

Analysis of the Ecological Wisdom in Robert Frost's Nature Poetry

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Abstract

Robert Frost was a poet who had a preference for nature poetry. Through his nature poems, Frost demonstrated the meaning of nature, aroused people's love and attention towards nature, and prompted the readers to reflect on the relationship between humans and nature, seeking the ecological balance on Earth, including the internal aspects of humans. All of these indicate that Frost's nature poems are highly valuable ecological literature and cultural heritage that shines with ecological wisdom. This article will explore Frost's nature poetry from the perspective of ecological criticism and analyze the ecological significance embedded within it.

Keywords

Robert Frost; Nature Poetry; Eco -criticism; Ecological Wisdom.

1. Introduction

Robert Frost (1874-1963), a renowned poet in the 20th century in the United States, wrote many excellent poems throughout his life, such as *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, *The Road Not Taken* and *Fire and Ice*. Natural poetry occupies a significant proportion in Frost's works. His natural poetry is characterized by its simple language, vivid imagery, and profound meaning, and sets a unique style in modern American poetry. "Frost's art of depicting and using natural scenes is superb and his techniques are proficient, and the philosophy contained therein is profound and thought-provoking."^[1] Since he became famous, Frost and his poetry have attracted the attention of literature scholars both domestically and internationally. Even decades after his death, he has not faded from people's sight. In recent years, with the rise of ecological criticism, this poet who prefers to create natural poetry has once again become the focus of many scholars' attention.

Ecocriticism emerged as a wave of criticism in the literary circles of the United States and Britain in the 1990s. It primarily explores the relationship between literary works and the natural environment. "Ecocritical theory studies the relationship between texts and the natural environment, mainly discussing how the natural world is presented to people through literary creation and how this value system influences people's attitudes towards nature, aiming to call on people to pay attention to the natural world."^[3] In Frost's poetry, he strongly condemned the deteriorating relationship between human beings and nature caused by industrial civilization. Eco-criticism aims to clarify people's understanding of the relationship between humans and nature, awaken people's awareness of ecological protection, and improve the human living environment. In today's increasingly serious global environmental crisis, the development of eco-criticism is of great significance. It injects new vitality into literary research, provides new perspectives for literary criticism, and enables literary critics to join the cause of sustainable human development with a fresh attitude.

For poets like Robert Frost who are passionate about nature poetry, ecological criticism provides ample opportunities for expression. This article will explore Frost's nature poetry from the perspective of ecological criticism and uncover the ecological wisdom embedded within it.

2. Ecological Wisdom in Robert Frost's Nature Poems

"As the unofficial Poet laureate of the United States, Robert Frost can be regarded as one of the most popular poets in the United States in the 1990s."^[2] His wisdom is well reflected in his nature poems. Frost believes that poetry should begin in delight and end in wisdom. Most of his nature poems indeed follow this pattern: the beginning of the poem often features a certain thing or phenomenon in nature that gives the poet an inspiration, followed by the poet's contemplation of the thing or phenomenon before him, and finally ends with the truths which the poet has realized. The wisdom in Frost's poetry is an important part of his poetic legacy. Today, when interpreting Frost's nature poems from the perspective of ecological criticism, the readers find that the wisdom conveyed in the poems coincides with the basic stance advocated by the modern ecology.

2.1. Love nature and care about nature

Frost's life and poetry creation are inseparable from nature. He spent most of his life on farms in New England. In the fields and forests, he indulged in the beauty of nature, combining farming with poetry. For Frost, nature is the source of joy and wisdom. It not only inspires the poet's creative inspiration but also becomes the poet's favorite subject for writing.

Frost, through his nature poems, presents us with beautiful and vivid images of nature. In *Spring Pools*, the poet depicted a pond in the woods in spring, where the water reflected the flawless sky. The flowers by the pond quivered, delicate and tender, eliciting a sense of pity and love. In *Birches*, we see the morning breeze blowing on a clear winter day, the birch trees with ice-covered branches creaking, and crystal-like ice crystals falling off one by one, making for a beautiful scene.

From the examples above, we can see the poet's love and attachment to nature. Nature not only brings joy to people but also inspires the human wisdom. In Frost's view, "nature always gives humans some kind of hint; as long as one is good at observing and thinking deeply, humans can benefit from nature's inspiration, learn knowledge, and comprehend truths."^[4] Frost is precisely a poet who is adept at observing the myriad phenomena of nature and deriving philosophical insights from them. Many of his nature poems record the process by which he draws inspiration from nature and transforms it into wisdom.

In *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, the verdant hues of nature are the most elusive to preserve, thus treasured like gold. The tender buds that first bloom are as delicate as flowers, yet they swiftly mature into green leaves. Likewise fleeting are the joys of Eden and the dawn before daylight. "Time, like gold, never stays," is the lesson the poet has learned from this.

