

FROST AS A NATURE POET

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ABSTRACT: Nature forms one of the chief and most recurrent themes in the poetry of most poets. It *is* another matter whether it is treated as a predominant object or a secondary object of treatment, forms the major concern of a poet or appears casually in a few of his poems, appears independently or serves only as a background of certain aspects of man's life. In English nature has been treated by great poets like Chaucer, Spenser, Gray, Thompson, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Robert Bridges and others. Among American poets of Nature, Robert Frost occupies a prominent place, because of his deep interest in, and frequent treatment of Nature.

Key Words: Nature, Frost, Wordsworth

FROST AND NATURE

The beauty of nature in all the variety of its charms can be found chiefly in rural areas. The poets who belong to, or who have lived, in the countryside and have observed natural phenomena from close quarters, have been great poets of nature. For example, Wordsworth lived in the Lake District, and observed the beauty of nature closely. Similarly, Frost passed a large part of his life in the rural areas of New England, and became familiar with the natural scenes and objects, such as brooks, pastures, farms, trees, flowers and birds, that he described in his poems in detail. Because of having observed these objects personally, he was able to describe them realistically. He had a distaste for modern industrial life of big cities, and a predilection for the rural life of the countryside, with its natural surroundings. He disliked the noise and bustle and the sick hurry of the life in cities, and preferred the calm spread in what Wordsworth calls the 'mute insensate things' of Nature. Naturally, when he came to write poems, he could not keep his eyes off the beauty and charm of Nature, and the fascination its various objects held for man. He had lived under the spell of natural beauty, and sought to portray it in his poetry. Being a poet of rural life, he had to deal with the objects and scenes of Nature in most of his poems. His poems like 'Birches', 'Snow', 'The Pasture', 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', 'The Sound of Trees', and 'Desert Places' depict these scenes and objects in an appealing manner.

HOW FAR IS FROST A POET OF NATURE ?

Even though Frost has frequently treated nature in his poetry, there has been no unanimity on the point whether he is a poet of nature or not. According to John F. Lynen, for example, "Frost's nature-poetry is so excellent and

so characteristic that it must be given a prominent place in any account of his art.” Robert Langbaum remarks that “In the power to render nature Frost may well be our best nature-poet since Wordsworth”.

However, some other critics are of the view that Frost is predominantly a poet of man and humanity or human life, and not of nature. Frost himself once admitted in a television interview: “I’m not a nature-poet. I have only written two poems without a human being in them,” meaning thereby that human beings form a more frequently treated theme in his poetry than Nature and its objects. A. Alvarez remarks about Frost: “He is not a nature-poet; his best work has none of that personal interpretative weight. He is a country-poet, whose business is to love with nature rather than through it.”

Frost is a pastoral poet, and seems to depict nature in so far as it serves as the backdrop of the rustic life he seeks to portray. The rustic folk, their activities, etc., are always in the foreground, and Nature and its scenes remain in the background in Frost's descriptions. In fact, Frost is not predominantly a poet of Nature, as Wordsworth is, and does not present it for its own sake or in its own right. "His best poetry is," as Marion Montgomery remarks, "concerned with the drama of man in Nature, whereas Wordsworth is generally best when emotionally displaying the panorama of the natural world." It may be said that although Frost does deal with Nature and the countryside, he is not chiefly a poet of Nature.

