

ECO-TEACHING OF LITERATURE WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO ROBERT FROST'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

There is an undeniable relationship between literature and environment. Nature has always been an inspiration for the writers. The modern man has become fully materialistic and totally insensitive towards his inseparable part i.e. Nature. The writers of all ages have shown their concern regarding environmental degradation. Robert Frost is one of those poets who use nature as an instrument in their poetry. On the one hand he describes the beautiful scenes of nature to delight the reader while on the other, he gives him a hidden warning to not to interfere with nature and its phenomenon. He takes up the reality of modern life and presents the fundamental problems with which the modern man is faced. Eco-Teaching of literature is a way to make the teacher and the taught sensitive towards their surroundings and it will also be helpful to make them considerate enough to understand environmental concerns. This paper is an attempt to analyze with the help of a few poems of Robert Frost, how far the poet has succeeded in synthesizing these Eco-concerns with his philosophical ideas.

Keywords: Eco-Teaching, environment, insensitive, degradation.

INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSION

Eco-Teaching of Literature means how far Literature is helpful in understanding Environmental concerns and vice-versa. It makes the teacher and the taught sensitive towards their surroundings. Though the Eco – movement started in late 1960's, the literary people were already concerned with the environment surrounding them. They have shown their concerns in different ways. Who can be more concerned with the environment than a farmer poet like Robert Frost who had farmed his own land for years? Nature is not merely the backdrop but the instrument through which man is educated. Frost found his poetry out of doors, either in the face of the fields or in the faces of men who are in daily contact with the elemental realities of the Earth and the Sky. His poetry is full of natural symbols and imagery which flow over from volume to volume of his poems. The symbols that stand out prominently in his poetry are of trees, water, woods, snow, stars, darkness, light etc. The most prominent feature in Frost's poetry is that he has clothed his philosophic thought in a naturally conversational style. In his childhood, Frost was uprooted from his native place California and he came to settle in New England. At that time the region was witnessing a decline in prosperity. New England was losing its native hue and was becoming more and more urbanized and industrialized. The people were facing a grim battle of survival and the future was insecure. It is this background that Frost had in his childhood, the most impressionable period of one's life. Everything in Frost's poetry rings of keen perception and lived experience. He sees the world as it is. He understands human beings and has an excellent rapport with the rhythms of nature. He can see through the subtle nuances and moods of both the human world and the world of nature. Many a fundamental truth of life is learnt by Frost's man through his encounter with nature, and nature's beauty and grandeur is also revealed in the process.

Though the central subject of Frost's poetry is humanity, natural objects are sources of his home-spun philosophy. He treats nature in a clear and natural way and invests his nature poems with layers of meaning dealing with problems of universality. His extraordinary intimacy with nature and his hypersensitive lyrical presentation of nature is often felt as a treat to senses. His love of nature is mainly directed to the local or regional plane. The hills and villages, the streams and the sylvan regions, the plants and flowers, the birds and animals, even the insects and hornets of New England find a place in his poems. New England just because it is primitive and remote from modern life is for him a medium for examining the complex urban world of today - a standard by which to evaluate it, and a context within which to discover the underlying experience that modern life is obscured and confused. No other American poet can claim to have described the scenes of nature with such intense, engrossing vividness of detail as Frost has been able to do. He does not depict the landscape merely as the background for his poetry or as the native soil of those who inhabit it. The environment, the physical features, and the climate have a direct bearing on the psychological make-up of these individuals. Though not idealized as an end in itself nature is a prominent part of the poet's universe. His nature poems are substantially about the way man affects nature or is affected by it. Frost himself says in "Education by Poetry": "Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the philosophical attempt to say matter in terms of spirit or spirit in terms of matter to make the final unity... It is the height of poetry, the height of all thinking." (p.58)

In "Mending Wall" the simple issue of a boundary wall between the two fields, with sheer poetic intensity is lifted to the level of a universal problem of barriers and boundaries between man and nature, between man and God, between man and man, as well as within man himself on the basis of caste, class, creed, race and religion. The opening lines of the poem suggest that there is some power in nature that does not like wall between the two fields. The poet is trying to convey the message that if we go against nature it will be a serious mistake. With the help of environmental objects the poet has made an ironic comment on those who raise walls between man and man, blindly believing that good fences make good neighbours. Such barriers are detrimental to human relationship; generate tension resulting in neurosis and emotional imbalance verging on the brink of insanity.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall

(CP 47)

In a different sense, "Mending Wall" suggests that whereas walls may not be called for everywhere, they, all the same, serve the useful purpose of carving out definite individual entities, and facilitate a fluent and friendly conduct of life. The choice is not really between having or not having walls, but only between having them blindly or considerably:

Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it

Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

(CP 47)

