
THE CONFLICT BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE IN ROBERT FROST: A STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS

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ABSTRACT

Robert Frost, one of America's most renowned poets, often centers his work on the intricate relationship between humans and the natural world. Though widely known for his rich depictions of nature, a closer look reveals a recurring tension between human desires and the impersonal, often indifferent aspects of nature. Many critics of Robert Frost continue to interpret his nature poetry through the traditional lens of earlier philosophical and religious conceptions of nature. However, with the arrival of the twentieth century and significant scientific advancements, this conventional perspective on nature underwent a substantial shift. The earlier viewpoint regarded nature as part of a grand, all-encompassing cosmic order, with the physical world representing just one aspect of this broader design. In contrast, the modern understanding of the universe is marked by uncertainty, disorder, and adversity. Frost's portrayal of nature reflects this shift; he presents it as a distant, indifferent force, detached from human emotions and suffering. He identifies a deterministic pattern within the universe that often leads to existential negation. For Frost, both humanity and nature exist within a neutral, impersonal framework that lacks any divine or spiritual essence. This paper explores the recurring theme of conflict between man and nature as depicted in selected poems by Robert Frost.

Keywords: Nature, Philosophy, Religious Interpretations, Determinism, Divine Absence, Modernism, Psychological Conflict

Robert Frost: A Nature Poet beyond Romantic Traditions

Critics hold varied opinions regarding Robert Frost's status as a nature poet, shaped largely by their personal experiences and critical perspectives. Some, for instance, offer high praise. One critic even hails Frost as "our best nature poet since Wordsworth," while Barry D. Bort regards him as "the only major contemporary poet writing convincingly about nature." Such accolades recognize Frost's ability to vividly portray natural scenes and elements with a striking immediacy and authenticity.

However, not all critics agree with labeling Frost primarily as a nature poet. Figures like Joseph Warren Beach and Carlos Baker argue that Frost should not be classified under the traditional banner of nature poets, suggesting that he focuses more on rural life, practical human concerns, and "country things" rather than nature itself in the abstract. John Freeman adds to this view by emphasizing the stark difference between Frost and Wordsworth. Freeman notes that Frost's work lacks the spiritual radiance and idealistic optimism often found in Wordsworth's poetry, and is instead characterized by a "steady grey light"—a muted, somber depiction of the world.

Many early critics interpreted Frost's nature poetry through older, Romantic lenses, molded by the philosophical and religious ideals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. According to the traditional Romantic outlook, nature was perceived as a divine creation, filled with purpose and inherently harmonious. Nature was seen as a spiritual guide, a source of moral lessons, and an embodiment of the sublime. However, the twentieth century introduced a profound shift in how nature was understood, influenced heavily by scientific developments and the disillusionment brought about by world wars. The modern view replaced the harmonious and purposeful vision of nature with one that recognized nature's indifference, randomness, and capacity for cruelty.

Frost's poetry reflects this modern, more skeptical outlook. He presents nature as a detached, impersonal force, indifferent to human struggles and aspirations. Nature, in Frost's vision, is neither benevolent nor hostile by intent; it simply exists, following its own unknowable and often brutal laws. In this universe, Man and Nature are separate entities, coexisting within a vast, impersonal cosmos devoid of divine purpose or sacred significance.

Although Romantic nature poetry significantly influenced the poets of the transitional period, they ultimately diverged from their Romantic predecessors in a crucial way. Unlike the Romantics, the transitional poets believed that no spiritual presence resided in nature. For them, spiritual forces were either beyond human understanding or entirely absent—neither existing as an external deity nor dwelling within nature itself. As a

result, the divide between humanity and the natural world appeared dark, impenetrable, and almost impossible to bridge.

Despite this somber view, transitional poets sought to impose some sense of order upon the seeming chaos of nature. They yearned for a glimpse of inherent kindness within the natural world and for the strength and resilience in human beings to overcome the barriers separating them from nature's unity. In contrast to the sensuousness and aesthetic admiration found in the works of Keats and Wordsworth, transitional poets abandoned such romanticized portrayals. Robert Frost, in particular, developed a distinct style to address the feelings of discomfort, hopelessness, and despair he perceived in the natural world.

Frost's Unique Treatment of Nature and Humanity

For Frost, the central focus remained firmly on human experience. Nature served both as a mirror and a contrast to human concerns, hopes, and fears. His depiction of nature is stark and often somber, highlighting the human struggle against the unknowable and indifferent forces surrounding them. Yet, Frost maintained a careful balance: while recognizing nature's vitality and beauty, he emphasized man's fragile engagement with it. His poetry embraces a dualism that acknowledges both wonder and terror.