TREATMENT OF NATURE BY FROST

Frost may not be regarded as a poet of Nature; but his poetry contains accurate, concrete, vivid and realistic descriptions of natural objects and scenes. His descriptive power is remarkable. In this connection, Isidor Schneider admits: “The descriptive power of Frost is to me the most wonderful thing in his poetry. A snowfall, a spring thaw, a bending tree, a valley, mist, a brook, these are brought not to, but into, the experience of the reader. The method is simple and can be analyzed. What he describes is not a spectacle only, but an entire adventure. In ‘One Singing Strength’ we follow him disputing with birds a bit of roadway; in ‘A Hillside Thaw’ we almost see him on his knees trying to feel with his hands the response comes naturally. The three fuses together and the experience comes as a whole to us. It is an effect rare even in the best poetry.” Frost portrays natural scenes and objects realistically, and does not give them a tinge of his romantic imagination. He is able to describe everything in an accurate and vivid manner, because he has himself seen it closely and not as a man of the city like Pope. ‘Birches’, ‘A Hillside Thaw’, ‘Out Singing Strength’, ‘Mending Wall’, ‘The Grindstones’, and ‘Hyla Brook’ are some of his poems abounding in faithful description of nature.

Frost loved Nature and admired its beauty comprising various scenes and objects. His descriptions of Nature are realistic; but they often have a symbolic significance, as we

find in the case of poems like, 'Birches', 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' and 'Mowing.' His sensuous approach to Nature, and not a mystical or spiritual one. Unlike Wordsworth, he is not a Nature-mystic; nor is he inclined to feel and prove the presence of some spirit behind various objects of Nature. He deals with Nature as a background for human life or as a thing associated with man's life, but not superseding it. "His poems on natural objects, such as 'Birches', 'Mending Wall' or 'The Grindstone', are, as W. H. Auden points out, "always concerned with them not as foci for mystical meditation or starting points for fantasy, but as things with which man acts in the course of the daily work of gaining a living." Frost is more akin to Keats than to Wordsworth from the viewpoint of a sensuous and non-mystical approach to nature. "For all that nature meant to him he was," observes Willard Thorp, "Never a nature mystic. In his early verse, one feels the joy in the sensuous pleasure which nature has given most modern poets."

MAN VERSUS NATURE IN FROST'S POETRY

Frost writes about nature, but he does not do so without referring to man. His observation of various objects of Nature brings to his mind the similarity between these objects and man. For example, when he observes the behaviour of a group of ants, in 'Departmental,' he seems to be reminded of the departmentalism or red-tapism prevailing in the society of man. Similar is the case with his poems 'A Considerable Speck' and 'The Bear'. Frost does not find the same spirit running through Nature and Man. To him, there is a line of demarcation between the two, and Man seems to stand separated from Nature. Willard Thorp is of the view that "Frost always knew where to find the line which separates Nature from man. When tired of trees he sought again mankind; but if by noon he had too much of men, he could turn on his arm and smell the earth and look into the crater of an ant. In the earlier poems nature and man confront each other across the wall, as the buck and the doe in "Two look at TW face the wondering man and woman, each pair in its own pasture." In fact, what interests Frost is "not definitions but attitudes, not what nature is in itself but how man responds to it in a world he never made"

(George Nitchie).

Frost depicts the animal and vegetable natures in man, but he does not read man's nature into the animal and vegetable worlds, as is the case with Wordsworth. He is, according to John F. Lynen, "a poet who sees man and nature separated by a boundary which is both definite and inalterable." Nature to Frost is only a background for the interplay between human beings, and an arena in which their activities and their interaction continue. Man is more important for Frost than nature and human life more important than natural phenomena.

NATURE, FOR FROST A HOSTILE FORCE

Unlike Wordsworth who believed nature to be essentially benevolent, Frost regarded it as a malevolent force showing hostility towards Man. In Frost's view, nature had both good and bad aspects, and it was both beneficial and harmful for man. It may often be benevolent and kind; but very often it is cruel, or at least indifferent, to him. There is no harmony existing between Man and Nature, and nature often works against Man. Man has to exert his power over Nature in order to turn it into something useful for him. As Frost says in his poem 'Design', Nature has no benevolent design for man, as Wordsworth believed. It confronts man with various difficulties, fears and sufferings, and makes him act boldly and courageously to thwart its ill-doings against him. In poems like 'The Riders', 'The Soldier', and 'The Lost Followers', he shows man acting with courage in the teeth of evil external forces of Nature. Frost often finds nature to be 'red in tooth and claw'. In 'Two Tramps in Mud-Tune', he shows frost as something lurking in the earth beneath, and abruptly putting forth its 'crystal teeth'. In the poem 'Bereft', he feels as if there were something sinister and evil in the hissing of leaves. The bleak, harsh and malevolent aspects of Nature are thus frequently presented by Frost in several of his poems. He wants to keep aloof from the objects of nature, as is seen when he says in 'A Minor Bird'

