Chapter V

Ecocentric Dimensions

The perception that the arrogance associated with humanism has contributed, in no small measure, to man’s abuse and exploitation of the natural world, prompts Jeffers to present various solipsistic dimensions of those human presumptions that alienate man from the earth. His characters thus become examples of deluded humanity. Many of the narratives explore characters whose views of the world deny nature’s fundamental force. Firmly rooted in the land in which they live, they seem strangely at odds with it. Even as they value the escape from the city that the land can provide, they experience it as constriction and deprivation. They are destroyed by the very power of nature that they cannot control, which eventually shatters the false consciousness that exists as a barrier between human beings and nature. Some of the poetic techniques used by Jeffers can be regarded as ecocentric devices that present the concept of cyclical time, critique the introversion inherent in the human race, emphasize interrelationships and interdependence, and celebrate the integral wholeness of the universe.

Closely related to the eschatological tendencies in Jeffers is his use of the myth of eternal return to convey his cyclical view of time. As Mircea Eliade points out in The Myth of Eternal Return, there is everywhere in nature “a conception of the end and the beginning of a temporal period, based on the observation of biocosmic rhythms and forming part of a larger system—the system of periodic purification and of the periodic regeneration of life”(52). As Fritjof Capra points out in The Turning Point, rhythmic patterns seem to be manifest in all levels of nature:
Plants, animals, and human beings undergo cycles of activity and rest, and all their psychological functions oscillate in rhythms of various periodicities. The components of ecosystems are interlinked through cyclical exchanges of matter and energy; civilizations rise and fall in evolutionary cycles, and the planet as a whole has its rhythms and recurrences as it spins around its axis and moves around the sun. (327)

Myth is a dramatization of the elemental pattern of death and rebirth, a celebration of the natural cycles. Robert Brophy in his study, Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol, traces the development of tragedy from primitive myths:

Primal ritual dramatized the beliefs that men had about the nature of the existence in which they were immersed (i.e., principally that existence was sacrificial and cyclical); primitive mythos was the fleshing out of this ritual in narratives which came to embody and illustrate the cyclic action. This mythos, plot or myth, in time taking on many variations, adapted the year-god fatality to the lives of legendary Greek heroes. Eventually it declared its independence from the rite (Dionysian festival competitions) and lost its character as particularization of the agonized and dying god who is yearly reborn. Thus, some scholars say, was derived Aeschylean or Sophoclean tragedy. Jeffers takes these popular myths and reduces them again to the monomyth of eternal recurrence—Apollonian stasis yielding to Dionysian chaos as the cosmic life-force forges on. (8-9)

Jeffers uses myth to dramatize the process of change taking place on the Californian coast, the evolutionary struggle that is part of the natural process. In many poems he reaffirms one of mankind's most ancient beliefs, the myth of eternal return. Jeffers
adapts the vegetation myths, which consist of the mating of the earth goddess with the vegetation god, the death of the vegetation god, and his subsequent rebirth, to dramatize Jeffers's concept of cyclic time.

The long poem "Tamar" can be examined to highlight the death-rebirth motif that is repeatedly employed by the poet to emphasize that all developments in nature, those in the physical world as well as those of human situations, occur in cyclical patterns. The theme of incest, another recurrent motif in the long poems, is used to emphasize man's introversion. Man's inherent urge to directly or indirectly interfere with natural processes, in one way or the other, is seen to upset the rhythms of nature.

The poem begins as Lee Cauldwell, in a moment of drunkenness, spurs his horse over the sea-cliff. Lee epitomizes modern man's self-destructive delusions. He survives the fall to lie there on the tidal boulders in delirious agony till help arrives. The perspective keeps shifting from human to cosmic and to human again, contrasting the pathetic human perversity with the indifferent cosmic beauty and seeking a reconciliation. The poet's gaze rests for a moment on the worm-like broken figure on the rocks and compares its pettiness with the sweeping magnificence of the ancient water and "the everlasting repetition of the dawn." Through Lee's accident, Jeffers stresses a theme that is present in all his poems, that human tragedy is only an unimportant part of a great indifferent purpose. Perspective itself becomes a device whereby man's insignificance is emphasized. Later in the poem, as Lee observes from the headland over Wildcat Canyon "the immense water possessing all the west" and "Point Lobos. Gemmed in it, and the barn-roofs and the house-roof / Like ship's keels in the cypress tops" (1: 23), the dwarfed human habitation not only emphasizes human unimportance, it also appears to be threatened by the immensity of nature.
Robert Brophy identifies Lee with the vegetation god (20); Lee is aware of the "beauty of things." He looks forward to the coming of spring: "The fields are full of winking poppies. In a week or two I'll fill your arms with shining irises" (1: 21). He longs to show Tamar "some new beauty of canyon wildflowers, water / Dashing its ferns, or oaktrees thrusting elbows at the wind, black-oaks smoldering with foliage / And the streaked beauty of white-oak trunks, and redwood glens" (1: 22). The lines, "he that left in December / Walked the February fields" denote not just Lee's fall and recovery, but nature's winter death and revival in spring. Brophy draws a parallel between the incest between Tamar and Lee and the mating of Tammuz with his sister-mother-lover Ishtar, a hierogamy that celebrated the renewal of spring growth (20). The storm, a warning of disaster, is also a destructive purging which precedes the spring growth and sweeps away the dead forms of winter.

Premonitions, omens, supernatural incidents and dreams are also used by Jeffers to project a feeling of impending disaster. Tamar recalls Aunt Stella's vision several months ago of Lee lying all bloody on the beach under the constellation Orion, and is filled with foreboding. The storm that comes roaring from the south is again a warning of disaster ahead and portends the destruction of the house that seems to "creak all her timbers." It is also a reflection of the storm within—"for it seemed that nightmare: Within the house answered to storm without." Old Cauldwell, the next morning, sees the reluctant dawn dammed behind the hills until it overflows at last and runs down on the sea like lava, suggesting a release of the dammed up forces of violence and destruction.

