

NATURE IN WILLIAM WORDSWORTH AND ROBERT FROST: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Tasmia Moslehuddin*
Ahmad Mahbub-Ul-Alam**

ABSTRACT

Nature has often been one of the prominent themes in literature. It has been the topic of celebration by the Romantics to have a way out from the hectic business of city life. On the other hand, the adaptation of the same subject has also been observed by the Modern poets to put emphasis on the realities and responsibilities of human existence. This paper aims at making a comparative study in the presentation of "Nature" by William Wordsworth, an English Romantic and Robert Frost, a Modern American.

Keywords: *William Wordsworth, Robert Frost, Nature, Thematic Uniqueness*

1. INTRODUCTION

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) stands supreme as a poet of nature. He is a worshipper of Nature, nature's devotee or high-priest. His love of Nature was probably truer, and tendered, than that of any other English poet, before or since. Nature comes to occupy in his poems a separate or independent status and is not treated in a casual or passing manner as by poets before him. Wordsworth had a full-fledged philosophy, a new and original view of Nature. On the other hand Robert Frost (1874-1963) uses nature to express his views on human lives as well as to make his poetry interesting and easy to imagine in our mind through the detail he supplies.

Both the poets, the English Romantic William Wordsworth and the Modern American Robert Frost have commonly and frequently used "Nature" as the subject of their poems, but notably their individual treatments of the same subject have uniqueness in handling various themes, which ultimately make these two world famous poets stylistically distinctive and significant. The general aim of the present study is to show the use of "Nature" as the subject matter in the poems of the two poets of the Romantic and Modern ages, respectively from the English and the American zones. And, the specific objective of the paper goes on to show the distinctiveness in handling the thematic issues encapsulated with the various aspects of the same subject matter. And, due to the demand of the topic and relevance of the study, the present paper is developed fully on "observation method". To develop the hypothesis of the study, followed by a unique conclusion, relevant works by various literary critics and discussions by different researchers on the similar issues have been considered to have the basic inputs for this paper. And accordingly, a discussion has been made to show the distinctiveness in the use of "Nature" by the two poets of this study.

* Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Manarat International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Email: tuni_kazi_171@yahoo.com

** Assistant Professor, Department of English, Manarat International University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Email: pialbd@yahoo.com]

2. SCOPE AND JUSTIFICATION

The present study has its uniqueness in its origin, though the consideration of the two separate wings, i.e., “Nature in Wordsworth” and “Nature in Frost” have been considered by various critics and researchers of literature. Many papers are separately available on Nature in Wordsworth and in Frost, but a comparative study in the treatment of the same subject in heightening different thematic values towards life has been the exclusive focus of the present study. The study has encompassed few selective extracts by the two poets, making an attempt to show their individual treatment towards “Nature”, and has further proceeded for focusing on the uniqueness of the two poets in their distinctive use of the same subject. The paper has its own scope and justification in setting an example of the study of comparative literature in handling various thematic issues with the same subject matter.

3. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

In his recent book, *Wordsworth and the Critics: The Development of a Critical Reputation*, Rattigan Professor of English John L. Mahoney said: “Wordsworth’s legacy came about in the name of turning poetry away from the drawing room and the salon and bringing it back to nature”. Through poems like *The Excursion*, Wordsworth was seen as much a thinker and philosopher as writer, and “considered the poet of the moral life.” The new critics today such as; David Bromwich has in fact called for a complete reappraisal of Wordsworth, suggesting that we cast aside idealized visions of him as the prophet of nature, and remembering that he was a man - at times a disagreeable one - who wrote poetry. (<http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/responding-to-wordsworth-a-critical-history>)

In the book review of *The Cambridge Introduction to William Wordsworth* by Emma Mason it is said: William Wordsworth is the most influential of the romantic poets, and remains widely popular, even though his work is more complex and more engaged with the political, social and religious upheavals of his time than his reputation as a ‘nature poet’ might suggest.

On the other hand in her article *The Realistic Nature of Robert Frost’s Poetry* (The Criterion: An International Journal in English ISSN 0976-8165) Dr. Nina Sharma said, “Robert Frost’s chief concern is with man. The focus in his poetry is on man’s position and attitude and especially on his feelings.” And in the book *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* John F. Lynen in the chapter “Nature and Pastoralism” has shown Frost as a pastoral poet.

The texts titled *William Wordsworth* by Geoffrey Durrant, *The Simple Wordsworth* by John F. Danby, *Robert Frost* by Philip L. Gerber also talk about the view of nature by Wordsworth and Frost.

3.1. Nature in William Wordsworth

As a Romantic, Wordsworth conceived Nature as a living Personality. He finds out as well as establishes in his poems a cordial, passionate, impressive, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and inseparable relationship between nature and human life. According to him, all created things are parts of a unified whole. Actually, the love of nature leads Wordsworth to the love of man which is noticeable in many of his poems.

