

Study of Robert Frost's Poetry: An Ecocritical Approach

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Keywords:

Ecology,
Environmental
Crisis,
Natural Symbol,
Landscape,
Fallouts,
Relationship

Abstract: Ecocriticism or ecocritical approach to a literary text is an approach to explore representations of the natural environment in a literary text. Ecocriticism began to emerge as a critical and cultural approach to literary study from the late 1980s against the backdrop of a severe environmental crisis all over the world. Since the beginning of the industrialization and capitalistic economy, the rift between humans and the natural environment is ever on the increase. Throughout the ages, great poets and writers have emphasized the importance of a harmonious relationship between man and the natural world for a healthy and peaceful coexistence. But humans have shown their utter callousness. In today's capitalistic social and political structure, environmental issues are hardly taken into consideration and the world is increasingly heading towards crisis. Against this backdrop, the humanities cannot sit idle. Therefore, the emergence of a critical approach namely 'ecocriticism' in the 1980s had been a time-befitting academic endeavor. Today many literary texts are being studied ecocritically to showcase the ecological aspects of the texts and thus make people aware of the importance of preserving the natural environment. The present study has been designed with this end in view. Here the major poems of the leading American poet Robert Frost have been studied from an ecocritical point of view. Although man amidst nature is a common feature in his poetry, there are distinctive treatments as well. This study has been designed to analyze and interpret his poetry eco-critically. The study, therefore, is meant for a critical scholarship.

Introduction

"Eco' indicates our relation to the natural surroundings in which we live." Ecocriticism or ecocritical approach to a literary text is a critical approach to explore the representations of the natural environment and to find the relation between the human and the non-human world. The term "ecological criticism" is demanded to be used first by the prominent US eco-critic Karl Kroeber in the journal PMLA. Before, it was known as "the study of nature writing" (Murphy). Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the literary critics to place literature and environment in the mainstream of academic study, is a fortnight in defining eco-criticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (415) The UK version of eco-criticism or green studies begins with the British Romantics of 1790s rather than the American transcendentalist of 1840. To the eco-critic, nature exists. There is a crucial relationship between culture and nature. "Everything is socially and linguistically constructed." To them nature "really exists, out there beyond us, not needing to be ironized as a concept, but actually present as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it" (Barry, 243). Global warming and other anthropocentric problems such as toxic waste and other nuclear fallout are the direct outcomes of our antagonistic action towards the natural environment. It is a praiseworthy aim for critics and theorists to make all sensible of the crucial fact so that we can manage to avoid environmental catastrophe. Otherwise, it

might be seen as working flat out to secure improved working conditions for the crew as the ‘Titanic’ speeds towards the iceberg.

John Ruskin, the great Victorian art critic was deeply eco-conscious and was the first major British writer to record a sense that nature’s power of recovery might not be infinite, and that forms of production and consumption have the potential to inflict fatal environmental damage in his lectures on what he called “the storm cloud of nineteenth century” which he also called “the modern plague-cloud”. Ruskin expressed his deep anxiety that the atmosphere was being permanently damaged by industrial pollution, which we might say was the environmental consequence of assuming that our ‘dominions’ over nature have no limits. The ‘minatory’ Ruskin is convinced, after twenty years of making observations that cloud formation, atmospheric condition, and weather patterns had been negatively changing during that time. Interestingly, Emerson had no worries about the ‘pathetic fallacy’ of Ruskin. Rather, to him, ‘Nature always wears the color of the spirit’ (Emerson). Waldron and Friedman explain that “the goal of ecological science is consonant with ecocriticism: both seek to understand biotic relationships” (207). Their model of literary analysis, based on ecology, focuses on interconnections between people, places, and nature, within and between texts. Here is an attempt by approaching the text as an ecosystem, interpreting it based on the relationships represented.