In the scene of incest, one can sense the restlessness in Tamar as she petulantly affirms her desire for knowledge and senses the need for recklessness. By committing incest, Tamar abjures the world's values and moral standards. But her
exultation is short-lived. First Aunt Stella in a visionary trance, and then Helen, the
ghost of her aunt, assert that her sin was not an act of defiance, but a foreordained
pattern: “a trap so baited / Was laid to catch you when the world began, / Before the
granite foundation” (ll. 30-31). Jeffers explains why he made use of the incest theme:
"Incest seems to me a fairly appropriate symbol of the immoderate racial introversion
which needs pointing out and protesting against" (SL 59). He elaborates:

it breaks taboo more violently than the other irregularities and so may
be of a more tragic nature; and more important, it seems to symbolize
human turned-inwardness, the perpetual struggle to get ahead of each
other, help or hinder each other, love each other, scare each other,
subdue or exalt each other, that absorbs 99 per cent of human energy.
For instance the man who discovers a mountain isn't happy until he
collects other men to admire it, or until he fights other men for
possession of it. This excess of introversion is a sort of racial incest.

(SL 35)

The storm-beaten coast where Jeffers lived, with its twisted and knotted trees,
provides a proper setting for the story of incestuous relationships. The ambivalence of
his attitude towards the act of incest is significant. While reiterating that introversion
in every form must be abjured, one notices that Jeffers is not really unsympathetic
towards his incestuous characters. He reaffirms Tamar’s helplessness, her puppet-like
role in a foreordained pattern. Even while asserting that man’s introversion and
crossing of limits in search of knowledge and power have brought about his
alienation. Jeffers also seems to imply that, caught in the cycle of existence, man is
helpless; the catastrophe is inevitable and only out of catastrophe will come renewal.
Beginning with "Tamar," Jeffers adopted for many of his narratives the strategy of chorus-like commentary, taken from Greek drama, where a detached group intervenes between players and audience to reflect on the action of the play and to anticipate new directions. For Jeffers, this chorus constitutes a very important progressive summary of meaning usually provided by him in a lyric "aside" or "interlude" (Brophy 16). The first interlude is a speculation as to the source of Tamar's revolt and the nature of the forces moving her; in that critical moment before Lee and Tamar succumb to their mutual desire, the narrator intervenes to wonder:

Was it the wild rock coast

Of her breeding, and the reckless wind

In the beaten trees and the gaunt booming crashes

Of breakers under the rocks, or rather the amplitude

The wing-subduing immense earth-ending water

That moves all the west taught her this freedom? (1: 25)

He wonders if the wildness of the coast and the amplitude of the ocean instigate Tamar's recklessness and longing for freedom. Brophy describes the wild coast with its twisted, knotted cypress trees as a fitting "objective correlative" to the incestuous act, which is tangling the "net of generations / With a knot sideways." The amplitude of water suggests peace, awe, unselfconsciousness; freedom is a rebellion (defiance of "custom" and "nature"), a radical revocation of all relationships, setting aside all values (26). The physical features of the coast thus seem to affect the attitudes of the character. In many poems, the tortured and twisted characters and their obsessively destructive traits are shown to be intimately related to the storm beaten, violent Big Sur coast, emphasizing the significant role that place plays in Jeffers's poems.
The next interlude begins with an apostrophe, where the poet invokes the swiftness. the strength and the beauty of natural objects—"O swiftness of the swallow and strength: Of the stone shore, brave beauty of falcons, [. . .] O beauty of the fountains of the sun." The invocation concludes with a plea to his muse to reconcile the human corruption with the beauty of things:

O blower of music through the crooked bugles,

You that make signs of sins and choose the lame for angels,

Enter and possess. Being light you have chosen the dark lamps, hawk the sluggish bodies: therefore God you chose

Me and therefore I have made you idols like these idols

O enter and possess. (1: 32)

Beauty is swift, strong, brave and dynamic. This beauty, which is his God, can enter the old, the stupid, the vain, the botched, the crooked, the sluggish, and the sinners. These characters are merely little chambers or tiny cells which can however hold the fountain of beauty. These idols are puppets—Tamar is a "doll on wires"—who act out foreordained roles. The poet suggests that God's music comes through the "crooked" bugles. The fact that God makes "signs of sins" suggests that one must look at transgressions like incest to understand the real nature of things and that these botched and tortured characters can reveal God's truth. Having stressed the contrast between the natural beauty and human corruption, the poet calls for a reconciliation of these opposites. As Fritjof Capra says in The Tao of Physics, the idea of such a reconciliation of opposites is in tune with the eastern mystical concept, which believes in the implicit unity of all opposites (157). Having attained the realization that apparent contradictions can be harmonized—the swift and the lame, light and darkness, the botched and the beautiful—and that they are merely two sides of the
same reality, extreme parts of a single whole, the poet emphasizes that only through the perception of ugliness can the existence of beauty be revealed. Such an awareness, of the unity of all opposites, questions the dualisms present in Western thought that have separated mind from matter, divorced the male from the female, and wrenched man from nature.

The oppressive Californian summer is reflected in the oppressiveness experienced by the characters. The insufferable masculine sun scorches the feminine earth: the east wind streams seawards holding off the cool sea wind; the stars blaze in the sky; "The year goes up to its annual mountain of death, gilded with hateful sunlight, waiting rain" (I: 41). Stagnant decaying waters, dried up springs and faded rock flowers indicate the absence of the vegetation god. This oppressiveness of the season finds resonance in Tamar who, pregnant with Lee's child, feels in her blood "the filth and fever of the season." She seeks relief by invoking contact with the dead. Self-disgust turns to self-hatred and hatred of the entire world, "the intolerably masculine sun hatefullest of all." Centipedes invade the house signifying its corruption. Stagnation is equivalent to death and only death and rebirth can renew life-giving water. The centipedes with "their phalloid bodies" along with the "intolerably masculine sun" are contrasted with the sweet and female sea, which is "weak with calm." In spite of the burning hatred within her against the tyrannical male aspects of nature, Tamar is still like the sea, weak and submissive.

Having defied nature and custom, Tamar cannot wait for the normal course of renewal: "Rain in October or November / Yearly avenges the balance;" she longs for death. This death wish is characteristic of the human race, which reveals an unseemly haste towards destruction. Tamar wants to speak to the dead, and to do that she has to "go down to the darkness." The descent to the tide line beneath the sea is paralleled in
terms of myth to the descent into the underworld that is necessary for the return of the
year god. Robert Brophy describes the characters' descent into the sea at low tide as a
"return to life origins, to the realm of mystery and ghostly presences, a contact with
life/death at its primordial source, a crossing of borders, the no-man's land of tidal
rocks, a quest for knowledge which proves lethal" (178).

