

**The Poetic Art and Vision of Robert Frost with a Focus on His  
Pragmatic View of the Relationship between Man and Nature:  
A Brief Analysis**

**Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.**

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**Robert Frost 1874-1963**

Courtesy: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/89511/robert-frost-the-road-not-taken>

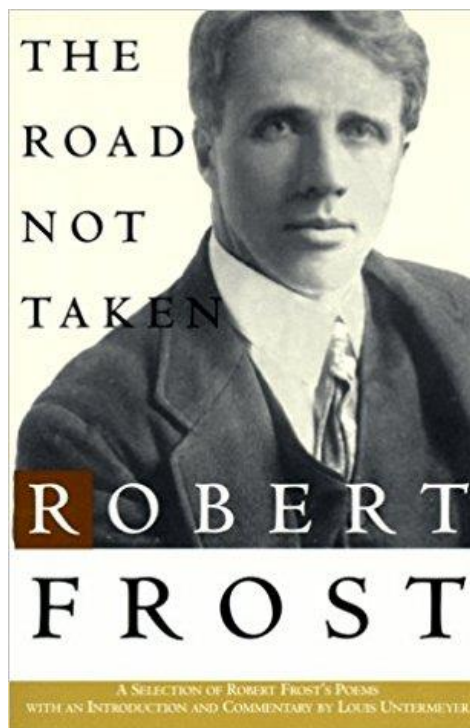
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**Abstract**

This paper projects Robert Frost as a typical poet of New England and America – almost one among the most eminent poets of the English language winning wide popularity and enjoying the extraordinary academic and official honour heaped on him by a good number of critics, bringing home the fact that Frost is an experimenter and expert in various poetic forms – odes, eclogues, satires, dramatic monologues, dialogues and mosques. It reveals rather

beautifully how he is a great metrical artist as well as a great poetic experimenter with ‘right words at the right place’ and how he has embarked upon the noble task of turning the living speech of men and women into poetry in general and turning common words and expressions into literary pearls in particular. It shows neatly how he has proved himself to be an excellent poetic artist considering ‘descriptive power’ as the most wonderful thing in his poetic realm.

**Keywords:** Robert Frost, poetic form, poetic experiment, living speech, supreme expression.



## **Robert Frost**

Robert Frost was one of the most popular poets of his day and an important cause of his popularity lay in the fact that no poet was so thoroughly a typical poet of New England or America as he was. If popularity could be regarded as the measure of a poet’s eminence, Frost would certainly be among the most eminent poets of the English language. What is most striking about him is not so much the wide popularity that he enjoyed but the extraordinary academic and official honour that was heaped on him. Critics and poets, differing widely amongst themselves

in taste and temperament, recognized his eminence. While referring to the honour and recognition given to Robert Frost, Malcolm Cowley rightly said:

“He has been a professor of Amherst, a poet in residence and fellow in letters of Michigan; a Charles Eliot Norton Professor, a Ralph Waldo Emerson Fellow and a Fellow in American Civilization at Harvard, all these being fairly lucrative appointments”.

Robert Frost was awarded four Pulitzer Prizes, one more than E. A. Robinson and two more than Stephen Vincent Benet. He was given the Loines Prize for poetry, the gold medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the Silver medal of the Poetry Society of America.

Such an eminent poet was born in San Francisco, California on March 26, 1874. His father, William Prescott Frost, was a New Englander and his mother, Isebella Moodie, was a Scot who had come to America from Edinburgh. Frost had inherited much of his father’s venturesome practices and his impatience for a life of excitement and colour.

It was in 1912 that Frost decided to make poetry his vocation in life. After selling out his farm, he went with his family to England and settled in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. His first volume of lyrics “A Boy’s Will” was accepted in 1913 for publication and his second book of dramatic monologues “North of Boston” (1914) attracted so much attention that it was also published in America soon after. After the successful publication of the first two volumes, he brought out ten notable works as 1. *Mountain Interval* (1916), 2. *New Hampshire* (1923), 3. *West Running Brook* (1928), 4. *A Further Range* (1936), 4. *Witness Tree* (1942), 5. *Come in and other Poems*, 6. *A Mosque of Reason* (1945), 7. *Steeple Bush* (1947), 8. *A Mosque of Mercy* (1947) and *In the Clearing* (1962). Other than these poems, he also wrote three hundred odd poems. Nearly forty honorary degrees were conferred upon him by different Universities including Oxford and Cambridge and he was elected to the Membership of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1916 and Membership in the American Academy in 1930. On January 20, 1961, he was called upon to recite his patriotic poem, “The Gift outright” when the late President Kennedy assumed office. Frost died on January 1963. President Kennedy described Frost as,