This perspective surfaces in several of Frost's poems. In "Birches," for instance, he meditates on the possibility of transcending the earthly world and achieving spiritual unity. Yet, bound by earthly attachments, Frost hesitates. The moment he imagines escaping into the unknown, he experiences anxiety—not envisioning a union with God, but fearing an encounter with "fate" and the finality of death. Fearing that he might depart from the earth never to return, he ultimately rejects the unknown and reaffirms his connection to the tangible world, declaring that "Earth's the right place for love." He says:

**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.**

As the poet contemplates the powerful allure of the infinite, he experiences a sense of fear and is brought back to the awareness of his earthly responsibilities. This fear of being "taken away, never to return" is similarly reflected in the poem "After Apple-Picking," where he intentionally compares his sleep to that of a woodchuck. Through this comparison, the poet seeks to eliminate any misunderstanding by emphasizing that his drowsiness is merely a temporary condition—a brief period of rest in which he remains mindful of his duties in the world. He says:

**The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.**

At times, Robert Frost perceives nature as cold and hostile. The cosmic design often appears frightening to him. In a letter to Lincoln MacVeagh, Frost remarks that "something hates us and likes to spoil our fair beginning." He portrays nature as a vast, impersonal force determined to obstruct human progress. This immense and dynamic power can be wildly destructive and annihilating. As Lionel Trilling notes, Frost is not simply a poet who comforts us with affirmations of traditional values and emotions; rather, he instills a sense of fear by revealing the terrifying aspects of the universe. Frost's anxiety about nature's threatening side is vividly captured in his poem "The Onset". The paralyzing response of a dazed persona at the sudden sight of an ice storm finds expression in the lines:

**I almost stumble looking up and round,
As one who overtaken by the end
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend
Upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun.**

Similarly, "Storm Fear" paints the chilling image of human vulnerability against nature's mighty forces. In "Once by the Pacific," the crashing waves symbolize a violent, approaching apocalypse, warning humanity to brace for inevitable destruction.

The same profound sense of cosmic indifference appears in "Stars," where a lonely traveler is swallowed by the relentless, featureless snow, and in "Desert Places," where the emptiness of the snowy landscape mirrors the void within the human soul. Frost deepens this meditation in "Design," where even the minute, seemingly random encounter between a spider and its prey suggests a grim pattern of destruction at the heart of existence.

Nature's Ambivalence and Human Resilience

Yet Frost's treatment of nature is not wholly pessimistic. He often portrays humanity's resilience—its capacity for endurance, creativity, and moral responsibility—as the counterpoint to nature's indifference. In "Mending Wall," for example, nature's force is depicted as something that "doesn't love a wall," subtly working to dismantle human-made barriers. While the persona jokes about attributing this mischief to elves, he acknowledges a larger, enigmatic force at work—a force not malevolent but indifferent to human divisions and constructs.

The same overwhelming, impersonal power of nature is presented in "Stars," where a solitary traveler loses his way amid icy winds and snow that blankets and erases all signs of life. In "Desert Places," Frost portrays a scene of utter emptiness, describing the snow as "a blind whiteness of benighted snows with no expression, nothing to express." Here, human despair deepens with the realization of the universe's indifference. This bleak sense of void and cosmic meaninglessness also appears in "Design" and "Neither Out Far nor In Deep." Finally, in "Mending Wall," Frost explores the ongoing struggle between humanity and nature, highlighting their unending and inexplicable conflict. When the persona finds the repaired wall repeatedly broken at 'the spring mending time', he says with astounding astonishment:

**Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly....**

Frost envisions a deliberate pattern in the universe's design. In his poem "Design," he reflects on the inevitable chain of cause and effect, finding dark and unsettling meanings in the chance encounter of a white heal-all flower, a moth, and an albino spider. Through this imagery, Frost confronts a natural order that seems indifferent to human emotions and appeals. Nature, to him, remains an unfathomable and enigmatic force, difficult to fully understand. In Frost's poetry, there is often a tension between the straightforward reality and the profound mystery that envelops it. This mysterious element emerges when the visible world collides with the invisible. For instance, in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the clear and tangible event is the speaker pausing by the woods, while the surrounding mystery lies in the unseen, deeper significance of the woods themselves. The persona says:

**My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year**

The persona is deeply enchanted not only by the outward beauty of nature but also by the profound mystery and complexity that lie beneath its surface. However, despite feeling a strong pull toward the spiritual realm, he remains firmly rooted to the earth and bound by human fears. Whenever he senses himself drifting toward a higher, spiritual experience, he is quickly brought back to the reality of his moral responsibilities and the duties he must fulfill. Though he experiences a brief longing for eternal rest and surrender to nature's alluring call, he restrains himself, remembering that he belongs to the human world, with obligations and a life path he must continue to follow. So, he says:

**The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep**

The theme of nature's dual character is a constant thread in Frost's poetry. Nature can seem either nurturing or hostile, largely depending on the perspective of the observer. However, Frost does not attach any spiritual or mystical meaning to the relationship between man and nature. Instead, he acknowledges the inherent limitations and maintains a clear boundary between the two. Although the universe may be governed by a dark and chaotic design, Frost strives to uncover a sense of order within this apparent disorder. As Reginald Cook aptly notes, Frost neither fully embraces Hardy's vision of a hostile universe nor Emerson's idea of a benevolent one. Frost dismisses the notion of nature as a kindly, divinely ordered system. His vision of nature is shaped by human emotions such as isolation, alienation, and longing. The recurring sense of estrangement, combined with a quiet acceptance, contributes to the unique artistic quality of his work.

In conclusion, Robert Frost redefined nature poetry for the modern age. He abandoned the Romantic idealization of nature and presented a more nuanced, often unsettling vision that reflected the complexities of the twentieth-century worldview. His poems, infused with existential awareness, reveal nature's beauty, terror, and indifference, while affirming humanity's fragile but persistent quest for meaning in a vast, mysterious universe.

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