As Aunt Stella makes contact with the dead, Tamar is threatened by a
wandering power that essays her body. Strange tongues issue out of the old woman's
throat. Tamar is commanded to strip and dance to bring forth the dead gods. When
Tamar refuses. Stella insists: "He says No, no, the pregnant women / Would always
dance here and the shore belongs to his people's ghosts nor will they endure another /
Unless they are pleased" (1:44). Tamar cannot complete her descent to the darkness
in search of knowledge and renewal, until she has identified with the spirits of the
earth:

So Tamar weeping
Slipped every sheath down to her feet, the spirit of the place
Ruling her, she and the evening star sharing the darkness,
And danced on the naked shore. (1: 44)

Robert Brophy summarizes Mircea Eliade's (*Patterns in Comparative Religion*
p. 398–400) description of the various rites embracing death-rebirth: (1) purgation,
abolishing everything that represents the old cycle; (2) extinction of old fires and
kindling of new ones, in the interval a "cosmic night" being established in which all
"forms" lose their outlines and become confused in a darkness identifiable with
primordial chaos whence commences a fresh creation; (3) masked processions,
ceremonial receptions and entertainment of the dead who are then led back at the end
of the ceremonies "to the borders of the territory. To the sea, or the river, or where
ever it may be"—the masks being signs that "all barriers are destroyed and all forms of life merged together": (4) contests between two opposing teams during which communication with the dead becomes possible . . . (5) an interlude of Saturnalia or reversal of normal order resulting in a fusion of all forms into one single, vast, undifferentiated unity (38-39).

These rites are very clearly evoked by Jeffers in the beach scene when Tamar, despoiled by the spirits of the night, is purged of her earlier inhibitions and suffers a virtual self-annihilation. As she dances, her body "touched and troubled with polluting presences" loses its maidenly grace, and kindled with lust, wakens to wantonness to become coarse and beastlike. The loss of her unborn child is also a purgation. The fire that she has set to destroy her house is extinguished as also her relationship with everything that stands for the old order, and she invokes a new bridegroom, a new fire. The masked procession is described by Helen as "half a dozen savages. / Dead and dressed up for Gods." Death and renewal involve entertainment of the dead and propitiation of the gods. Tamar's orgiastic dance is for entertaining these spirits of the dead, who possess her and return "gross and replete shadows, swaggering along the tide-marks / Against the sea-gleam." The orgy is for communication with the dead, which she achieves when she is able to speak to the dead Helen. After a merging of opposites—life and death, spirit and flesh—what she achieves is not the knowledge she had been seeking, but "an identity-annihilation from which emerges a totally new agent" (Brophy 40). The reversal of all norms that began at the incest committed earlier is complete at the sexual orgy that is enacted on the beach and the resultant revocation of relationships as Tamar repudiates both her father and brother after subjugating them sexually. She attains a new self-awareness after her dance on the beach. She lifts up her face "like a snake lifting its head / Out of
a fire." For Jeffers, the snake, with its ability to slough off its skin, is a symbol of
rebirth or renewal, as in the apocalyptic ending of "The Inhumanist" where he pictures
man as surviving the holocaust, slightly scorched, but sloughing off skin like a serpent
in spring. The orgy on the beach thus accomplishes the virtual self-annihilation
necessary to attain a more comprehensive awareness. It blurs the outlines between
individual objects so that all forms of life merge together. It destroys dualisms,
reverses accepted norms, so that the hitherto dominant aspects are sidelined and
marginalized voices emerge stronger as the "spirit of the place" wrests power from
the human characters

Tamar sees herself as an agent of destruction. She has to destroy the house of
corruption and so she identifies with fire:

"I have smelled fire and tasted

fire.
And all these days of horrible sunlight, fire
Hummed in my ears, I have worn fire about me like a cloak and
burning for clothing. It is God
Who is tired of the house that thousand-leggers crawl about in,

[.] I say He has gathered
Fire all about the walls and no one sees it
But I, the old roof is ripe and the rafters
Rotten for burning, and all the woods are nests of horrible things.
nothing would ever clean them

But fire" (1: 48)
Tamar will not be satisfied with any continuation of the natural cycle. Her revulsion is against life as well as against death. Betrayed by the living and the dead, "I have so passed nature," she longs for a holocaust that will be a paradigm of a greater cataclysm. Having extinguished the old fires, she invokes a new fire:

'O strong and clean and terrible
Spirit and not father punish the hateful house.
Fire eat the walls and roofs, drive the red beast
Through every wormhole of the rotting timbers
And into the woods and into the stable, show them
These liars, that you are alive." (I: 49)

Intent on destroying everything around her, Tamar assumes monstrous proportions. But in the next interlude, Jeffers realizes that in spite of her transgressions, God accepts Tamar as a part of things:

God who makes beauty
Disdains no creature, nor despised that wounded
Fired and betrayed body. She in the starlight
And little noises of the rising tide
Naked and not ashamed bore a third part
With the ocean and keen stars in the consistence
And dignity of the world. (I: 48-49)

The implication here is that God is indifferent to individual catastrophe, making all the more ridiculous the human belief that what man does is of universal importance. But Jeffers's God, the infinite non-human universe, accepts finite humanity, however despicable, as part of the whole.
Tamar's yearning for knowledge culminates in a kind of reversal that leads to chaos and thence to new discoveries and revelations. She acquires a detachment, a distance that gives her power and peace. She learns that nothing is repulsive, that everything has its beauty and dignity, that life's patterns are repeated in cycles. Past, present and future coalesce in Tamar. She assimilates the past history of her race. "dead beasts' dripping," the present momentum of the life-force as it envelops her and the future "new race" she anticipates in her dream. Tamar dreams of hanging "half-way-between sea and sky, beaten on by both; / Burning with light." Earlier the sky had been full of the "intolerably masculine sun" and the sea had been sweet and calm and submissive. But now though the sky burns with light; the sea reverberates "the straight and shiny serpents" that fall from heaven, signifying a balance of opposites with the feminine sea no longer submissive. The patriarchal authority has been overset. Earlier she had been "voiceless" like the weak sea dominated by the male forces in nature. Now she assumes authority, sexually subjugates her father, diminishes him, wrests power and life from him. David's Biblical perspective, full of guilt-ridden despair at man's corruption is overwhelmed by her consummate power. All the other characters become mere puppets in her hands. Tamar errs when, having attained knowledge of good and evil, she fails to be satisfied with striking a balance, and tries to assume superhuman proportions. Her freedom and peace are derived from her resolve to keep her sin pure—"'we must keep sin pure / Or it will poison us, the grain of goodness in a sin is poison.'" She will not repent; she puts herself above petty human guilt and establishes a cosmic view. Having abjured laws and annulled hope, she has found peace. The revocation of relationships, "'he is not / Your son nor you my father.'" completes the Saturnalian reversal of norms. As Robert Brophy points out, the male characters merge into a composite cyclic sacrificial figure (63).
Tamar becomes the instrument of destruction, not just the victim, and exterminates the entire Cauldwell house with herself. She repudiates linear time, "[...] it was out of me that fire lit you and your Helen, [...] / Only because I was to be named Tamar and to love my brother and my father. / I am the fountain' " (1: 63). Jinny's broken memories confirm the repetitive nature of Tamar's sin. The coalescence of identities as Jinny mistakes Lee for David and Tamar for Helen is also significant as it stresses the repetitive nature of generations.

