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Indifferent Earth: The Dual Faces of Nature in Robert Frost's Poetry

Angom Mangi Singh

Man lives in close proximity to nature. So, man has been experiencing the amazing phenomena of nature. Nature comprises different elements. Everything that occurs in nature, including man himself except for the things made by man, is an element of nature. The elements include rain, snow, wind, wood, trees, mountains, rivers, etc. It is not always true to say that nature is not vicious but benign to man. Sometimes it shows its cruelties to man, making man's life difficult to survive. Then it is nature that gives shelter to man from its cruelties. Here, the important question is whether nature is man's enemy or friend? Is man aware of the duality of nature? So, it has become a pertinent fact to do a thorough research to know the interplay between man and nature. Robert Frost is a poet of nature and man. He successfully combines these two throughout his poetry. Frost has presented nature and man's place in nature in his poems. All of his poems are full of natural imagery. He understands nature and its elements well. In his poetry, he uses natural phenomena as a background and moves toward making human beings and nature no longer exist as a separate entity. The paper focuses on studying man's reaction to the elements of nature in the poetry of Robert Frost. The paper will also study the unseen forces of nature hidden in the poetry of Frost.

Keywords: Duality, Friendly, Hostile, Man, Nature

Introduction

The twentieth-century American poet Robert Frost emerged as an iconic figure of his era, almost a granite-like figure worthy of a

place on Mount Rushmore or a comparable cultural pantheon. He was born in San Francisco in 1874. He was a poet of man and nature. To Frost, nature may symbolize man's relation to the world, but the most crucial aspect of his poetry remains his underlying solid message about man. He was also known as the poet of New England. New England is a region in America comprising the states of Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island. The region is famous for its colonial past and forested mountains. He lived most of his life in Massachusetts and Vermont. He knew the region very well. The dense foliage and forested mountains inspired him to write poetry. Amy Lowell states, "He derives his inspiration from direct contact with the world – the little world of hill and upland, of farmhouse and country town" (Lowell, 1920, p. 85). So, he knew well what he was writing about.

Frost, as a New England poet, knows the typical features of the New England landscape. The elements of nature present in his poems are as realistic as they are in real life. He neither romanticizes nor exaggerates them. All his poems expose his deep reverence for nature and its great powers. In this regard, John F. Lynen asserts, "his flowers, tress, and animals are all described with affection, yet none of the nature poems is free from hints of possible danger, under the placid surface there is always the unseen presence of something hostile" (Lynen, 1960, p.149). Fear makes man stay alive by finding the ways and means to overcome his fear. To come to terms with the unfriendly aspect of nature, man has to understand them. In simple terms, man has to change his attitude towards nature. Instead of fighting against the great forces of nature, man would rather respect it. With respect to Frost's attitude towards nature, M. Montgomery asserts, "his attitude towards nature is one of armed and amicable truce and mutual respect interspersed with crossings of the boundaries separating the two principles, individual man and forces of the world" (Montgomery, 1962, p.138).

The present study takes only Robert Frost's six poems, namely "Ghost House", "My November Guest", "Storm Fear", "Blueberries", "Home Burial", and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". These poems appear in *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston* and *New Hampshire*

respectively. Furthermore, the poems are divided into two groups thematically – the poems exhibiting nature as hostile: “Ghost House”, “My November Guest”, “Storm Fear”, and “Home Burial”, and the poems demonstrating nature as hospitable: “Blueberries” and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”.

The poem, “Ghost House”, is a story of an abandoned house that is in a ruined state. The narrator knows the house before it has been destroyed by nature. The owners had protected the house while they were alive. But after the death of its last owner, it had been left alone on its own. So, after many years, the house vanished. Now, a lonely ghost lives there. The house cannot withstand the wilderness alone without its human owner.

I dwell in a lonely house I know
That vanished many a summer ago,
And left no trace but the cellar walls,
And a cellar in which the daylight falls, (*Robert Frost's*, 2002, p.46)

The present owner, the ghost narrat, or may be someone from the previous human owner who died long ago. It is evident from the physical description of the house and its surroundings by the ghost:

O'er ruined fences the grape-vines shield
The woods come back to the mowing field
The orchard tree has grown one copse
Of new wood and old where the woodpecker chops;
The footpath down to well is healed. (*Robert Frost's*, p.46)

Nature is claiming the abandoned human settlement and has swallowed everything, consequently. Once destroyed by human settlement, if nature is left alone for sometimes, it will regenerate itself in a few years. In certain respects, natural elements have a hand in the decision of the prospective owner to leave the house alone after its previous owner. The unfriendly weather condition and the inhospitable terrain make the man leave the settlement. Nature destroys the things that human values. The narrator's heart aches to see the destruction of human settlement. Man builds house to protect his family from harsh weather and wild animals. He grows food in the fields for his family. He builds road to move from one place to another. When

man stops looking after them, all these things cease to exist. Gradually, nature swallows all of them. Tim Kendal asserts,

Cleansed of the human stain, nature has reestablished its bounty with free-growing “purple-stem wild raspberries” and “grape-vines” which “shield” the ruined fences originally erected to protect and support them. Fields, once mown, have been reclaimed by woods, and a new copse has sprung up where once there was merely and “orchard tree.” “The footpath down to the well is healed” – that is to say, the tracks left by man were a wound in the landscape which time has made good. Even those lingering monuments to man’s presence, the gravestones “out under the low-limbed tree,” are “Doubtless” being repossessed. (Kendall, 2012, p. 20)

Nature has reclaimed what has been taken from it. It does not show empathy with human’s situation. This does not mean that man is nature’s enemy. Frost realistically depicts nature as it is without romanticizing it. Man cannot demand or force nature to have feeling for him. The poem portrays the hostile attitude of nature, which is ever ready to destroy anything that man stands for.

