

Robert Frost and the Nature of Nature

Robert Frost was notable for the way in which he was able to infuse human symbolism into poems that on the surface level deal with nature. Since his poetry about nature does not seem to assert that all things in nature point towards a positive metaphysical harmony, he has been criticized for not being as idealistic as other poets such as Emerson who used nature as a source for transcendent truth or insight. Frost did in fact use nature to explain his views on humanity and the human mind, even if it is a much bleaker image than those that traditional transcendentalists held. As Charles B. Hands aptly put it "we should be encouraged to discover the terror that underlies much of Frost's best work" (1168). Through his poetry, Frost sought to show the relationship man holds with nature, one in which we do have connections with nature, but from which we receive no sympathy and very little comfort from it. While we may wish that nature could help us to make decisions and succeed in the world, nature has no mind or will of its own. When we are "one" with nature, we are psychically and socially alone. Frost would like us to see the connections that we have with nature, but not to imagine there are connections where there in fact are none, or, as Nina Bayn writes, "Frost is interested in human truth in nature; yet such truth need not be transcendental" (716). Frost also wrote about people alone with the wilderness in order to help us understand what he felt may be some

probable psychological consequences the human mind may face when its sole extrinsic comfort is nature. Three of his famous poems in which different relationships of man and nature can be seen are "The Road Not Taken", "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", and "An Old Man's Winter Night."

Although "The Road Not Taken" is a multi layered poem with literal and symbolic meaning, in the literal sense the narrator and nature seem to have a neutral relationship. The narrator professes to have neither a positive nor negative outlook on his surroundings. The woods do present him with an option he must make: to travel down one trail or down another similar one. "And be one traveler, long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth" (Frost, "The Road Not Taken"). The narrator is saying that since he has no one else with him, he knows this decision will have to be made with little help from anything else even though he is surrounded by nature. Despite the fact that nature will provide no advice to him in this endeavor, he does search it for clues as to what he should do. "Then [I] took the other, just as fair, and having perhaps the better claim, because it was grassy and wanted wear" (Frost, "The Road Not Taken"). The narrator recognizes that there are things in nature around him that he can possibly trust to lead him to the best decision even though he recognizes that there will be no divine sign of the rightful path. In the end (still in the literal sense of the poem) the narrator implies that he traveled down the right path since he "took the one less traveled by." Even though he used clues provided by nature, he credits himself solely for his

accomplishment: "I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference" (Frost, "The Road Not Taken"). Where a true transcendentalist would probably have given credit to nature for leading the way, the narrator here makes no metaphysical connection between himself and his surroundings and keeps his perspective on the matter realistic by crediting his own intuition.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a much more complicated poem to decipher than the previous. There is a definite relationship between the narrator and his natural surroundings, but the narrator seems to admit that he personally feels a connection that the rest of civilization may not consider rational. Instead of stopping for the night in the village close by for reprieve he would rather stop near the woods, "lovely, dark, and deep." "Whose woods these are I think I know, his house is in the village though" (Frost, "Stopping By Woods"). In this statement we see that the narrator stops here even though he feels some sort of paranoia that he may be discovered. That is why he feels compelled to explain to himself that this will hopefully not occur since the owner of the woods lives in the village. The narrator even thinks that his horse is questioning his rationale, thereby making his horse representative of civilized thought, along with the woods' owner.

In the last two lines of the first, second, and third stanzas as well as the first line of the fourth and last stanza of this poem, the narrator describes admiringly the morbid scene in which he has decided to stop, contrasting his reasoning for

stopping there with the reasoning of his horse (the civilized man) for want of safety. "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" (Frost, "Stopping By Woods"). The rider recognizes that nature presents danger here. The frozen lake on one side could well represent death while the cold, dark woods, if not representing certain death, definitely pose danger to life. The narrator's own reasoning tells him that the safest place to stop would be the village, which would also have other people to socialize with, but the narrator feels a longing for something different, "to watch his woods fill up with snow" on "the darkest evening of the year." As Nina Baym observes, "the human action in Frost's poetry is a repeated gesture of defiance" (721).

The last stanza makes it clear that the reason he stopped was out of this longing. "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" (Frost, "Stopping By Woods"). Whereas before he justified staying in the chosen spot, he here snaps his mind back to rational thinking and tells himself he must continue on because he has "promises to keep" either to himself or to others before he will allow himself to "sleep." Since a regular night's sleep during the night is quite normal, then the sleep he longs for must almost certainly be the ultimate reprieve from life's responsibilities: death. Why, then, does the narrator wish for death? The only substantial clues given to us are those concerning tasks the rider must complete, or "miles to go" before he can sleep, thereby alluding to a

reason why the man could wish for death: to escape responsibility. As Patricia Wallace writes concerning Frost's ideology, "you don't get the joys of solitude, the sweetness of it, without the responsibility of return" (12). In other words, if the narrator's duty was not great, the thought of such an escape would not have been as profound as it was. The narrator feels that if he allows himself to "sleep" with nature he will be transcending the mundanity of his normal life, but he realizes that he cannot do this without breaking promises to civilization. Thus, Frost illustrates the thing that perpetually keeps man and nature from being able to reach a transcendental harmony together: the responsibilities man owns to take care of his fellow man. Frost seems to say that it would be a beautiful thing for the narrator to be able to envelope himself in the beauty of nature and concentrate perpetually on the stimulation of his own senses, turning a blind eye toward anything not within his immediate presence, but even if transcendence could be reached through this philosophy, it would be tainted by the selfishness required to neglect the needs of other human beings. Although, in the end, the narrator relinquishes the transcendental fantasy proffered by nature for the less sensational choice of living for his civil duties, his final reasoning is that of the responsible, civilized man.