Discussion

Robert Frost (1874-1963), mostly known as a pastoral poet is the true representative of American poet of modernism. The contemporary American life and society find an exquisite outlet in the texture of his lucid expression. His idealistic dealing with the pastoral landscape marks a very clear transition of American social life. But Frost was not a high priest of Nature like Wordsworth or a Pantheist like Emerson or Thoreau, rather he is a person who has a deeper and realistic understanding of nature. He did never idealize or glorify the objects of nature. Wordsworth observes all objects of nature with divine eyes, but Frost looked at all objects of nature as things or tools with which man acts in course of daily work to gain a livelihood. As a poet of modernity, his attitude towards nature is more realistic than romantic. In his descriptions of Nature, Frost is at his realistic best. “The descriptive power of Mr. Frost is . . . the most wonderful thing in his poetry. A snowfall, a spring thaw, a bending tree, a valley mist, a brook; they are brought into the experience of the reader” (Schneider, 201-2). He is preeminently the poet of the New England countryside. His poems are New England eclogues.

“A poet can dredge landscape and seascape for images, can offer a philosophy of nature and man’s relation to it, without in any profound sense being a countryman. Frost, on one side, was profoundly a countryman. He was deeply and truly penetrated by the mores, the institutions, the economy, the people, the mental horizon of the rural New England he memorialized in his work (Theodore, 186)”.

After Thoreau, it is Frost who has responded sensitively to the particularities of the rural landscape. “Frost is the interpreter and representative of his regional culture. His poetry portrays the rural world as interesting because it symbolizes the world, we ourselves know. The reader will object that Frost does not claim to describe the whole of New England. His subject is the region North to Boston and within that region he describes only the rural areas and farm villages. But to admit this is to recognize that his selection by Nature is creative. He has taken one particular kind of locality to stand for New England as a whole, one particular kind of Yankee to stand for the essential character of the New England mind.” (Lynen-86)

The poems: “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” “Mending Wall” “After Apple-picking”, “Birches” “Mowing” “The Road Not Taken” “Nothing Gold Can Stay” give us concrete descriptions

of scenes and pictures of New England countryside in different seasons. These are also the illustration of the pastoral art underlying his poems and his affection for nature which symbolizes man's relation to the world.

Frost's frequent use of rural landscape wins him the recognition of the poet of nature even in the modern era of material advancement. His nature poetry connects the world of nature and that of human beings. The liberality in the use of natural settings traces his superiority. He has a great uniqueness in the way of pastoral art which not merely serves the purpose of virtual background but emphatically unifies trees, leaves, snow, pasture, even scythe to transfer human feelings onto them. Frost in his poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" visualizes an enthralling environment just by illustrating the woods in the term 'deep, dark as well as lovely'. Here the speaker is completely baffled by the wondrous look of the evening show of the whitening snow. The calmness of the environment lurks him into oblivion, but the shake of the harness bell reminds him of the worldly duties bestowed upon him.

"The woods are lovely dark and deep ,
But I have promises to keep,
Miles to go before I sleep
Miles to go before I sleep".

The constant repetitions of the word 'wood' leave a curtain from our domain of thought and draw our insight signifying the split-self of rationality and temptation, the crisis of modernity with the individual mental serenity with nature and the call of duty. This poem illustrates most of his characteristics including the minute natural objects like 'the woods', 'snow', and 'downy' flake. Though the speaker is fascinated with death which is represented by the repeated word 'sleep', he decides to make a move as he also feels an urge for the duties and responsibility towards mankind. He acknowledges the inevitability of the ultimate sleep or death but feels a strong passion to make the optimum utilization of the time till then. Thus, he begins with the fascination of the beauty of nature, through an insight into it and finally finds a great affinity towards the reality of human life on the earth. Both the key elements of his motivation in his writing of poetry are present in this poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" i.e. he starts with observation in nature, contemplates it, and relates it with life. His description of the woods, associating it with death and the call of responsibility reveals the poet's response to the pastoral setting behind him.

The poem "Mending Wall" is an outstanding example of wonderful dramatic conflict between liberal modernity and conservative permissivity just by the very natural image of the mending wall. The poem presents the two sides as equal but does acknowledge a break between them. The human world is separated from the natural world via human constructs, in this poem represented by the tumbled wall, which can, in turn, be seen as an extension of Humanism. The "tumbled wall" signifies Lawrence Buell's reference to humanity's "alienation from the natural world" (Buell, 8). As Gilcrest notes, "Frost's division of the two 'fields' is artificial" (Gilcrest, 119), an artificial construct that questions the authenticity of the human realm. The authenticity of life in the human realm is questioned by the representative of the natural realm. Again, here the construction and reconstruction of the wall clearly mark the direct interference between man and nature. Here is a clear message not to go against the common natural order by attempting to bring any change in it. This suggests that there is a difference in the life experience of humanity compounds what the wall has made obvious; that humanity has been alienated from the natural world and that's remediation is required. In 'Mending Wall', a wall, not very different from the tumbled wall of 'Two Look At Two' is the subject of a poem. The wall is constructed to demarcate the boundary of the property, but Frost's narrator upholds the common natural order suggesting "that doesn't love a wall" (Frost, 53) and