Jeffers effects a comparison between the House of Cauldwell and the world; just as the house needs to be cleansed, the world is also out of its joints and requires renewal: " / A man that's ready to cross land and water / To set the world in order can't be expected / To leave his house in order" " (1: 68). The house thus is the microcosm that reflects the macrocosm. Jeffers also seems to doubt man's ability to set the world right. The incestuous family is thus the human race that is poised on the edge. What remains is the annihilative phase of the cycle. Tamar has attained the revelation that comes at the end of the cycle. She insists on the beauty of the tortured parts in an indifferent whole. Lee, on the other hand, suffers a regression; he loses the awareness he had attained after his accident and reverts into the mediocrity of his earlier debauched lifestyle. Tamar sees determinism, individual lives being swept along a current over which they have no control. David and Lee react against this determinism, one by overwhelming guilt and a desire for atonement, and the other by denial and rejection. Tamar accepts her sin as a fortunate fall, one that gives her knowledge and peace. She accepts her humanity as part of an infinitely beautiful scheme. It does not matter that the human drama is nearing its end, for the end is not just the decline of the Western civilization but also the reality of change and the circle
of existence. Signifying corruption, death, anticipated rebirth, this cycle is irreversible and predetermined. It is

the pulse of the universe and yields a constant cataract of beauty.

When its rhythm is contemplated with distance, it radiates peace—
an indifference to the terrible parts achieved when one becomes
absorbed in the whole [. . .]. Only by setting minuscule daily
experience in context with the cosmic totality can one work out
peace for oneself. (Brophy 65-66)

The supernatural again assumes significance in the poem as Ramon Ramirez
sees Johny Cabrera carrying fire to Lobos, an act signifying destruction and at the
same time firing the winter pastures to facilitate renewal. The use of the doppleganger
is a recurrent technique used by Jeffers. Robert Brophy explains:

One purges the hills for pasture-renewal; the other dramatizes the fire-
scourge coming to the Lobos community and to the world of man.

They demonstrate strikingly the two levels at which Jeffers' characters
act: one is the short-sighted human level with its varied reasons and
rationalizations; the second is the universal ritual level at which
humans, mostly without knowing it, act out as puppet-interpreters the
significance of a much larger, cosmic-oriented drama. (51)

Tamar dreams of an "axman chopping down a tree and field-mice scampering
'Out of the roots" (1. 54): the tree signifies the Cauldwell family and at the same time
the human race. In the dream of the apocalyptic horsemen coming out of the south,
the preordained pattern of events is again confirmed in the rider's statement, "Here it
began," when they pass Mal Paso Creek, the scene of incest. As they near the Carmel
River, Tamar waits for destruction, for that was the place where she involved Will
Andrews and by extension the whole world in the fall of her house. The struggles of the characters in microcosm mimic the story of the whole of mankind. When Ramirez too has a similar vision of helmeted horsemen carrying torches, the poet ponders on the energy made manifest in dreams and visions that runs through all things and interrelates them: "Who has ever guessed to what odd ports, what sea buoying the keels, a passion blows its bulkless / Navies of vision?" (1: 55).

Individual events seen by human beings as having portentous implications have little significance in the cosmic drama of change that goes on forever. The repetitive nature of events enacted in Jeffers's poems reinforces the cyclical nature of all existence inherent in his worldview. Brophy argues that Jeffers has the same perception of the physical world as that from which ancient ritual and mythology grew: he creates his own myth, assimilated and adapted from a rich heritage, to dramatize the ritual-like process of the world's immolation daily taking place before his awed eyes (9). Life, in Jeffers's poems, is cyclical, an unending cycle of birth, death, rebirth, and the topographical and seasonal features of the Californian coast give substance and immediacy to his use of myths. Human beings assume the roles of helpless participants, who are swept along by the inexorable life force.

Jeffers's technique of placing man as one among many forms of life, no more or no less important than the other forms, has ecological implications. The choric interludes serve to reinforce his distanced perspective, from where he can ponder objectively on the storms of passion and agony being enacted. The cosmic perspective also enables him to view the specific human tragedy as only a small part of the larger cosmic drama. He is thus able to see the tortured parts as units of a larger whole, which is always beautiful. The poet comes to conclude that even the botched and perverted human has a proper place in the universe. The catastrophe imminent
throughout the action of the poem is immanent, the inevitable end of a foreordained pattern. But Jeffers makes Tamar the agent of destruction. Tamar's hatred of life and death is perverse in that it causes her to dissociate herself from the human condition and seek to go beyond nature. Apart from epitomizing the narcissistic tendencies inherent in man, she also tries to attain knowledge of good and evil, and tries to assume a superhuman stature. She seeks to place humanity above nature and at the same time sever all relations with the human past. She strives for an absolute freedom. She embodies the ideal of leaving humanity in order to become God. Unlike California, the protagonist of "Roan Stallion," whose actions reveal a worship of God's beauty, Tamar wills the self into a position of divinity—leading to self-destruction as well as destruction of all around her. Jeffers seems to imply that this presumption of trying to go beyond the limitations of the human component to attain a manipulative superhuman stature, is modern man's tragedy.

Despoiled by human desires, Tamar seeks revenge through defiance of God and nature. On learning that her sin is but the repetition of an act performed over and over since the beginning of human history, Tamar tries to elevate it beyond the normal course of eternal recurrence. The confrontation between Tamar and her father is a meeting between the moral emptiness of the present and the religious delusions of an earlier generation. Christian taboos are not enough to overcome man's natural impulses towards socially prohibited acts like incest. In Jeffers's perception, the predicament of modern man is that he is able neither to sustain belief in the Christian myth nor develop new values. Tamar's tragedy occurs when by giving undue importance to the self, she rejects all moral guides or ideals outside the self and cuts herself off from the world of which she is a finite part. It is Jeffers's strategy here to make her get far enough out of humanity to view man's place in nature with
naturalistic objectivity. Far from being humbled by knowledge, Tamar uses it as justification for what she has done and plans to do. Tamar does not break out of humanity. Rather she plunges into humanity in the name of freedom. She becomes the symbol of introverted modern man, self-destructive in her attempt to go beyond nature.