The next poem, “My November Guest”, expresses the sorrow of the speaker to see the bleak and desolate landscape of autumn in November. The speaker addresses his guest as “she”, which is obviously the autumn season.

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. (*Robert Frost’s*, p.239)

The speaker’s guest thinks that the dark clouds of autumn rain are beautiful. She loves the bare branches and withered trees and walks on the soaked pasture lane. The images “darks cloud of autumn rain”, “the withered tree” and “sodden pasture lane” suggest the coming of autumn season.

The greenish summer has gone, and the sound of the birds chirping has gone too. The whole place is covered with a grayish-white color and shrouded in mist.

She's glad the birds are gone away,
She's glad her simple worsted grey
Is silver now with clinging mist. (*Robert Frost's*, p.239)

Everyone left the place, except the speaker and his guest. Without the leaves, the dried-up and dead trees frighten the birds and this makes them leave. The earth becomes paler. and the weather is unpleasant due to lack of fresh air.

The desolate, deserted trees,
The faded earth, the heavy sky, (*Robert Frost's*, p.239)

The speaker vividly portrays the harsh November days of the autumn season. All these occur as a part of natural process. The autumn season heralds the coming of the winter season.

The love of bare November days
Before the coming of the snow, (*Robert Frost's*, p.239, 240)

The cruelty of nature is depicted here through the autumn season. The weather and withered trees not only frighten the birds but also the speaker. The speaker is saddened to see that the green summer turns into a barren landscape. Man has to live by accepting the autumn season as a part of natural process. The speaker senses the grimness and desolation to see the bare November landscape. To show its might, the hard autumn is indifferent to the speaker's sorrow. Frost tries to communicate through this poem the cruel beauty of the autumn season at its best.

Showing courage in the face of adversity is one of the unique qualities of human nature. Such a unique quality is shown in the poem "Storm Fear". The harsh and violent manner of the winter storm is portrayed in the poem as heralded by the autumn season in the previous poem.

When the wind works against us in the dark,
And pelts with snow (*Robert Frost's*, p.240)

Strong winter winds are a part of winter. The snowstorm in winter is bound to happen. So, without going against it, it is better to take shelter until the wind pacifies. Robert W. French writes, "Nature is bestial, savage, intent on luring man to his destruction; and even worse, nature is portrayed as scheming and deceptive, whispering its

cruel invitations to disaster” (French, 1982, p.156). The wind attacks the lonely farmhouse which has three persons: two adults and a child. So, they do not have a chance to confront the attack. The hostility of the wind is so great that it is addressed as “the beast”, and the coldness of the night worsens it further. The wind seems to invite them to come out but they decide not to go out. “The lower chamber window” suggests that the family is protected safely inside the house unharmed. It is quite natural for man to fear the natural forces which are beyond his control. Judith Oster observes,

In “Storm Fear” the person encountering nature is not just fearing what may represent, nor reading the storm for its significance, rather he expresses genuine fear of annihilation promoted by actual circumstances – a nature unleashing dangerous and untamed forces that have the power to destroy him and that, consequently, dramatize his helplessness and render him subdued and fearful. (Oster, 1991, p. 137)

Despite the fact that the family is protected, the speaker is still in a high fever of doubt:

And my heart owns a doubt
Whether ‘tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided. (*Robert Frost’s*, p.240)

The snow covers the “dooryard and road ungraded” which suggests no one will come to rescue the family. Living on an isolated farm, the speaker has to show courage to survive the night winter storm on his own. D.A. Sohn and R. Tyre write, “Frost believed that man should face up to the indifference and hostility of nature, accept the disturbing qualities within himself, and go about his daily affairs with courage” (Sohn and Tyre, 1969, p. 35).

The hostility and heartlessness of nature is again presented in the poem “Home Burial”. Nature has not shown any compassion to the mourning mother who has lost her son recently. Frost dexterously highlights the superiority of fog, rain and earth over man in the poem. The father has not shown any emotion like his wife. He thinks that death is a human event because death is ineluctable for man. But he cares for his wife. Now, their little son has gone and the father is right

to think of only his wife's welfare. He tries to console his wife to overcome her grief.