He believed that there is a divine spirit pervading all the objects of Nature. This belief in a divine spirit pervading all the objects of Nature may be termed as mystical Pantheism and is fully expressed in famous poem commonly known as *Tintern Abbey* (Lines, composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour. July 13, 1798).

In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth traces the development of his love for Nature. In his boyhood Nature was simply a playground for him. At the second stage he began to love and seek Nature but he was attracted purely by its sensuous or aesthetic appeal. Finally his love for

Nature acquired a spiritual and intellectual character, and he realized Nature's role as a teacher and educator. By specifically using nature as his escape from "...the heavy and the weary weight/ Of all this unintelligible world," (39-40), he asserts that the purity of nature holds no ill memories of man's unkindness. This ability to gradually retreat from the trials of daily life by calling to mind the solace found in nature is key to the concept that only through withdrawal from the world of society and immersion in the natural world can one rise above present strife.

Wordsworth continues speaking of his connection with nature to the past by relating how nature has held prominence during all stages of his past life. But here he also imparts the importance his intimacy with nature will have in his future as he states "that in this moment there is life and food/ For future years." (64-65).

In the final refrain, he states, "...Nature never did betray/ The heart that loved her;" (122-123) and he assures his sister Dorothy that she too will find solace from the heartless world by her communion with nature. Wordsworth beautifully clarifies the concept of nature by using it as the ideal link between recollection, foresight, and his relationship with another.

In this poem Wordsworth also mentions the moral influence of Nature on human being; there is a spiritual intercourse between man and nature. He regards nature as –

*"The anchor of my purest thought, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being." (110-112)*

In his another poem, well known as, *Immortality Ode* (Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood) he tells us that as a boy his love for Nature was a thoughtless passion but that when he grew up, the objects of nature took a sober coloring from his eyes and gave rise to profound thoughts in his mind because he had witnessed the sufferings of humanity:

*"To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." (207-208)*

The ode begins by discussing nature as a metaphor for purity and the ability to dream. "There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,/ The Earth, and every common sight,/ To me did seem Appareled in celestial light," (1-4), these lines are a prime example of the use of nature to symbolize purity as an image.

In the Second Book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth gives us an insight into his meaning of Nature. He says:

*"Blest the infant Babe,
(For with my best conjecture I would trace
Our Being's earthly progress,) blest the Babe,
Nursed in his Mother's arms, who sinks to sleep
Rocked on his Mother's breast; who with his soul
Drinks in the feelings of his Mother's eye!" (233-238)*

In view of the total impression which the whole poem leaves on the reader, it can be said that "Mother" and "Nurse" with an earthly soul are the key words to the meaning of Nature. The choice of the word "Mother" carries with it a great deal of significance or Wordsworth. First and most obvious of all, Mother signifies a person. Nature was a real person to Wordsworth. In response to this motherly tenderness and helpful companionship, Wordsworth feels himself called to sing the praise of Nature. "I made no vows," he said, "but vows were then made for me; bond unknown to me was given that I should be, else sinning great, a dedicated Spirit." Thus Wordsworth became, in return for natural love of him, "singled out for the holy service" of Nature. And in the word "nursed" we find that this tender loving Mother is active. Nature is now a dynamic force constantly interesting, constant, tending her "chosen son." This is probably one of the most

striking characteristics of Wordsworth's Nature.

Wordsworth connects human life with nature also in *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, also known as *Daffodils*. Here "daffodils" represent the impermanence of human life. Once the poet experienced a 'jocund company' with numerous daffodils. But that pleasant moment does not accompany him all time. Wordsworth visualizes them only in his 'vacant or pensive mood.' He says-

*"For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils."* (19-24)

Wordsworth believed that the company of Nature gives joy to the human heart and he looked upon Nature as exercising a healing influence on sorrow-stricken hearts. Wordsworth takes pleasure in contract with nature and purifies his mind, 'in lonely rooms, and mid the din of towns and cities,' with the memory of nature. Moreover, nature has not become 'a landscape to a blind man's eye' to him. It indicates that the eyes of the city people are blind because they cannot get anything from nature.

He also believed that we can learn more of man and of moral evil and good from Nature than from all the philosophies. In his eyes, "Nature is a teacher whose wisdom we can learn, and without which any human life is vain and incomplete." He believed in the education of man by Nature. In this he was somewhat influenced by Rousseau. This inter-relation of Nature and man is very important in considering Wordsworth's view of both.

Above all, Wordsworth emphasized the moral influence of Nature. He spiritualized Nature and regarded her as a great moral teacher, as the best mother, guardian and nurse of man, and as an elevating influence. He believed that between man and Nature there is mutual consciousness, spiritual communion or 'mystic intercourse'. He initiates his readers into the secret of the soul's communion with Nature. According to him, human beings who grow up in the lap of Nature are perfect in every respect.