shows how “the frozen-ground swell... spills the upper boulders” (Frost, 53) just by the course of the winter. Here, nature seems to revolt against the human interference in between that relation.

Frost is very unique in the visualizing of the contemplation of serious issues of humanity just in the texture of the ordinary elements of common natural life. In this poem “After Apple-picking”, he dexterously sketches an interesting portrayal of a tired farmer working relentlessly hours after hours in the following way;

“Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples, I am drowsing of”. (Frost, 08)

The sensuous enjoyment of the sight and sound is carefully illustrated here. The apple-picker has been picking apples for quite a long time and grows tired thereby. “And there’s a barred that I didn’t fill” (Frost, 03). Frost here imposes human feeling into natural elements like trees, leaves, apples as well as seasons. Here ‘apple’ becomes the symbol of life. The empty barrel in the hand of the farmer wondrously signifies the tasks which are unfinished and for which the speaker regrets. It also suggests the time which Frost himself wasted without writing poetry and he also regrets himself for that indifference.

The line “stem end and the blossom end” reflects the cycle of life in nature, so the speaker has looked at all his life experiences from top to bottom and regrets the undone tasks in his life. Frost finds a higher concept regarding the bruises. Although every day is the same there is at least a slight difference between each day and each day brings new opportunities and challenges. It is wonderfully suggested that none should miss any single opportunity as the lost opportunity can hardly be brought back by traveling towards the past of life. One should always treasure each moment in his life as once the opportunity is lost, one cannot travel back to take it twice.

The poem "Birches" opens with the common scenario of the birches trees bending by the snow falling. The scene reminds the speaker of the childhood’s common sports in the rural area of New England where Frost passed his early days. The ‘swinging’ of the birches caused by the snow-crust unlashes the hard reality signifying life-burden. The speaker wants to swim in the merry-making playful memories of his childhood on these birches trees. Like ‘a swinger of birches’ the speaker’s yarns ‘of going back’ as he is ‘weary’. He compares his life to ‘a pathless wood’ which ‘burns’ his face ‘and tickles with the cobwebs’. Like an escapist, he wants to unburden the weary of life and wishes ‘to get away from earth awhile’. The speaker next while changes his mind and gets ready to face the earth with the positivity in it. Now to him ‘Earth’s the right place for love’ and he finds no place ‘where it’s likely to go better.’ Again, with the course of the season, the sunlight melts the snowflakes and then the birches get straight again with rejuvenating spirit. The speaker also is hopeful here despite the adverse reality which will also melt away by the course of the good fortunes in the near future. Thus, the poem revolves round a highly positive philosophy of life amidst the ups and downs using just the simple natural phenomenon of the birches. Such, balance between life and art must be maintained to make life meaningful.

In the poem “Mowing”, the speaker is working with a scythe in agricultural land. It was a very hot day with scorching heat and his scythe seems to produce whispering sounds while working with it. The speaker is confused about what the scythe speaks, and he makes up in his mind that the sound may be as the result of heatstroke or merely his imagination. Finally, he comes to an end saying that the scythe is expressing nothing but its own belief of the natural world with all common order. Unlike others, the scythe finds satisfaction amidst business in relentless working. The scythe is not for dreaming or relaxing but for working and working just where it gets pleasure. That is how the speaker gets a lesson from the nature of the scythe and begins to work leaving aside all his irrational

hopes or unimportant musings. He starts finding full saturation in making hay, in working tirelessly in the field. Thus, here Frost presents men's activities in the natural field which ensures food and livelihood.