The last four lines place the tragedy in natural perspective. No matter how horrible the events may have been to the persons involved, the wound inflicted on nature is but slight and transitory. After the holocaust, the focus again shifts to the land: "Grass grows where the flame flowered; / [. . . ] all about there / The trees, some of them scarred with fire, endure the sea wind" (1: 89). It is interesting to note that Jeffers rarely focuses on rebirth except as transhuman renewal. The rebirth phase seems to be a return to the beauty of things, which is oblivious to the presence or absence of man. God to Jeffers is the cosmic, totally beautiful process. Man must submit with dignity to being part of the whole. Death is natural; it is the end of all corruption, the beginning of life.

Perhaps in no other character is the presumptuousness of the human condition so subtly portrayed as in Cawdor, the protagonist of the long poem "Cawdor." He is no Tamar whose introverted desire for egoistic power brings about her tragedy; nor is he like Barclay, the protagonist of "The Women at Point Sur," whose delusions of divinity make him insane; he is a man who has a very close relationship with the earth—a man of strength, integrity and independence—who has tested the different ways men live by and found them wanting. He would appear to have many of the qualities that are admired by the poet. He stands aloof and dominant in his high stronghold. But the poem questions his type of aloofness and isolation, an aloofness that implies humanistic arrogance. With his intimate knowledge of the land, he takes
pride in the fact that he has been able to subdue and conquer it and presumes that his vigilance and control are sufficient to protect his realm from the ravages of nature.

Cawdor's inability to sense the interdependence of all phenomena, human as well as nonhuman, sets him apart. This isolation and the delusion of dominance over the land make it difficult for him to relate successfully with his fellow beings and the world.

The very name “Cawdor” alludes to Shakespeare's Macbeth, Thane of Cawdor, whose desire for power and control turns out to be a phantasmal nightmare. Cawdor's arrogance in his strength and his lack of caution make him vulnerable and mark him out for tragedy. Though he knows that he is being imprudent, the girl who comes down the canyon like “a fawn out of the fire” so fascinates him that he throws caution to the winds. There is something pathetic in the sight of this strong man's vulnerability before Fera, a certain diminishing in stature: "Then Cawdor shuddered with hope of love. His face relaxing began to look like an old man's" (1: 416). The scene closes with a choric interlude apostrophizing the kingfisher and stressing the foolishness of the feeling of invulnerability in man:

No strength of a man

But falls on folly before it drops unto dust?

The man who'd not be seduced, not in hot youth,

By the angel of fools, million worshipped success, the self-included man, the self-armored,

And never beguiled as to a bull nor a horse.

Now in his cooled and craglike years

Has humbled himself to beg pleasure: even power was better.

Laugh kingfisher, laugh, that is their fashion. (1: 417)
From the kingfisher's vantage, man's tragic delusions appear trivial and his self-inflating pretensions eminently laughable. The poet would like to borrow the bird's perspective, rejecting human values with a kind of inhuman objectivity that will allow no involvement.

Jeffers's use of premonitions reinforces the sense of foreboding that runs through the poem, as when on the night of Cawdor's marriage, his son Hood feels that some disaster has befallen his father and sees his father's face "distorted either with pain or approach of death" and hears his voice "like a dying man's." Hood is portrayed as a hunter who is attuned to the rhythms of nature; he tells the time by looking at the stars. Though far away from home, he can sense the fire that sweeps the coast, can "hear the faint ripple, and wind in far fire." The sighting of a red comet's tail further strengthens his sense of foreboding. But as he returns home over the hills and looks from the height into his father's redwood canyons untouched by the fire, which had devoured the neighbouring hills, he knows that his father is not dead. Hood's identification of Cawdor with his canyon is strengthened by Cawdor's apparent dominance and control. The poet seems to imply that the conflict between Cawdor and Hood is the conflict between one rooted to place and one who can never stay.

Specific places in the landscape assume significance for the characters. The Rock that stands out of the hill at the head of Cawdor's Canyon is Hood's refuge—his retreat after violent quarrels with his father. For Fera, the lonely oak-shielded shadow under the polished laurel leaves was a sanctuary where she could come for solitude, to gather her spirit to endure old men.

In terms of the vegetation myth, Fera can be identified with the earth; she endures Cawdor "as the earth endures man." When with his Attis-gesture, Hood manages to overcome his desire and cool her ardour, the poet seems to suggest a "spurning of the
earth-goddess" (Brophy 169). Subjugated by Cawdor, rejected by Hood, Fera in her wrath turns out to be the agent of destruction. But unlike the other characters with their regressive tendencies, Fera has a perspective that seems to have the poet's approval. Fera displays an acute awareness of the land and the habitats of its creatures. Even in her grief and her relentless pursuit of Hood, she sees humanity as a stain that has to be cleansed."The trees are decent, but we! [. . .] some day the coast will lose patience and dip / And be clean" (1: 463).

The rainstorm that breaks over the coast is violent and destructive. But Cawdor is prepared for every calamity. He is "never taken / Asleep by the acts of nature outside: he knew / His hills as if he had nerves under the grass, / What fence lengths would blow down and toward what cover / The cattle would drift" (1: 430-31). The torrential rain and the violent wind, which wreak destruction on the coast, seem to portend impending catastrophe. Apocalyptic manifestations of the fire, water, wind and earth are let loose. Immediately following the holocaust-like forest-fire that ravages the coast are the storm and the flood. The erosion image of "Each canyon's creek-mouth smoke its mud-brown torrent / Into the shoring gray" (1: 433), seems to suggest the imminent whittling away of Cawdor's realm. There are strong suggestions that with Fera's arrival, the destructive elements of nature that so far had seemed to stop at Cawdor's threshold, threaten to enter the citadel. Jeffers uses an ominous image of the shattered windowpane through which the fury of the wind enters like a wild beast: the flood inundates the little garden-acre in Cawdor's canyon.