3.2. Nature in Robert Frost

Frost's use of nature is the single most misunderstood element of his poetry as he himself said, "I am not a nature poet. There is almost always a person in my poems." Most of Frost's poems use nature imagery. His grasp and understanding of natural fact is well recognized. Frost like Wordsworth is not trying to tell us how nature works. His poems are about human psychology. Rural scenes and landscapes, homely farmers, and the natural world are used to illustrate a psychological struggle with everyday experience met with courage, will and purpose in the context of Frost's life and personal psychology. His attitude is stoical, honest and accepting. Frost uses nature as a background. He usually begins a poem with an observation of something in nature and then moves toward a connection to some human situation or concern. Frost is neither a transcendentalist nor a pantheist. Frost's poetry particularly brings to attention the social issues relied upon the human way that gives the message of man for mankind.

Robert Frost saw nature as an alien force capable of destroying man, but he also saw man's struggle with nature as a heroic battle. As told in his poem *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 favor of man,
Say a fraction of one percent at the very least,*

*Or our number living wouldn't be steadily more,
Our hold on the planet wouldn't have so increased." (12-18)*

Nature is separate and independent from man. Man "keeps the universe alone," even though he may call out for "counter love," he will not find it. Even though he loved natural beauty, Frost recognized the harsh facts of the natural world. He viewed these opposites as simply different aspects of reality that could be embraced in poetry. He accepts these facts with honesty and is remorseless in his realization of them. He probes the quality of truth and accepts that there may be no answer. In the poem *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening* nature is expressed a lot. Frost's very first sentence talks about the woods. Here we find him as a nature lover who likes to sit and watch the snow fall. But in the last stanza he says that life is more important to him than being tempted by the beauty of woods. 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." (13-16)*

While Wordsworth likes to pass hours and hours in the midst of nature, through this stanza the readers find Frost's deep philosophical connotation, where the poet reminds himself of his obligations to himself and to his fellow being. "*And a miles to go before I sleep*" is a symbol for life's journey which ends in eternal sleep that is death. Here the "sleep" becomes a deserved honor. The "woods" is a complex symbol. It symbolizes deep gratification as well as the dark inner self of man.

In his poetry Frost's facts are correct, especially in botanical and biological terms. But he does not try to tell nature stories nor animal stories. He always uses these metaphorically implying an analogy to some human concern. Frost is often described as a parabolic. His poetic impulse starts with some psychological concern and finds its way to a material embodiment which usually includes a natural scene. Frost always takes time to describe it with sensitivity and care while using good poetic technique especially figurative language.

In another poem *Mending Wall* nature is shown to present the barrier of today's world. The "wall" between Frost's apple orchard and his neighbor's pine wood suffers damage during a winter. During the next spring the poet and his neighbor meet to repair it and walking along each on his side of the wall they replace the fallen stones. The Poet feels that repairing the wall is meaningless. But his neighbor replies that "*good fences make good neighbors*". The central situation of the poem has given scope to a social or symbolic interpretation and cultural problems have been analyzed as well. He overtly observed the human psychology and tries to find out the factual situation of the human tendency in critical moment, so that the poet wants to suggest that the man has become a wayward. He searches himself in the whimsical world. He reveals the realistic picture of the society. He shows the right path and way of life where man is thoroughly invisible in day to day life.

In *Birches*, Frost gives us a nostalgic view of his childhood when he used to swing the birches as a boy. To talk about the weariness and the despair of his life Frost uses nature in this poem. He compares human life with a pathless wood. He says:

*"So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood" (41-44)*

Poems some as *After Apple Picking*, *The Road Not Taken* and *The Wood Pile* deal with men's weariness, confusion and creativity. In every comment on human being Frost uses imageries such as the apple orchard, the forest and the pile of wood. But everywhere he presents nature and natural objects to talk about people and their lives.

3.3. A Comparative Study

For Wordsworth, poetry is the outcome of personal, spiritual or mystical experience. In the poetry of his great period, Wordsworth's theme is the spirit eminent in nature and man. The philosophic ideas through which he seeks to justify this concept of spirit are diverse and combined in a variety of ways, the emphasis shifting from one poem to another. He expresses this union most often through suggesting a blending of thought and landscape and portraying the subtle affinities between the natural scene and the moral sentiments.

The vague suggestiveness of Wordsworth's terms is the medium in which thought and object merge. The same blending is manifested in the kind of vaguely outlined nature imagery Wordsworth and most other Romantics prefer. Their streams, breezes, odors, mists, tangled undergrowth, and twilight have the indistinct quality which allows them to drift into the area of subjective experience. As Wordsworth put it, he prefers the regions "where things are lost in each other, and limits vanish, and aspirations are raised."

