life of a fool is hell on the earth”. Life is one lone struggle in the dark, Lucretius illuminate a path to enlightenment laid out by Epicures. Their key teaching include, most pleasures is to be obtained by living a simple life, nor all desires are to be satisfied, emphasis on the avoidance of fear of death and the pursuit of intellectual pleasure which are long lasting. Frost’s blending of delight with wisdom is closer to Lucretius’s blending of scientific inquiry with an ethics of leisure. While Frost fleshes out dualistic philosophy in his poetry, Lucretius and Epicurean follow materialism in the poetry.

Frost also does not spiritualize nature. Like Epicurus and Lucretius, Frost is not an atheist. While Lucretius is the pre cursor of Darwin’s theory, Frost is also a strong believer of Darwin’s theory of evolutions. Like Lucretius nature, Frost’s nature is realistic mechanistic and anti-romantic.

In the poem “The Most of it” he is closer to Lucretius, when the protagonist realized that nature is impersonal and indifferent. Frost’s anti-romantic and anti-transcendentalism attitude towards nature is Lucretian in this poem.

The Dialectical Perception towards Nature

The dilemma between duty and imagination i.e. between fact and fancy is the main theme of poems such as ‘Birches’ and ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’. In the poem ‘The Sound of Trees’, the narrator’s responsibility and duty to his community is deviated by the endless noise of the trees.

At last, the narrator chooses imagination over his duty, but he does not like to influence others to choose the same path. On Contrast in ‘Stopping by Wood on a Snowy Evening’ Frost chooses duty to fancy. Frostian world is a mixture of faith and confidence on the one hand and of uncertainty, fearfulness about man’s place in the hostile universe on the other hand.

The Superiority of Man over Nature

Though nature does not provide answers for the human cry and remains indifferent and alien, Frost believes in the ability of man to inculcate self-knowledge in natural settings. The encounter between man and nature in Frost's poetry always culminates enlightenment, awareness of human condition and a new perception about universe, divine, mortality and cycle of life and death. The poem, "The Range Finding" was written in 1916, during the time of World War-I, and the poem from 'Mountain Interval' depicts the encounter between two distinct worlds – the world of battle fields which symbolise human struggle and the world of nature which symbolizes beauty and innocence of non-human world. This poem pictures the drama of battle field and its far reaching effects on non-human creatures in the natural surroundings without the presence of a human figure.

The world of nature is unaware of the consequences of War and its 'collateral damage' to its surroundings. The bird 'caring for her young, the butterfly seeking his flower of rest' and the spider 'ran to greet the fly' show the innocence, purity and simple life of the natural world. But the underlying message of the poem is that the natural world is below the human world, while man's path and acts are chosen by his targets and ambitions. Human beings are capable of thinking, feeling and deciding, but on the contrary nature and its creatures just exist. As man's life has a purpose and meaning, his death is an absolute and real, but the creatures in the world of nature act by instincts not with intentions or purpose. Their life and death has no meaning as they do not live a real life with purpose. So, human world is superior and the natural world is only below the human world.

In the perspective of Frost, nature stands as a symbol of connection between man and universe. The main paradox in the attitude of Frost towards nature is that nature serves to glorify man by showing the superiority of the man's mind over brute matter but yet it is to be feared as it is hostile brute and mysteries.

The same theme is depicted in the poem 'The Wood Pile' and this poem asserts again the superiority of man over nature. The wood pile stands as a symbol of man's creativity, confidence and the endurance and the everlasting value of human artifacts, and the efforts of birds are parallel to

efforts of wood cutter. While Frost admires the work of the wood cutter and his interest in uncovering mysteries, he does not acknowledge the efforts of birds to defend itself against a human threat. He ignores its efforts as its work is useless and foolish. This poem not only explores the gulf between nature and man, but also glorifies the creative power of man and his superiority over the world of nature.

This poem implies that humanity is the source of order in the world and he has a greater overall purpose in the world, and the world 'far from home' shows the interest of man in the uncovering mysteries of the unknown within the infinite spaces. But the birds which represent the world of nature, act on instincts without any purpose or goal.

Conclusion

Frost is well versed in the world of country things and his description of nature is not a transcription of a thing directly observed as in Thomas Sheeler's painting. It has to be acknowledged that the nature poetry of Frost is a living tribute to his unself-conscious awareness, minute and accurate identification and originality in observation. Frost tries to capture and records the 'present moment' and the reality of experience when a man encounters with nature. Frost is capable of dismissing the past and moves along with the known living present and gets wisdom through it. Certain poems depict the superiority of man over nature, and the world seems to exist on his own level, manageable and controllable, and in some poems, the nature is projected as uncontrollable, mysterious and less comprehensible and indifferent.

As nature provides excitement which is sensual and dramatic, to Frost nature is not an ecological system perceived only scientifically. To Frost all beings participate in nature's struggle and while exploring this tension he fails to conclude that man and nature could be separated. As a poet of nature, Frost rejected the transcendental machinery and as an existentialist, he was to emphasis 'on being' rather than 'doing' or 'planning'. There is always sensory experience which is intensified by poet's participation and involvement with the events of life and nature

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