“The great American poet of our time

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His life and his art summed up the  
essential qualities of the New England  
he loved so much: the fresh delight  
in Nature, the plainness of speech,  
the canny wisdom and the deep underlying  
insight into the human soul” (Gerber 139)

Jawaharlal Nehru was greatly impacted by the poems of Robert Frost, and he had kept these lines in his bedroom, clearly showing how he viewed his life:

**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.**

### **“A Poem Begins with a Lump in the Throat”**

As the twentieth-century men, Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens shared the twentieth century concerns and like most other contemporary writers, they faced the problems of coming to terms with a world that seemed to lack real spiritual significance, a world often visualized as a wasteland. Frost and Stevens experienced the terror of vision that the universe is the diminished thing to which modern man must respond. Though he tried to explore the real horrors of the mind just as Poe, Melville and Henry James did, Frost even in his best lyrical poetry was content to stop outside, either in the thrush-haunted dusk or on a snowy evening. Frost was a poet neither of the mountains nor of the woods, although he lived among both, but rather of the hill pasture, the intervals, the dooryard in autumn with the leaves swirling, the closed house shaking in the winter storms. In his words,

“A poem begins with a lump in the throat; a home sickness or love sickness. It is reaching out towards expression; an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found the words... My definition of poetry would be thus; words that have become deeds” (Cox 16).

## **An Experimenter**

It should be borne in mind that Frost is an experimenter and expert in various poetic forms – odes, eclogues, satires, dramatic monologues, dialogues and mosques. He has employed ballet metres, sonnet variants, terzavima, heroic couplet, blank verse, and certain forms which are his own invention. According to Frost, a poem is a put-up job’, thereby differing from those who hold that a poem is an artifact or a thing deliberately constructed: He believed that a poem should make itself as it grows and his own poems bear out this. In short, Frost is a great metrical artist as well as a great artist with words. It is said that Frost has turned the living speech of men and women into poetry, carefully rendering into metre the customary Yankee speech. His greatness and skill lies in his mastery over the different art of handling conversation in verse forms.

## **Form of Poetry**

In his different letters, he has revealed his unique ideas regarding form of poetry, sound of poetry and vocal imagination. These theories of Frost stand as a touchstone to expose the special genius of Frost, the poet. In a poem after poem, all that is other than himself is identified by sound, either seductive or threatening, either meaningful or brute. There is the sound of the wind and the rain, of trees in their rustling, of the scythe in the field, the cry in the night, the beating on a box by a lonely old man, the movement of a beast, the song of birds, the voice of a lover or her silence. Richard Poirier writes rather aptly:

“The voice of imagination, the speaking voice must know certainly how to behave, how to posture in every sentence he offers. The person who is vulnerable to these sounds and silences is characterized as the common man who is a poet maker of poetry” (73).

## **Images of Voices**

When Frost refers to vocal imagination, he makes it synonymous with what he calls ‘images of the voices speaking’. Frost listens for those images as much in nature as in human dialogue. The difference is that only in human dialogue can such images emerge as ‘sentence

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sounds' rather than as vagrant noises, the sweep of mind and downy flake, or mere words. His capacity to find these images in nature depends upon human love. The supreme expression of this complex of feelings is found in the poem, 'Never Again Would Birds Song Be the Same'. Frost was different from his contemporaries in his approach to poetry and in his writings, he rejected the revolutionary poetic principles that were sweeping the time. He alone chose "the old fashioned way to the new" instead of the totally new.