*"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."*

Frost gives charming descriptions of nature, but at the same time, he also points out its evil aspects. "Even in Frost's most cheerful sketches," observes John F Lynen, "there is always a bitter-sweet quality. Admittedly he can and does enjoy nature. His flowers, trees and animals are all described with affection, yet none of the nature poems is free from the unseen presence of something hostile."

FROST'S LOVE OF NATURE AND EARTH

Despite his awareness and depiction of the uglier and harsher aspects of Nature, Frost seems to have an intense love for her. When the gloom pervading his mood subsides, he feels attracted towards the beauty of Nature and delighted by her manifold charms. For him, as he says in 'Birches', 'Earth's the right place for love'. He realizes that, as he says in 'Our Hold on the Planet',

*"There is much in nature against us. But we forget;
Take nature altogether since time began,
including human nature, in peace and war,
And it must be a little more in favour of man."*

Frost's bird poems like 'A Minor Bird', 'The Oven Bird' and 'Looking for a Sunset Bird in Winter', present his sympathetic understanding of and love for the birds

described by him. At one place he writes: "Lord I have loved your sky." In 'The Sound of Trees', he says-

*"I wonder about the trees.
Why do we wish to hear
forever the noise of these
More than another noise
So close to our dwelling place?"*

Frost thus seems to be a lover of nature and of its various objects, like brooks, trees, flowers, birds, etc. This love is revealed in his minute and repeated descriptions of these objects.

MORAL LESSON DRAWN FROM COMMON OCCURRENCES IN NATURE

Frost describes the most common scenes and occurrences of nature in the simplest possible manner. For example, he describes the lovely woods (in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*') or the falling of a few pieces of snow-flakes on his head (in 'Dust of Snow'), or the singing of a bird (in 'Oven Bird'), and conveys a moral based on them. In 'Dust of Snow', his gloomy and depressed mood is shown being lightened by the falling of a few flakes of snow on his head, with the implication that the commonest object of Nature can give Man joy, and relieve his gloom; he writes—

*"The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree
Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued."*

The sound of the scythe in 'Mowing' conveys the moral that "fact is the sweetest dream that labour knows." The absorption in the beauty of the dark, lovely woods in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' reminds him of his obligations, and refrains him from sleeping or taking rest. In 'Oven Bird', Frost exhorts us not to be worried by the change of seasons, and to try to know 'what to make of a diminished thing'.

However, despite his habit of frequently conveying a moral, Frost should not be regarded as a didactic poet. It does not openly philosophise or moralize about Nature. As Lewis Leary remarks, "He is a serious moralist as well as a serious artist. But his peculiar intimacy with nature prevents him from being openly didactic. He teaches like nature in Parables: sometimes merely presenting a picture, a mood, a narrative, and leaving you to draw your own conclusions, never permitting himself more than the tender humorous sort of comment."

CONCLUSION:

Frost may, to some extent, be regarded as a poet of Nature. Nature forms a prominent and recurrent theme in his poetry. He describes various objects and scenes of Nature, especially those of the New England countryside, realistically. He seems to be interested in portraying the commonest objects, like the meanest flower that blows.' He also occasionally draws some moral from objects of Nature. But he is not a didactic poet. He is not a nature-mystic, or a delineator of the spiritual aspects of Nature. A painter of Nature in all her moods and forms, he treats man and human life as more important than her manifold charms.

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