If the man-nature relationship featured in "Stopping by Woods" expressed a romanticized view of succumbing to death, then the relationship featured in

“An Old Man's Winter Night” is a more painful thing to behold. Whereas in the first two poems man and nature lived in a state of neutrality, the old man in this poem is forced to defend himself in what must ultimately become a losing battle against nature since all things must eventually die. The poem does not seem to attribute to nature the old man's weakened mental and physical state so much as it attributes this to the natural aging of man. “What kept him from remembering what it was that brought him to that creaking room was age” (Frost, “An Old Man's Winter”). Although the poem does not blame the man's decrepit state on nature, it does give nature the role of imposing an impending doom on the old man since it is law that nature must eventually consume the weak. It is encroaching on his life. “All out of doors looked darkly in at him” (Frost, “An Old Man's Winter”). We know that nature must eventually consume the old man in his old age who has no one to fend for him but himself. “His snow upon the roof, his icicles along the wall to keep...” (Frost, “An Old Man's Winter”). The walls, roof, and floor of the man's house are his, but the snow and ice are tools of nature eroding away and assimilating the only thing keeping the old man alive, which is his house. Not only is his home being assailed from the sides and above, but also from below. “And having scared the cellar under him in clomping there, he scared it once again” (Frost, An Old Man's Winter). Nature, then, is assailing the old man's house from all directions and Frost leaves us with almost no hope for reconciliation between the old man and nature while the old man still lives.

Even though we barely get a glimpse at the old man's thoughts (or his non-thoughts) since the poem is written in the third person, the poem does let us know that the old man can still find something that is not wholly working against him in his natural surroundings. "He consigned to the moon, such as she was, so late-arising, to the broken moon as better than the sun in any case" (Frost, "An Old Man's Winter"). Since ancient times, the sun has represented life and happiness to mankind across many different religions and has been proven by science to be a key psychological support found in nature. If the old man is thus so faced with natural adversaries during the night, should he not look for the sun for comfort? Instead the old man "consigned to the moon": "A light he was to no one but himself" (Frost, "An Old Man's Winter"). He no longer has any joy to live whatsoever. The moon is "broken" as he sees it, as he is himself, and therefore consoles him more than the sun, an important sustainer of life.

Why, then, does the old man stubbornly resist death? If succumbing to the death that nature offers him would be better than to continue on in his miserable state of conflict, then Frost must be using the old man to symbolize the conflict between the process of nature and the spirit of man. If the old man has any wish to die in this poem it is an unconscious wish, for he shows no sign of a desire to give in to death willingly. "In clomping there, he scared it once again in clomping off; and scared the outer night..." (Frost, "An Old Man's Winter"). The old man does not consciously entertain the thought of allowing the

disturbance to continue without a rebuttal and so stays off the ultimate assimilation of himself into nature for another night. "One aged man—one man—can't fill a house, a farm, a countryside, or if he can, it's thus he does it of a winter night" (Frost, "An Old Man's Winter"). Where the man facing two trails and the horseman stopping by the woods presented complexity of thought in their relationship with nature, this old man presents us with man's instinct to survive, even after the joys of life are gone, when it is nature's time to bring us back into the earth.

For all of the differences in the man/nature relationships featured in Frost's poems, the similarities just as well bring us back to a theme prevalent in much of Frost's poetry: that the world in which we live is not one configured to provide humanity with an easy path. We do not live in a world where harmony exists between man and his surroundings. Although man and nature may not always be constantly at odds with one another, the only promise nature holds for us is an eventual death, which Frost seems to argue is not necessarily a bad thing. While we live, our different habitats present us with complex choices and difficult decisions. Frost suggests through his poetry that we should not pretend the world is transcendental when making choices in life, but that we should see the world as it is: not necessarily an evil, prohibitive place conducting malice toward humanity, but quite frequently a dark and indifferent one.

Works Cited

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<<http://www.americanpoems.com/poets/robertfrost/12075>>.

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17.4 (1985): 713-23. Print.

This article explains different ways in which one can view Frost's use of nature in poetry. This will help me with my own analysis.

Durham Jr., John M. "Robert Frost: A Bleak, Darkly Realistic Poet." *Revista De Letras* 12 (1969): 57-89. Print.

This essay characterizes some of the main themes proscribed by Robert Frost to his poetry. This will help me to better understand Frost's poems and serve as a reference of understanding.

Hands, Charles B. "The Hidden Terror of Robert Frost." *The English Journal* 58.8 (1969): 1162-168. Print.

This article provides good arguments against the notion that Frost's poems are not complex and arguments for the classification of Robert Frost as a modernist writer. This will help me to illustrate some of the qualities of Robert Frost.

Hinrichsen, Lisa. "A Defensive Eye: Anxiety, Fear and Form in the Poetry of Robert Frost." *Journal of Modern Literature* 31.3 (2008): 44-57. Print.

This article explains how Robert Frost implements deep psychological concepts such as anxiety into his poetry. This will help me to better understand and explain thoughts behind specific poems.

Wallace, Patricia. "Separateness and Solitude in Frost." *The Kenyon Review* 6.1 (1984): 1-12. Print.

This article attempts to explain the use of solitude for dramatic purposes in Robert Frost's poetry. This will give me things to look for in my own close reading process.