For Frost, the more important thing in nature is not its outward beauty and charm, but what its phenomena connote by way of the abiding verities of life. Nature is at least as much life as some other work-a-day concern of man. It recharges him and broadens his understanding of life's verities, so that by interacting with it he is in a better position to face the stern realities of life and deal with them more sagaciously. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is one of the best known poems of the 20th century. On the surface level the poem seems to be a descriptive record of the beauty of a natural scene of soft white snowflakes falling against the

back drop of the shadowy dark trees. It presents a speaker on his horse, passing through a forest, who is tempted to enjoy the sight of dark woods being covered by white snow. When the process of thinking whether to move or not to move is going on in his mind, his horse at once gives his harness bell a shake as if to remind him of his earthly duties and obligations. Thus the indifferent animal becomes the guardian who sounds the alarm which rings above the whispered invitation of lovely scene of nature and he decides to travel a great many miles to fulfill his promises, obligations and duties:

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.
(CP 275)

Thus, nature is not just a fancy which dissuades man from his projected path but rather an aid in his life, imparting it the right direction by remaining a part of it. "Birches" is another poem by Frost in which he observes the natural phenomena minutely. He observes the snow covered branches of birches and sees the rays of sunlight splitting into seven colours as they pass through ice. The burden of ice makes the branches bend low and touch the ground. The speaker recalls his past experience of birch swinging which is symbolic of human desire for withdrawal from harsh realities of life. But this withdrawal is momentary as he makes clear his aspirations that he likes both going and coming back. The swinging of birches becomes a metaphor for ideal human attitude, finally balanced between a pragmatic acceptance of life and a sense of dissatisfaction with it.

I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb back branches up a snow white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
(CP 153)

In another poem "Two Tramps in Mud Time" too, achievement consists in recognizing others' needs, in making things beneficial and aesthetically satisfying for them. It is in the company of others that human achievement emerges bigger. Frost bewails the fact of disjunction of "vocation and avocation" and counsels their unification, "as my two eyes make one in sight". According to him, only this unification can ensure that man's work is of durable value:

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For heaven and the future's sakes.
(CP 359)

In "Dust of Snow", a short lyric, we find how important role nature plays in our life. In this poem a scene has been described in a neutral tone, without any intrusion by the poet or the speaker. The speaker tells that one day when he was sitting under a hemlock tree in a sad mood, lost in his own thoughts, a crow threw a "dust of snow" from that tree by stirring it a little. With the falling of snow, all of a sudden, there came a change in his mood. He forgot

for a moment all the depressing thoughts in which he was lost. So, his day did not end in regret:

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
Form a hemlock tree
Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.
(CP 270)

The poem reminds us of the fact that there is much more in nature to enjoy as it helps man to emerge out of his depressing mood. Despite the fact that a relationship of mutuality exists between man and nature, the former must not make the mistake of crossing the bar, as it were, and should be realistic enough to recognize the barrier between him and nature. In the poem “Two Look at Two”, a man and a woman look at a buck and a doe across a wall on the mountainside. On the level of the outer nature, the poet is conscious of the inevitable separation between man and the animal world, and yet he can, though with a strenuous effort, bring these worlds together by the miracle of love and faith overcoming fear and misgivings:

Two had seen two, whichever side you spoke from.
‘This must be all’, it was all. Still they stood,
A great wave from it going over them,
As if the earth in one unlooked-for favor
Had made them certain earth returned their love.
(CP 283)

“Directive” is more specific about Frost’s thesis about the primordial nature holding the ultimate secret of reality and the need of man’s working his way up and back to the primal source of life. In this poem, the poet sums up his attitude towards rapid industrialization and declining agricultural way of life. The bleakness of human landscape generates a strong current of fear with a hidden warning:

There is a house that is no more a house
Upon a farm that is no more a farm
And in a town that is no more a town.
(CP 520)

Frost considers poetry to be an influential instrument of sharing with his readers the truth encoded into it. He takes up the reality of modern life and presents the fundamental problems with which the modern man is faced. Judith Oster makes a thoroughly valid point about Frost’s treatment of nature. According to her, Frost often shows a speaker identifying himself reluctantly and uncomfortably with aspects of nature which he wishes were not so reminiscent of his own inner nature: “In love, birth and death, for example, we are one with nature, participating in the natural process, which operates within us as surely as in non-human nature, and it is here that we are not separate from nature but of it.” (p.198) Thus, Frost is not just a poet who describes his feelings or the scenes of nature but an artist who offers a large variety of life in its complex relation to the physical environment of his

characters, drawn from different strata of the society. The objects of nature have played a great role in understanding the central vision of Robert Frost's poetry. Most of his poems illustrate his view of a poem beginning in delight and ending in wisdom. So, the description of the environmental objects of New England with its lush green vegetation and snow-clad mountains is more a strategic retreat of the poet to explore and express the wider spectrum of human life in relation to the mysterious vastness of the universe. To conclude, we can say that his poetry has a great importance in present day world, where man is leading a life of complete materialism and has become totally insensitive towards nature. The use of pathetic fallacy in many of his poems may be very helpful to make man understand the importance of environment in his life. Even the surface reading of Frost's poetry can make the reader much more sensitive to the environment surrounding him.

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