Both Cawdor and Hood are in different ways shown to have regressive tendencies that invite retribution. Hood is not able to confront and resolve the dilemma that he faces—a natural desire for his stepmother and loyalty towards his father. Cawdor cannot accept his old age and attempts to recapture lost youth by
taking a young wife. His relationship with a wife young enough to be his daughter has incestuous overtones as when he is disturbed on seeing her in Michal’s clothes. Jeffers presents both father and son as more caught up in their regressiveness, than victims of Fera’s manipulations. She accuses Hood of rape, and in a fit of jealous rage, Cawdor kills his son. As the horror of the act sinks in, Cawdor realizes that he has erred:
Whatever the truth of Fera’s story, he has acted impulsively: “All my damnation draws / From having done in a haste” (1: 507). When Fera confesses the truth, Cawdor is filled with remorse and grief, and blinds himself. It is ironic that it is only after being blinded that Cawdor attains an acceptance of his place in the natural scheme of things. Blinded and deluded till then, he has finally attained atonement with the world.

As Cawdor suffers in silence, the land that he loves grows hateful and terrible; he longs to go away but the strict code of his life prohibits that. When the rains fail and the hills become dry Cawdor discovers “his mind / Building conjectural bridges between the drought / And the curse of his deed” (1: 501). In “Give Your Heart to the Hawks,” the same motif of man’s misdeeds being reflected in the land can be seen, when old Fraser laments on learning of his son’s transgression, “No wonder the sweet rain would not fall” (2: 392). Jeffers here presents the transgressions of men, as having repercussions on the land causing natural disasters and epidemics. A common motif in ancient myths, it here attains relevance, as it shows man, with the best intentions, overshooting the mark and contributing to disequilibrium. News of infected cattle in the North does not trouble Cawdor, for he knows his “herd in the isolation of the coast canyon / Would be the last.” But he dreams recurrently that he was slaughtering his herd, implying the erosion of the concept of control. Jeffers suggests that this delusion of total control is modern man’s tragic flaw, this refusal to
sense the precariousness of his very existence. In his study of the mythic elements in the poetry of Jeffers. Robert Brophy explains:

In terms of Jeffers's philosophy, both ritual and mythological levels work together. Psychologically, as will become clear. Cawdor has refused light, has reneged on his role, has tried to reverse time's process. He has made certain presumptions of invulnerability, has half-willfully blinded himself. He refuses to live with the mutability which is the life-force: he hesitates on the brink of the inevitable down-swing of the cycle for him. He does not learn, except in the final pained brightness after he has made his journey into darkness, that security, stability, endurance are found only in the beautiful process itself, as revealed in his god-filled Sur country. Peace is resignation; security is a state of mind dehumanized of biases toward order, stability, control, strength which have no value in the ritual of eternal recurrence. (168-169)

Brophy goes on to point out: "Mythically, the drama revisits the theme of hubris, of over-reaching, of presumed control and invulnerability [. . .]. Ritually the drama means only one thing: the merciless, mindless pirouette of life in which lost balance must be regained" (169).

Jeffers repeatedly stresses the cyclic nature of all life. Fera praises life, as does her father who believes that life is good because it is growing. But Fera's praise is tempered by the knowledge that what grows must eventually die. Old Martial's knowledge of the origin and evolution of life exults in the magnificence of man. Though his pride in mankind's evolution is at odds with the poet's view, the narrator offers no comment on such obvious humanistic pride:
'At first it was a morsel of slime on the sea,
It grew to be worms and fishes, lizards and snakes.
You see the progress, then things with hair and hot blood.
It was coming up from the ocean and climbing mountains,
Subduing the earth, molding its bundle of nerves into the magnificent mind of man, and passing beyond man, to more wonders.' (1: 497-98)

The role of old Martial is in opposition to Cawdor’s character. To the world, Martial is a failure, one marked for misfortune, who unlike Cawdor, cannot fight against and overcome natural disasters. A minor character at best, Martial’s character is built up by the reader from Fera’s description, as well as obliquely from Martial’s own utterances, with no intrusion of overbearing narratorial comment. The idea of polyphony put forward by Bakhtin permits “a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships” (Dialogic Imagination 263). In polyphony, the character and narrator exist on the same plane, the latter does not take precedence over the former but has equal rights to speak. As Martial dies in harmony with the storm, Jeffers offers several points of view about human relationship to the landscape. Each character’s sharply particularized ‘voice’ articulates a recognisable social viewpoint. Orchestrated together, these voices offer a verbal image of the man-nature relationship. Fera describes the storm as nature’s reaction to the old man’s death, she insists that despite being a failure in human terms, Martial had been an extraordinary man, for a man’s life and his soul have nothing in common; “[...]he had eagle imaginations. This poor scarred face / For whose sake neither nature nor man has ever stepped from the path while he was living: his death / Breaks trees, they send a roaring chariot of storm to home him” (1: 432). Even in his deformity and the
"shame of obscure death." Fera insists that he is more fortunate than more successful men, for "under the bone, behind the burnt eyes / There have been lightnings you never dreamed of, despairs and exultations and hawk agonies of sight / That would have cindered your eyes before the fire came" (1: 436). The narrator does not comment on Fera's passionate defence of her father.

In his conversation with Concha Rosas, the Italian farmhand has another view of man's connection to the land:

'This country
You cannot trust, it never need any people
My old country at home she is not so kind
But always she need people, she never kill all.
She is our mother, can't live without us. This one not care.
It make you fat and soon it cutting your neck.' (1: 437)

The farmhand recognizes the indifference of the untamed Californian coast towards people, unlike the European land where people seem a necessary component.

Allowing these marginalized elements a voice, lends significance to hitherto silenced and insignificant characters like Martial and the Italian farmhand. Resisting integration into the omniscient narratorial viewpoint, such differing views strengthen the ecological idea that every element in the great web of life has equal significance and validity.

Jeffers provides an entirely different perspective at Martial's death when the narrator describes how the old man's brain re-enters the physical world on death and decay. "Gently with delicate mindless fingers / Decomposition began to pick and caress the unstable chemistry / Of the cells of the brain" (1: 449). The old man's death dream is a flight from reality; in life old Martial had often dreamt of the sweetness of
death; now in death his brain celebrates life. The brain is now deluded by false visions. "insulated from all touch of reality":

Whatever he had wanted

To do or become was now accomplished, each bud that had been nipped and fallen grew out to a branch,

Sparks of desire forty years quenched flamed up fulfilment. (1: 450)

Suffering and disaster are reversed through a "flighty carnival" to an "unconditional delight." Jeffers insists throughout this section that Martial's death dream is a delusion. that these flashes of post-mortal felicity are not worthy of desire and were only momentary and concludes that "salvation" is gained when one's substance is fully reintegrated into the cycle of existence, the cosmic whole. "Afterwards it entered importance again. Through worms and flesh-dissolving bacteria" (1: 451). Here Jeffers makes effective use of a variety of perspectives on man's relationship with a physical world that is alive and has many aspects.