The poem "The Road Not Taken" is literally one of the simplest poems of the literary world. But within the natural canvas of the lucid dictions amidst very common scenarios Frost holds a very complex theme of the crisis of modernity. It dramatically highlights the mental dilemma of a modern man in the choice of life. Here the speaker comes upon in the woods and introduces a crossroad marching towards two different dimensions. The speaker must choose one to be followed and has nothing but to leave another. Here these two roads in the woods are not merely the ways but these are to be the ways which a man must follow to lead his life in this transitory world. Thus, this physical journey represents the journey of life, the psychology which determines our way of thinking. The speaker very thoughtfully and courageously affirms to follow 'the one less traveled by' and it is because he finds in the way of life 'all the difference' from others. Thus, Frost's natural symbol relates to the crisis of a modern man's choosing the way of life.

Frost's basic method is the same, the structure of the nature poems is also similar. As we have already noted, he is able to focus on the broad areas of experience within his sketches of the very remoteness of the rural scene. The same is true of his nature poetry. By insisting upon the remoteness of nature, he directs attention to the patterns in nature which correspond to those in human experience. In "Nothing Gold Can Stay" this analogical method is highly obvious:

"Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay." (Frost)

The poem opens with the description which apparently seems to have a regret for the natural beauty which seems to be lost. From them, the image is suddenly moved towards a new dimension. The loss of beauty of the leaf is strikingly compared to the loss of heavenly innocence. Anyone can feel a mixture of sadness and inevitability in its transition from gold to green. The subject is not just the passing of a beautiful sight, but the corruption which seems to be a necessary part of maturing into fullness.

The fall of man reveals in human nature taken as a whole, and through the next image "So dawn goes down today". Here we see the same process in the cosmos. The common natural order of dawn to sunset highly symbolizes the individual life span. One can feel the same sense of loss as he physically develops from childhood to the maturity of his age.

This parallelism in Frost's poetry regarding a process in the human sphere with a process in nature is very thought-provoking. Here the leaves seem to be preternaturally bright because they hold so much meaning for man. It is very unnatural to snatch away our attention from the leaves to Eden, to dawn, to the life of the man on average. We see all in a single line of vision. The tiny leaves though seemingly so trivial, enfold the problem of man's destined fate. Thus, as a true realist and a strong advocate of individualism, Frost saw the human being as learning from nature, the zones of his own limitations.

Frost always had an unending quest for the ideal reconciliation of the opposition between man and nature. He feels nature both as mild and harsh, “together and apart”. His works are replete with the elements of deep ecological advocacy which paves a long way for the guidance against all human irrational actions which could induce self-destruction. Here the poems are with the overwhelming presence of nature. The rural landscape, hills of snow caving in heavily valleys, roads, open or leaf-strewn, crowded trees, dense dark woods, and many more are his very common expression of natural objects. But unlike the natural observer, he uses nature as a background to judge the eternal relationship of human beings on earth.

His poem ‘Tree at My Window’ shows’ upholds a very natural love for the tree which is a must in maintaining ecological balance while modern industrialists are cutting and burning down trees or natural forests for their business expansion and industrial setup. In the poem ‘Out Out’ he dramatizes a very pathetic outcry of the dire negative impact of the dehumanized industrialization which is far away from the natural bondage with the environment. Thus, becomes the cause of irrecoverable paths of numberless child labor. In “West Running Brook” Frost’s image of brook instantly arrest our attention towards the sources of natural pure water which in the modern industrial world are being dangerously polluted, thus, threatening our very existence on this earth. “In today’s world fresh water is going to be scarce more and more. The poem expresses a concern for the preservation of water” (Zafar)

Conclusion: Though the diction of Frost’s poems is seemingly very ordinary to look at, many of these poems deal with complex and highly philosophical implications underneath. Actually, a close study of his major poems uncovers an eccentric and lonely feature of human life with the ‘design of darkness’ in the lap of a meek and mild nature. Frost treats all objects of nature as merely things or tools with which man acts in the course of the daily work to gain a livelihood. His attitude towards nature is more scientifically ‘realistic’ rather than emotionally ‘romantic’. Researches related to environmental issues are gaining more focus in the humanities. This paper intends to develop a better understanding and insight into the study of the poetry of Robert Frost focusing on environmental issues, which can help develop people’s awareness to show due respect to nature. This will hopefully put a very significant contribution to the critical study of Frost’s selected poems on the grounds of ecocriticism. It will also provide impetus and guidelines in the emerging area of ecocriticism for the study of literary texts.

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