Three foggy mornings and one rainy day
Will rot the best birch fence a man can build. (*Robert Frost's*, p.30)

The father tries to reason with his wife that their son's body will be quickly consumed by earth just like the birch fence. Therefore, the father appeals to his wife to accept the reality that their son will not be coming back. The father knows the strength of nature and at the same time he has not shown any fear of it. Both the father and the elements of nature mentioned in the poem treat the grieving mother with indifference. For the father, the indifference is his love for his wife because he wants his wife to finish her mourning. But for nature, it is neither love nor hatred. The elements—fog, rain and earth do not show any compassion and kindness to the suffering mother and the dead child who is lying inside the coffin buried in the family graveyard. It is a process of nature to decompose everything inside the earth, provided that there is a suitable weather condition as mentioned in the poem, foggy and raining. Here, Frost "is able to look at the grim reality of nature, to recognize its remoteness and inhumanity, and at the same time to admire its magnificent strength" (Lynen, 1960, p. 148).

The genial and hospitable aspects of nature are portrayed in Robert Frost's poem, "Blueberries". The poem is a dialogue between two neighbours narrating the story of a family whose profession is to collect berries from the wild. The father, Loren has brought up all the young Lorens on wild berries. He knows where the wild berries grow. Lorens are compared to a chewink, a bird that lives on eating berries. The Lorens not only eat the berries but also sell them to buy shoes for their feet.

Like birds. They store a great many away.
They eat them the year round, and those they don't eat
They sell in the store and buy shoes for their feet. (*Robert Frost's*, p.23)

Nature has provided food for man to live on. The Lorens seem to take only what nature is willing to give. They do not grow berries forcing the earth by using man-made tools like harrow and

plow. One of the neighbours has the opinion that it is a good way to live

Just taking what Nature is willing to give,
Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow. (*Robert Frost's*, p.23)

Patterson is the owner of the pasture where blueberries are grown. The blueberries are grown in his pasture by cutting down the pine trees and burning until not a fern is left. Individuals such as Patterson appear to have no regret or remorse for the harm they have inflicted upon nature. They only see the blueberries. So, Patterson has done an act of cruelty towards nature. However, individuals such as the Lorens collect different kinds of berries from the wild. One of the neighbours wishes to know,

Of where all the berries and other things grow,
Cranberries in bogs and raspberries on top
Of the boulder-strewn mountain, and when they will crop. (*Robert Frost's*, p.24)

The neighbours do not know where wild berries grow. They think that it is a mistake on the part of Loren to think “all the fruit grows wild is for him” (*Robert Frost's*, p.25). They have almost forgotten how to pick berries. But now, they have a chance to pick berries of Patterson’s pasture.

We’ll go in the morning, that is, if it’s clear,
And the sun shines out warm: the vines must be wet. (*Robert Frost's*, p.25)

Here, the genial part of nature is portrayed in the poem. Nature provides a sustainable livelihood to those people who live in close contact with nature. The Lorens without any fear go to the bogs and boulder-strewn mountain to collect wild berries. On the other hand, the neighbours cannot find the wild berries as the Lorens do. They almost forget how to pick berries. It is not like they do not want to collect wild berries but because it is not now found abundantly. Patterson’s planting of blueberries is justifiable if it is looked at from a human perspective. Man needs food to survive. If nature does not provide enough food, man has to grow food. In this poem, nature has shown friendly gesture towards human by allowing them to access its forest, bogs and mountain without fear. The sun does hurt the berry

pickers, but here, instead helps them by drying the vines. The poet is conveying a cordial relationship between the elements of nature and man in the poem.

Furthermore, the warmth and hospitality of a winter evening is painted in Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". A weary traveler is attracted by the beauty of the woods whose owner is from the nearby village that the traveler just has passed. The falling snow covers the woods and enhances the beauty of the woods. The traveler stops his horse despite the cold winter evening to see the beauty of snow-covered woods. Enchanted by the beauty of the woods, he forgets that he and his horse are stopping

.....without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year. (*Robert Frost's*, p.189)

The harsh winter scene is portrayed in the above lines. The traveler comes to his senses by the shaking of his horse's harness bell. Above this sound he can hear:

The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake. (*Robert Frost's*, p.190)

The wind is gently sweeping and snow is falling like feathers in flakes. The winter, snow, wind and woods have shown friendly attitude towards the traveler. The hospitable nature makes the traveler forget for a while about his duties and obligations to his people.

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. (*Robert Frost's*, p.190)

Conclusion

From the study of the above six poems by Robert Frost, this study contends that nature is neither an enemy nor a friend of man. An individual's perception of nature differs depending on their perspective. Nature is characterized by its duality, displaying harshness and violence, yet at times exhibiting geniality and hospitality. When an individual encounters severe conditions in nature, the environment may be perceived as hostile. However, to an individual who encounters

benevolent conditions, nature appears to be hospitable. Human beings are incapable of bringing nature under their control. The events and actions that occur in nature are beyond human imagination. Man has to have a comprehensive understanding of the laws and dynamics of the natural world. Only then, he can survive from the harshness of nature. Thus, man's reaction to the elements of nature is characterized by a complex interplay of emotions. The sun, night, summer, rain, storm, autumn, fog, snow, winter, mountain, wood, trees, plant and fields are all parts of nature. Whatever happens in nature is happening in its own course. Therefore, man has to understand nature's changing course in order to survive against the forces of nature.

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