The Indian and the caged eagle watch with "dark indifference" and "dark distrust" the preparations for burial:

Dark aboriginal eyes,

The Indian's and the coast-range eagle's, like eyes

Of this dark earth watching our alien blood

Pass and perform its vanities, watched them to the far oaks. (1: 461)

More in tune with nature, they seem to sense the lack of contact of the other characters with the earth and with their fellow beings. The caged eagle watches impassively the burial of old Martial by a group of shame-faced people, "Intent, ill at ease, like bewildered cattle nosing one fallen [. . .]. Feeling some want of ceremony" (1: 466). The bewildered mourners stand desolately, unable to lend a necessary
dignity to the burial of the dead. Their lack of relationship with the dead man and with
the world surrounding them is evident. The red glow from the setting sun casts
strange shadows over the shallow grave, up the red mound of earth and the mass of
oak trees. The shadows of the still people lie like a bundle of rods and beyond them
another shadow. "Broad, startling and rectilinear, was laid from the eagle's cage; nine
slender human shadows and one / Of another nature" (1: 467). Jeffers seems to
suggest the superiority of that other nature over the human element. Unexpectedly a
burst of colour and glory from the dying sun transforms the scene and lends it a
dignity and sense of reconciliation:

    then the deep west fountained

    Unanticipated magnificences of soaring rose and heavy purple,

    atmospheres of flame-shot

    Color played like a mountain surf, over the abrupt coast, up the austere

    hills.

    On the women talking, on the men's bent forms filling the grave, on

    the oak, on the eagle's prison, one glory

    Without significance pervaded the world. (1: 467-68)

The bloody effulgence of the sun bathes the entire scene and achieves a unity that had
hitherto been missing in the disparate parts.

The title "The Caged Eagle's Death Dream" given by Jeffers to the excerpt in
Selected Poetry, suggests a flight of fancy. The eagle's spirit is contrasted with the
spirits of men, which dwindle into their peace after their deaths. "The unsocial birds
are a greater race: / Cold-eyed, and their blood burns" (1: 510). The eagle,
accidentally crippled by Hood is caged and in pain, but never fails to present a
ferocity and independence. When finally Michal who has kept him as a pet, allows it
to be killed. the poet imagines the eagle's spirit spiralling up toward the sun, leaving the ranch, the Coast Range and the continent below, an ever expanding and receding panorama. As the eagle's spirit spirals higher, it sees the mountain dividing

Canyon of its captivity (that was to Cawdor
Almost his world) like an old crack in a wall,
Violet-shadowed and gold-lighted; the little stain
Spilt on the floor of the crack was the strong forest;
The grain of sand was the Rock. A speck, an atomic
Center of power clouded in its own smoke
Ran and cried in the crack; it was Cawdor; the other
Points of humanity had neither weight nor shining
To prick the eyes of even an eagle's passion. (1: 511)

From the eagle's point of view, the human world and its self-assumed importance dwindle into insignificance. Cawdor's domain is then related to the coast range hills, the continent, and the globe. The eagle's spirit sees night and dawn as they pass about the globe, and transcending time, it sees into the future, and its own extinction as the inexorable cycle of life continues; it views the ebb and flow of races, the brown, the white, and back to the brown; it witnesses the delusion called progress receding, as men who had out flown the hawk revert back to a primitive existence and become "scarce as wolves." Thus through the eagle's vision, the poet emphasizes the alternation of growth and decay.

It saw according to the sight of its kind, the archetype
Body of life a beaked carnivorous desire
Self-upheld on storm-broad wings: but the eyes
Were spouts of blood; the eyes were gashed out; dark blood
Ran from the ruinous eye-pits to the hook of the beak
And rained on the waste spaces of empty heaven.
Yet the great Life continued; yet the great Life
Was beautiful, and she drank her defeat, and devoured
Her famine for food.

The vision attained by the eagle has a comprehensiveness that relates every object to larger wholes. It stresses the relegation of man from a position of centrality to a mere speck, reconfirms the circular nature of all existence, and accepts that the cosmic totality is God, symbolized as "the dell of fire." The eagle's spirit also perceives the nature of existence of all beings—human as well as nonhuman. It sees that limitation and pain are the essence of life, but realizes that pain does not inhibit the resurgence of life:

There the eagle's phantom perceived

Its prison and its wound were not its peculiar wretchedness,
All that lives was maimed and bleeding, caged or in blindness,
Lopped at the ends with death and conception, and shrewd
Cautery of pain on the stumps to stifle the blood, but not
Refrains for all that; life was more than its functions
And accidents, more important than its pains and pleasures,
A torch to burn in with pride, a necessary
Ecstasy in the run of the cold substance,
And scape-goat of the greater world.

Pouring itself on fulfilment the eagle's passion
Left life behind and flew at the sun, its father.
The great unreal talons took peace for prey
exultantly, their death beyond death; stooped upward, and struck
Peace like a white fawn in a dell of fire. (1: 512-13)

"The Caged Eagle's Death-Dream" thus enables the poet to establish a detached perspective that sees life in its totality, to emphasize the significance of the parts in the cosmic whole, which to Jeffers is God. It stresses the cyclic nature of all existence, that the rhythm of life is governed by pain, but that life is more important than its pains and pleasures: the only peace available is death; re-absorption into the core of energy "the dell of fire"—"the sun, its father." William Everson in his introduction to *Cawdor and Medea* describes the eagle's death flight as "one of the matchless examples of the transcendental intuition in English" (xiv). He clarifies that Jeffers uses the human deaths, those of Old Martial and Hood, as "disintegrative and deliquescent," representing "diffuse human consciousness incapable of achieving sufficient concentration to survive after death," and the eagle's death as integrative and transcendent.

Jeffers, rather, is taking these deaths, eagle and man, as polar opposites, and using them symbolically to define the nature of the consequence that inheres in each. He is taking both the disintegrative ego-centric death of man and the trans-egoistic death of the eagle as instances in an inferred teleological ultimacy. (xv)

*Cawdor* thus is one who cannot see himself as part of the whole. The use of polyphonic voices is a device that lends voice to marginalized opinions that have been hitherto unheard. "The Caged Eagle's Death Dream" lends the poet a perspective that sees the cosmos as a whole into which the different parts are subsumed and creates in
the reader the awareness, that everything is interrelated and unable to exist as disparate parts.