In the beginning of *Time Out*, the poet suddenly realized that the hillside he was climbing resembled a book standing upright before his eyes, a book hidden among flowers and plants. This metaphor reminds us of the nature around us: Isn't it just like a book standing before our eyes? It is a dynamic, philosophical book, waiting for us to peruse and study. Loving and paying attention to nature is one of the ecological wisdom conveyed by Frost's nature poems, and it is clearly the primary duty of everyone who cares about the fate of human existence.

The industrial society has overlooked the interdependent relationship between human beings and nature. Driven by profit, human beings have been constantly and excessively exploiting nature. Meanwhile, nature began to retaliate against humans because of their endless desires. As a result, human beings became mechanized, and people, even family members, became extremely indifferent to each other. Frost emphasized that excessive and unrestrained exploitation of nature would eventually lead to the extinction of humanity. Having witnessed the tragedy that industrialization brought to humanity with his own eyes, "Frost constantly endeavored to awaken human ecological awareness and strongly recommended that humans return to nature to rediscover the vitality and instincts that humanity should have."^[5] The

ecological criticism theory should be used to guide humanity in achieving harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. Frost's views on nature can awaken our ecological awareness and inspire us to better understand nature.

2.2. Non- "anthropocentrism" in Frost's poems.

Anthropocentrism can be traced back to the Western creation myth. During the European Renaissance, with the rise of humanism, humans uttered the bold words of commanding nature, dominating nature, continuing to conquer nature with a posture of strength. In modern times, with the progress of social civilization and the high development of technology and production, humans have pushed the conquest of nature to an unprecedented peak.

It is undeniable that anthropocentrism has played a significant role in the development of society. However, while humans enjoy increasingly abundant material wealth, they have also tasted the bitter fruit brought about by anthropocentrism which is the environmental deterioration and the ecological crisis. Today, the global ecological crisis is becoming increasingly severe, threatening the survival of humanity itself, and people have no choice but to re-examine the relationship between humans and nature. The idea of anthropocentrism has been questioned and even criticized in various academic fields.

Ecologists believe that people should adopt a universal symbiotic attitude towards nature, rather than adhering to anthropocentrism. Non-anthropocentrism is primarily a negation of anthropocentrism. In the eyes of ecologists, human beings are not in an absolute central position; Human beings, like other natural creatures, are part of the Earth's ecosystem; humans and nature are mutually environmental and interact with each other. When human beings act on nature, nature also reacts back on humans.

Frost's stance, devoid of anthropocentrism, is evident. His life is intimately intertwined with nature, and he is familiar with the natural world around him, deeply aware of its value and power. Through his writing, nature is portrayed not as a weak and submissive entity controlled and dominated by humans. Frost was adept at using the mundane and ordinary things in nature to reveal the laws of nature and the common sense of the universe. In these poems, nature and human beings seem to be one. Nature, with its own appeal and spirituality, conveys to humanity her laws and the universal laws of the universe.

In *Storm Fear*, we can see the snowstorm roaring in the darkness, menacing and aggressive. It strikes the poet's window, and maliciously tempts the poet to step out of the room and into the death trap it has set. The poet is furious and firmly rejects the snowstorm's malicious invitation, but he suddenly realizes that he and his family are powerless (only two adults and one child), while the snowstorm continues unabated. The poet's courage is gradually replaced by doubt and fear, until finally he cannot help but ask himself, "Can we have the strength to endure until dawn and save ourselves?" This poem reveals the poet's helplessness and resignation in the face of nature's powerful onslaught. Similarly helpless are the protagonists in *An Old Man's Winter Night* and *The Most of It*. The former depicts a lonely old man. On a winter night, the wind howls furiously, and the darkness outside coldly peeks into the room where the old man sits. Darkness, cold, and loneliness terrify the old man, leaving him with no recourse but to stamp his feet to bolster his courage. In *The Most of It*, the protagonist desperately shouts to nature, hoping to receive a loving response, but all he hears is his own echo—nature's mockery, not the love he longs for. Alone, he still stands by the lake, because he hears splashing sounds in the distance and hopes that it is another person swimming towards him. However, what emerges onto the shore is a majestic giant deer, stumbling and charging straight into the woods. Clearly, nature ignores his longing for love.

In the mentioned example, nature is cold and indifferent, showing no concern for human needs and predicaments, while humans are small and helpless in the face of nature. Here, the human

created by God in ancient Greek mythology, who could dominate nature, no longer exists, and the so-called central position of humans is even more inapplicable.

"Frost's poetry, on the one hand, depicts the tranquility of nature, bringing people a moment of peace amid the hustle and bustle; on the other hand, through a series of cold-colored images, it renders the cold, desolate and lonely atmosphere of the boundless natural world."^[6] This seemingly contradictory description precisely reflects that if human beings only live in the civilization they have built and leave nature behind, they will carefully savor the pain of loneliness in the hustle and bustle of the city. Nature is not insignificant. The unparalleled power it possesses can inspire fear in people's hearts. There are still many unsolved mysteries about nature that leave people confused and helpless.