### **Poetry is a Metaphor**

When compared with his contemporaries, Robert Frost has said very little about what a poem is or how a poem comes into existence. His remarks on poetry appear in his essays 'The Constant Symbol', 'The Figure a Poem makes' and in 'Poetry and School'. In 'The Constant Symbol', Frost makes an observation about a poem thus:

"There are many things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is a metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasures of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor... Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing. There is a sense in which all poems are the same old metaphor always" (Lathern 400)

Lawrence Thompson has very ably explained as to what Frost meant when he described poetry as a metaphor by analyzing the well-known poem, "Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening". Thompson has, at first, given the literal, the prose meaning of this lyric in these words. "The poem is a dramatic lyric which breaks into the middle of an incident, so that there is a drama-in-miniature revealed with setting and lighting and actors and properties complete. At the beginning the reader finds the curtain going up on a little action which approaches the climax of an experience, real or imagined; that is, an experience which happened to the poet or one which came to the mind of the poet possible. A rural traveller is the actor whose brief soliloquy describes the circumstances under which he has stopped his horse-drawn-sleigh to enjoy, inspite of cold and loneliness, the strange beauty of white snowflakes falling against a background of dark trees. There are many reasons why he should not stop; common-sense reasons which seem to occur even to the travellers little horse". But the spell of the moment is so strong that the

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traveller is reluctant to leave regardless of the winter night and the cold storm. He is impelled to move on by the realization of duties and distances; those “promises” which he must keep and the “miles to go” before he completes his journey. Thus, the poem ends and the images which crowd the statements are direct and unmistakable.” One of the most important of Frost’s utterances about poetry is that in which he described poetry as “a momentary stay against confusion” by which he, perhaps, meant that out of the chaotic confusion of daily impressions and thoughts the poet captures a moment with his words and achieves a kind of crystallization that gives to his chaotic raw materials not only shape but weight. His poem, “West Running Brook” is a fine example of what he meant by the term “a momentary stay against confusion.” The brook which runs west while all the other brooks flow east to reach the ocean, brings to the poet’s mind the analogy of existence. Frost believed that in poetry, there is a combination of impulse and art and he avoided two kinds of extremes, the view of those who think that poetry is nothing of content (pure art) and the view that poetry is nothing except content (pure preaching).

### **Poetic Form**

In the words of Frost, ‘form’ is essential to poetry in all ages. To him, If a poet wants to give form to poetry, he should employ the intricate method of conveying organization, shapeliness, fitness to the matter or substance of the context or meaning of the poem. Meaning should be subordinated in its proper balance with the structure. Frost himself has said something about his own experience – the working out of a poem. For Frost, there is a striking analogy between the course of a true poem and of true love, for each begins as an impulse:

“No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumed direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life-not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion...” (P55)

### **Recognising the Poetic Impulse**

As Frost says, there are two ways of recognising the poetic impulse which results in the formation of a poem. The first way of recognition is like this: the mental recognition of meaning

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in this emotional experience gradually asserts itself on a new plane of metaphorical reference. The second kind of recognition occurs when a sudden emotional pleasure is derived from the sudden mental perception of a thought which comes into the sharp focus through the discovery and recognition of a particular apt correspondence or analogy. Frost's idea of poetry as clarification of life has intimate connection with his poetic theory of Emerson, an individualist. Frost's idea of poetic intent is closely associated with the statement of Emerson:

“For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem, - a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis, the thought is prior to the form. The poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it is with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune...” (P10)

### **Spontaneity**

Frost's remarks about his own poetry and about poetry in general, which appear in “the Introduction” to his complete poems, make it clear that he prizes spontaneity, above almost every other quality but he also laid stress on discipline, patience and watchfulness. He expressed his views concerning the relationship between ideas and poetry. It was his conviction that a poet could eschew thought, but he must think from the marrow of his bones, thinking must become part and parcel of his sensibility. According to him, “a poet has every right to deal with abstract theories but he must not think intellectually”. In poetry, thought must become ‘felt thought’. In his opinion, the dramatic necessity is a very vital point of poetry, “There should always be people in poems.” Yes, even in lyrics “Lyrics ought to be dramatic”.