On the contrary the contrast between man and nature is the central theme of Frost's nature poetry. Frost views nature as essentially alien. He keeps himself confined with earthly region, with mundane phenomena; he is not willing to transcend the boundary of this earth. 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 by the indifference and inaccessibility of the physical world in which he must live.

For Wordsworth, experience is the antecedent and poems are the consequent. In fact, experience causes expression, and expression becomes a spontaneous outburst. For Frost, poetry begins consciously and it ends unconsciously. In Wordsworth's poetry, nature is supreme, where humans and nature forge an intimate communion; humans and nature are never found hostile to each other. In Frost, rural people are supreme and nature has been made subordinate to humans. It is hard to describe Frost as the poet of nature, if we determine Wordsworth as the standard. Frost himself admits: "We have had nature poetry for a hundred years." He is interested in locating the relations between nature and humans. It is true that both the poets sought to find solace and delight in nature.

Obviously as a Romantic, Wordsworth uses "Nature" as the prominent theme focusing on the beauty of nature that can heal his pain and give him pleasure. On the other hand as a Modern Poet, Frost's vision is to present human being as the central theme, and nature comes as a background. Poetry, to Frost, was a record of personal experience. To Wordsworth, it was "the image of man and nature. Its object is truth, not individual and local but general and operative; not standing external testimony but carried alive into the heart by passion." Thus Wordsworth's poetry is a direct revelation of reality, an authentic version of human phenomena. To Wordsworth, nature was the source of learning, ideas, power and values; nature was the fountain of inspiration and solace in times of mental agony. Nature appears to him as his 'guardian, nurse' and teacher. In times of despair and suffering, nature acts as the spring of moral strength and confidence for psychic survival. In nature Wordsworth feels "a presence that disturbs" him with "the joys of elevated thoughts." He is the poet of thought and meditation whereas Frost's poems are of activity, work, obligation and duty. Frost is pragmatic, worldly and anti-romantic. He sees in nature a symbol of man's relation to the world. Though he writes about a forest or a wildflower, his real subject is humanity. The remoteness of nature reveals the tragedy of man's isolation and his weakness

in the face of vast, impersonal forces. In this respect, nature becomes a means of portraying the heroic. There is a fundamental ambiguity of feeling in Frost's view of nature that is totally absent in Wordsworth.

4. CONCLUSION

No matter whether the English Romantic William Wordsworth had ever dreamt of a future personality like Robert Frost; it does not even matter if the Modern American Robert Frost had ever been influenced by William Wordsworth; but it really matters to bring forward into the discussion that they both have definitely proved their talent in using the common subject "Nature" along with its every possible small details to have a mind-blowing effect among the generations of readers to consider the thematic values of the different poems of these two legendary poets. Irrespective of any color or cast, they both have advocated for humanity and beauty through their poetic eyes and perceptive genius while upholding their subjective assessment towards Nature, and that is exactly what makes them individually unique. It has already been mentioned earlier in this paper that the topic of the present study has uniqueness in its origin. Any detailed comparison between the two poets of the paper's consideration in terms of handling the same subject "Nature" while upholding different thematic issues has been very rare in any formal research and/or publication. So, obviously, the study may have some loopholes due to the lack of to-the-point resources. But still the paper has initiated an approach to compare the stylistic presentations of the two poets of two different continents which will hopefully be a useful guideline for the future researchers to work on the similar topics of comparative literature for stepping forward with better discussions.

REFERENCES

- "The Theme of Nature in Robert Frost's Poetry." 123HelpMe.com. 06 Jan 2015, <http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=123364>
- Danby, John F. (1971). *The Simple Wordsworth*. Oxford: Alden&Mowbray Ltd. Alden Press.
- Durrant, G. (1979). *William Wordsworth*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Gerber, Philip L. (1965). *Robert Frost*. India: Bombay Popular Prakashan.
- <http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww287.html>
- <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/responding-to-wordsworth-a-critical-history>
- Lynen, John F. (1960). *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mahoney, John L. (nd.). *Wordsworth and the Critics: The Development of a Critical Reputation*. np.
- Mason, Emma. (2010). *The Cambridge Introduction to William Wordsworth*. UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Robert Frost. (1983). "Our Hold on the Planet", "Birches", "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening", "Mending Wall", "After Apple Picking", "The Road Not Taken", "The Wood-Pile". *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. .
- Trikha, M. (ed.). (1990). *Robert Frost: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. ...: Ace Publications.
- William Wordsworth, "Daffodils", "Immortality Ode", "Tintern Abbey". *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. 3rd Edition, (W.W. Norton&Company. Newyork) 1983.
- William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book Two (1850).
- Wordsworth, William. *The Complete Poetical Works*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1888; Bartleby.com, 1999.