Non-anthropocentrism not only denies the central status of humans, but also advocates a universal symbiotic and harmonious relationship between humans and nature. It should be noted that in poems such as *Fear of the Storm*, Frost subverts the status of humans as rulers while setting humans against nature, which is not advocated by ecologists. Ecologists prefer the ancient Chinese Confucian philosophy of unity of heaven and man. Unity of heaven and man emphasizes the integration and harmonious development of humans and nature, and is an extremely effective ecological philosophy.

Frost is also an advocate of the concept of unity of heaven and man. Although some of his poems contain traces of dualism between humans and nature, in other poems he expresses his yearning for the realm of unity of heaven and man. In *To the Thawing Wind*, the poet calls for the arrival of the spring breeze, praying for it to bring about the revival of the earth. He warmly invites the wind into his room, admiring the paintings on his wall and flipping through his poems. He also hopes that the wind will carry him outdoors and into the embrace of nature. This is a moving scene of harmony between man and nature. The poet regards the wind as his good friend, eager to experience life and share joy with it.

If the theory of "unity of heaven and man" is merely a poet's aspiration in *To the Spring Breeze*, it is fully embodied in *Two Look at Two*. The beginning of the poem describes a couple walking in the mountains at dusk. As the sky darkens, they stop and stand beside a low wall. Thinking about the rugged and steep path down the mountain, and the possibility of encountering boulders and landslides, they feel uneasy.

A doe appeared on the other side of the low wall, sizing up the two of them. But there was no trace of fear in the doe's eyes; it seemed to think that although the object in front of it looked strange, it was not dangerous and was something that did not require much thought. So the doe let out a whine and calmly walked away along the wall. Just as the couple was about to leave, they saw another scene.

A buck appeared at the spot where the doe had just been, similarly sizing them up from behind the wall. The buck raised its head, as if asking, "Why are you motionless? Why don't you show any signs of life?" It suspected that the object in front of it was not as alive as it seemed. It was only when the couple extended a hand towards it that the buck's doubts were dispelled, and it left along the wall without any surprise or alarm. At this moment, the couple felt a strong emotion enveloping them.

"It is a sense of belonging to nature. Although the poets are far away from human habitation, they are not lonely when immersed in nature."^[7] Out of their love for nature, they come to the mountains and forests. The appearance of two deer awakens their sense of kinship, reassuring them that their love has been reciprocated.

In this poem, the idea of unity between man and nature is well interpreted. The poem's title itself, *Two Seeing Two*, implies the equality and interconnectedness between humans and nature. Furthermore, when referring to the female deer and the male deer in the poem, the poet uses the pronouns "she" and "he" instead of "it" indicating that in the poet's view, there is no

absolute boundary between humans and animals. The female and male deer in the poem do not fear or reject the living creatures in front of them; in their eyes, these two things are just as much a part of nature as they are. It is their calm and peaceful demeanor that inspires the couple to find a sense of belonging. The harmonious coexistence between humans and nature in the poem also inspires the vast majority of readers, allowing them to experience the beauty of the unity between man and nature realm.

2.3. The balance in human beings internal ecology

Chinese scholar Lu Shuyuan once divided the essence of ecological criticism into three levels: natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology. Natural ecology refers to the physical existence of nature, while social ecology and spiritual ecology belong to the internal ecology of humans. With the development of society, humans have created a high level of material civilization for themselves, but at the same time, they have pushed nature into a perilous situation: greenhouse effect, air pollution, resource depletion, soil erosion, land desertification, and so on. The emergence of natural ecological crisis will inevitably lead to the competition for survival among humans, which in turn will lead to the alienation of interpersonal relationships, which involves the issue of social ecology of humans. The imbalance between natural ecology and social ecology will inevitably affect the inner world of humans, leading to the issue of spiritual ecology of humans.

At the inception of ecocriticism, researchers primarily focused on the relationship between humans and the external natural world, without addressing the issue of internal ecological balance within humans. However, as the research has progressed and deepened, ecocriticism scholars have realized that internal ecological issues within humans should also be included in their scope of study. Consequently, protecting and restoring the spiritual ecology of humans has become the primary task of ecological literature and ecocriticism. Undeniably, we witness the deterioration of human spiritual ecology: money worship, egoism, the collapse of faith, spiritual emptiness, personality alienation, and so on. These internal ecological issues within humans are no longer to be overlooked, and improving the state of human spiritual ecology has become the responsibility of a vast number of natural science and humanities scholars.