### **Rural Background – On Beauty**

Unlike his contemporaries, Frost was a lover of nature and humanity. There is a strong rural background in his poetry. A. Zverev, a social critic observes:

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“One can often see a poet of eternal themes, a poet of the land, of nature in Robert Frost. But he was not cut off from the anxieties of his America, from his spiritual needs or from the artistic striving of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (P 243)

Poets like Keats and W.H. Davies observed and recorded the beauties of Nature: for Keats, a thing of beauty was a joy forever and for Davies, Nature was a fountain of Beauty. Some other poets like Whitman and Shelley stood on a height to observe the panorama of Nature and society together. Still some others like Hardy and Wordsworth spiritualized or personified Nature; to them, Nature spoke a significant language and stirred within them profound philosophical reflections. But Frost’s approach to Nature was a fusion of all these. Sometimes he simply observed and recorded beauties of Nature; at times he found spiritual echoes in it, still at some other times, he found Nature to be a mirror of men’s soul. But he never saw Nature away from Nature. That is why he said,

“I’m no nature poet!  
All but a few poems have  
a person in them” (Gould 215)

It is true that Frost is not a nature poet; yet his poems might be called “nature poems” because as Louis Untermeyer rightly put it, “Although Robert Frost is not to be classified as a “Nature Poet”, he knows more about nature than most of his living contemporaries, more even than most of the poets of the past, with the possible exception of Vergil and Wordsworth” (Louis 195). Frost is ultimately not very much concerned with developing a philosophically consistent concept of Nature. What really interest him is not definitions but attitudes, not what nature is in itself but how man responds to it in a world he never made. Frost never sees in the natural world, the pervading spirit that Wordsworth saw. But Frost has Wordsworthian simplicity of style in his description of Nature.

### **Descriptive Power**

What is considered as the most wonderful thing in his poetic realm is his ‘descriptive power’. His attitude towards nature and life and the place he gives to nature and man is

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noteworthy in his poems. Being a pastoral poet, Frost writes about natural scenes and sounds. He deals with nature for nature always provides the background to his' poems. Though nature provides only a background to his poems, his descriptive is something remarkable – a snowfall, a spring thaw, a bending tree, a valley, the mist and a brook are not mere descriptions but expressions of personal registration in terms of the subject matter of the poems. In poems like “Birches” and “Blueberries”, one can see not only the ability of Frost in describing nature, but also in conveying his different experiences. “Birches” is one of the most widely quoted nature-lyrics of Robert Frost. It is remarkable for its skillful blending of fact and fantasy, observation and imagination. The subject of the poem “Birches” is not nature but man’s attitude towards life. The birches symbolise rural beauty. In spite of the boy’s severe swinging, the branches of the birch trees remain unscathed. Actually Frost sees in the act of swinging, a kind of objective correlative which connects the present with the past. Loren and his children in the poem “Blueberries” go picking blueberries through Patterson’s pasture to make their living. The poet says:

“He has brought them all upon wild berries,  
they say,  
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”

(Lines 50-53)

Really they lead a frugal life, without being influenced by the luxurious habits of the modern society. They work hard ferrying and accept what nature gives. They limit their needs to the minimum so that they live a life of contentment. They never conflict with nature or press nature to give more because of increasing needs. The Lovens’ experience is a concrete example of how nature has nothing but good effects for those who live in harmonious relationship with nature. Blue-berries represent a life force in the world of nature. The description reaches the peak at the closing lines:

“You ought to have seen how it looked in the rain,  
The fruit mixed with water in layers of leaves,  
Like two kinds of jewels, a vision for thieves”

(Lines 103-105)

The metaphor in the last line is an example of Frost's descriptive power. Though the value of Frost's treatment of Nature may be called in question, it is undeniable that his nature-poetry gives evidence of his capacity for minute observation and acute description. Isidor Schneider, who criticizes Frost's poetry on other grounds, makes this significant remark on his descriptive power:

“The descriptive power of Mr. Frost is to me the most wonderful thing in his poetry. A Snowfall, a spring thaw, a bending tree, a valley mist, a brook, these are brought not to bur into the experience of the reader” (P 13).

### **Frost and Wordsworth as Nature Poets**

There are a few marked similarities between Frost and Wordsworth as nature Poets and this point of similarity has very admirably been brought out by C. Day Lewis in these words that follow:

“Detachment, for him as for Wordsworth, is a necessary condition of the creative power. It is worth noticing that his most consistently successful work, *North of Boston*, which is concerned throughout with the New England landscape and character, was written while he was living in Gloucestershire. This is as clear an example of ‘emotion recollected in tranquility’ – as the lines of Tin tern Abbey. Frost's most remarkable affinity with Wordsworth, however, lies in the temper (or tempo, or temperature) of his verse.” (P 14).