When studying Frost and his nature poems, we find that the poet's focus is not only on the external nature. His ultimate concern is the human condition: he is accustomed to living in the mountains and wilderness, accompanied by nature, but he is by no means an hermit escaping reality; he pays attention to the myriad phenomena of nature, but he never stops thinking about life and how to deal with the world; his nature poems seem simple and unpretentious, but they are actually profound and full of life philosophy, serving as a good way to cultivate people's temperament and improve the human spiritual state.

Firstly, Frost depicts natural beauty in his poetry, showcases pastoral scenery, and describes the labor, life, and emotions of ordinary people. All of these can evoke a sense of closeness to nature and rural life in people. The authenticity of nature and the simple sentiments of ordinary laborers can, to some extent, restrain the desires and restlessness of modern people, alleviating their mental stress. This is very beneficial to the ecological health within humanity.

More importantly, Frost's nature poems are profound and rich in life philosophy. As he himself said, his poetry is a clarification of life and an instantaneous suppression of chaos. Although this suppression and clarification are instantaneous, they can make readers suddenly enlightened. In modern society, people face fierce competition for survival, and under immense mental pressure, they inevitably feel lost and confused. Don't they need this Frostian suppression and clarification? In *The Tuft of Flowers*, Frost wrote about one of his labor experiences: In the early morning, the poet came to the meadow to work. There was no one else on the meadow, and the poet felt deeply lonely. At that moment, he saw a cluster of wildflowers by the riverbank: A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared / Beside a redy brook the scythe had bared .

The poet realized that it was a mower who had arrived before him who had shown mercy to the flowers, sparing them from being cut along with the grass beside them. Deeply moved by the mower's kindness, the poet suddenly sensed a kindred spirit between himself and the mower. Finally, he came to understand this truth. The poem tells people that especially those modern individuals troubled by loneliness, there is also collaboration in life. There is a spiritual bond of kinship between people, and as long as one sincerely gives and feels with their heart, companions will be around.

The goal of a poet's life is to merge his hobbies and profession, because he understands that only when one loves their work can they truly make a difference. This noble state of mind is rare and precious in modern society, where money is paramount and opportunism thrives.

Frost's poetry has a strong rural flavor and an alluring rural charm. His poems are always interwoven with many depictions of the natural scenery of his hometown, such as forests, wilderness, snow, birch trees, ponds, stone walls, etc. The depiction of nature and the exposition of its beauty are a notable feature of Frost's poetry. Through the portrayal of natural beauty, it showcases a natural view of coexistence and prosperity with nature.

Equally commendable is the ability to maintain a peaceful mindset in the face of difficulties and setbacks. Maintaining a peaceful mindset is by no means easy, but we may find inspiration in Robert Frost's *The Birch Tree*. The poet, deeply aware of the hardships of life. Earth is a place fit for love, and humans have no better destination, so they always return. A temporary departure provides them with an opportunity to replenish their strength and energy, enabling them to better face challenges and restart their lives. At the end of the poem, the poet makes such a metaphor.

The poet wishes he could swing on a swing from a birch tree, so that he can soar to the heavens with the tree and then be returned to the ground. Such departure and return are quite nice. Through this metaphor, the poet tells us that occasionally, in life, one can also try the swinging approach to life. As long as we find a balance point, we can temporarily leave and return in time. Such self-regulation is very useful for us to maintain a balanced mindset. The poet gains boundless joy in a life of close and harmonious coexistence with nature. The joy felt by the poet does not come from the possession or exploitation of nature, nor from the humanization of nature by his own standards. Instead, it stems from his integration into nature, his oneness with it, coexistence and mutual prosperity, as well as the beauty and harmony he experiences in this realm.

3. Conclusion

Frost had a deep affection for nature and a unique insight into it. The spirit of his poetry was all contained in the trees, flowers, birds and beasts in his poems. Only the children of nature could truly understand the voice of nature in its natural way. Through the depiction of nature and metaphorical techniques, it reflects his different ecological sentiments from those of his contemporaries. It is precisely his ecological interactive aesthetic towards nature that enables him to transcend his contemporaries, critics and readers.

Frost wrote a large number of nature poems in his life, but he denied being a nature poet. "Some people regard me as a nature poet because of the natural background in my poems, but I am not a nature poet. There is always something else in my poems." What Frost referred to as other things are precisely his reflections and experiences on life, as well as his concern for the human condition. Through his nature poems, Frost allows people to see the value of nature, evokes love and attention towards nature, and prompts everyone to rethink the relationship between humans and nature. More importantly, Frost uses the form of poetry to suppress and clarify the chaos in life, helping people seek ecological balance within humanity. All of these indicate that Frost's nature poems are highly valuable ecological literature and a cultural heritage that shines

with ecological wisdom. In today's increasingly serious global ecological crisis, studying Frost's nature poems and interpreting the ecological wisdom within them is of great significance. Ecological criticism provides a new method for Frost research.

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