The one remarkable thing about Frost's treatment of nature is that his description of the objects and manifestations of nature show that he did not idealize or glorify them. His attitude towards them has been that of a realist, not so much of a romanticist. In the words of W.H. Auden, “His poems on natural objects such as ‘Birches’, ‘Mending Wall’ or ‘The Grindstone’ are always concerned with them not as foci for mystical meditation or starting points for fantasy but as things with which on and which man acts in the course of the daily work of gaining a livelihood” (Malaviya 15).

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In poems like “Tree at my window”, “A considerable Speck”, “Departmental” and “The Bear”, one can find Frost speaking to nature, one characteristic of Frost’s nature poems in his comparison of man with nature. In the poem, “Tree at my window”, Frost establishes a relationship between man and nature by speaking to the tree at the window. Frost says,

“But let there never be curtain drawn  
Between you and me”

### **Tree and Frost**

The tree seems to fascinate him. This is so because the poet has discovered close similarity between himself and the tree. The tree is torn and tossed by the “outer weather” while the man is torn and agitated by the “inner weather”. The man is tormented and plagued by the inner conflicts, fears, spiritual anguish and doubts. The tree is insensitive, unfeeling and dull; to feel and to suffer spiritually is a peculiarly human prerogative. In this way, Frost asserts the superiority of man over nature, of mind over matter. In “The Bear”, Frost compares man with the bear. Speaking about the poem, Louis Untermeyer points out:

“Frost does not regard the bear as the creature of foot loose freedom, but as a symbol of mortal perplexity. Here is a satirical comparison of the uncaged bear and man trapped in the endless conflicts between mind and mood” (P 65).

### **Nature and Man**

As a poet, Frost thinks that nature and man are two different forces and nature is indifferent to man sometimes. So he expects man to accept the gauntlet thrown by nature. Man on earth need not be desperate on account of forces beyond his control. On the other hand, he has to live courageously and fearlessly in the face of natural barriers and threats. What man has to do is as pointed out by N. Subramanian:

“Man is not to despair of his relation with nature. Instead, he can wisely avoid her when she appears unkind and get the most out of her when she is kind to him. This attitude of discrimination is necessary if man is to live on intimate terms with

nature. It should not be considered a time-serving device but only a wise and indispensable mode of man's life" (P 28).

Poems like "Our Hold on the Planet" and "A Minor Bird" discuss beautifully the relationship between man and nature. In "Our Hold on the Planet", nature's benignity is understood by man with gratitude. If nature is not in favour of man, then our hold on the planet would not have increased. Thus, there exists a relationship between man and nature. In "Slopping by Woods on Snowy Evening", Frost expresses his attitude, to nature:

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,  
But I have promises I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep" (Lines 13-16)

Frost's love of nature is primarily owing to his temperament; but it is also due to background – the circumstances under which he lived a great part of his life. Both as man and poet, Frost loved to live in Nature, to become one with it. As he says in "Two Tramps in Mud Time",

"My object in living is to unite  
My avocation and my vocation"

### **Farming and Composing Poetry**

The avocation and vocation are the twin activities of farming and composing poetry. The poems about nature by Frost make a delightful reading on account of their skilful handling of the poetic devices like images and personifications. Personification is generally employed to add vitality to descriptions of nature. The personifications of the Romantic take the form of brief metaphor, while Frost's are nearly always extended analogies. Frost does not merely likes things in nature to man, he explores the resemblances usually at some length. These devices serve to communicate their sensory experiences of the world of nature, which are largely visual and auditory and help them make a significant contribution to nature poems. Frost seems to view that nature includes man necessarily and there is a rightful place for him in it. He believes in a

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harmonious relationship between man and nature. His poems reveal how beneficial it is for man to be in amity with nature and how bothersome it could be for him to content against the forces of nature.

### **To Conclude**

To conclude, Frost is a great and original nature poet. But he has not given any explicit statement of a theory of nature or of man's relationship with nature. He writes from his own personal experience and observation. What interested Frost in nature was not definition of nature but attitudes, not what nature is in itself but how man responds to nature in different circumstances. In the world of Frost, nature is treated as a medium and a mode to fix the place of man in the created order. Frost's attitude is based on this worldliness. In a word, it may be said that Frost takes a pragmatic view of the relationship between man and nature.

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