Jefferies describes Reave Thurso, the protagonist of “Thurso’s Landing,” as being “too heavy with strength for so young a man” (2: 175). The implication is that this strength is, in fact, Reave’s weakness. His wife describes him as “‘cold, / And all alone in himself’ ” (2: 180), and sees his stubborn will as a disease. It clouds his perspective and makes it impossible for him to understand and accept the failings of others. He cannot forget or forgive his father’s suicide. As a reaction to his father’s failure, Reave epitomizes a grim refusal to fail, rather than a determination to succeed. This negative determination makes him inflexible, “‘one of those predestined stone men / For women to respect and cheat’ ” (2: 227). As his mother observes, “‘Your mind / Sticks in its own iron: when you’ve said ‘I will’ / Then you’re insane, the cold madness begins’ ” (2: 213).

When Helen runs away with a lover, his insistent doggedness is shown to enable him to track her down after a year. In spite of her pleas, he will not let her go. It is as though she is some prize stock that has got away and must be brought back: “‘you are my goods and you’ll be guarded’ ” (2: 209). Though implacably cold and calculated, there is a moment when he is moved by Helen’s pleading. But at that moment his father’s “sadly beaten face” appears to him; “‘that man yielded and was beaten / A man mustn’t be beaten’ ” (2: 210).

Though insistentely repudiating the past, Thurso gets more and more entangled in it. Every decision in his life is influenced by a rejection of the “beaten face” of his father. He fails to confront the positive aspects of his father’s character. Though at times he does feel a sort of grudging admiration for his father’s achievements, he is quick to stifle such feelings. He refuses to acknowledge the fact that his father is a
man capable of challenging and taming the Big Sur coast. He does not try to understand the reasons why such a man would "'blow out / In the first draught of bad luck like a poor candle!'" (2: 233). The great cable that spans the 'gorge above the farm assumes a significance that gives it a life like quality. The shadow of the cable looms over the characters, over the action of the poem and over the very landscape. It is so much a part of the landscape that Reave’s attempt to cut it down seems like man’s typical arrogance against nature. To Reave it is something to be removed, just "'Like anything else that’s no use.' " But as he gets ready to cut it down, "Thurso felt for a moment a little laughably godlike, / . . . hewing an old failure from the face of nature" (2: 233-34). He realizes how much an integral part of the landscape it had become: "'All the birds / Count on this ironware for as fixed as mountains, / It was here before they were hatched in the high nests . . .' " (2: 236). But even such an awareness does not deter him from his purpose. To Helen, however, even the ruins of Old Thurso's efforts appear monumental. Helen can see it as part of nature and can sense the hubris in Reave’s doggedness:

‘I’ve seen it myself

Through an earthquake and some big winds, and that bushfire

Three years ago. When Reave tackles it,

Down it shall come. Not the mountain-backed earth bucking like a bad horse, nor fire’s

Red foxtail on the hills at midnight, nor the man southeasters: nothing
can do it

But Reave Thurso, ah? That’s the man we’re measured against.’ (2: 234)
Reave tries to do what nature itself has failed to do and retaliation is swift. Reave is struck down as if by a mighty hand. Crippled and in terrible pain, Reave will not succumb as did his father but will cling on to life enduring his agony.

The use of perspective to put across differing attitudes is effectively handled by the poet. The way the characters look at past events in some way explain how they live in the present. Separate narrative perspectives can be identified, which then fit within the larger compass of the poem. Early in the poem, Rick Armstrong, on his way to the ranch house remembered the great cable

That spanned the gorge from the hill, and with a rusted iron skip
Hanging from it like a stuck black moon; relics.
With other engines on the headland, of ancient lime-kilns
High up the canyon, from which they shot the lime
To the promontory along the airy cable-way
To be shipped by sea. The works had failed; the iron skip
Stuck on its rusted pulleys would never move again
Until it fell, but to make a desolate creaking
In the mountain east wind that poured down the gorge. (2: 177)

This seems also to be the authorial perspective—a detached, objective attitude that does not condemn Old Thurso, but accepts the failure as part of the scheme of things. "The works had failed." not the man. Reave’s version on the other hand vibrates with contempt. He juxtaposes the responses of his parents to a crisis and repudiates his father's way out. His bitterness at the cowardice of his father is balanced by an admiration for the will of his mother who "took up the ruins and made a farm":

That was a little too easy, to pop himself off because he went broke.
I was ten years old, I tried not to despise the soft stuff
That ran away to the dark from a touch of trouble;

Because the lime-kilns failed and the lumber-mill

Ran out of redwood.

My mother took up his ruins and made a farm;

She wouldn’t run away, to death or charity. Mark and I helped.

We lost most of the land but we saved enough.’ (2: 191)

Where Reave sees failure, Helen sees accomplishment. She does not condemn the suicide. She can admire the almost superhuman effort that had gone into the failed lime-works.

‘It’s called Thurso’s Landing. That’s something

To have the standing sea-cliffs named after you. His father used to swing down the barrels of lime

From the head of that to the hulls of ships. The old wrecks of rusting engines are still to be seen up there

And the great concrete block that anchors the cable [. . .].’ (2: 223)

The three versions of the past—the author’s, Reave’s and Helen’s—agree on the events that took place. But these versions are different in the attitudes towards those events. While Reave condemns, Helen is admiring and understanding and the authorial voice is that of a detached observer. The narrations also bring out the differences in the characters of Helen and Reave. These narratives seem to suggest the interplay of differing points of view, which are interconnected when the characters share the same figurative language. The metaphor of the ship appears repeatedly in the poem linking the characters together. Helen seems to share to some extent the narrator’s perspective and language. The narrator compares Mill Creek Canyon to
a crack in the naked root of a dead pine when the bark peels off.

The bottom

Of the fissure was black with redwood, and lower

Green with alders; between the black and the green the painted roof of
the farmhouse, like a dropped seed,

Thurso’s house like a grain of corn in the crack of a plank, where the
hens can’t reach it. (2: 184)

Such a perspective effectively conveys the narrator’s distance from the scene of
events, and enables him to have a comprehensive view. Later in the poem, Helen’s
metaphor echoes the narratorial comparison, when she asks Hester: “‘You wouldn’t
stay in this wretched crack / Between two rocks?’” (2: 222). It is difficult for Helen to
attain the same degree of distance and detachment as the narrator. But the sympathy
that she seems to share with the narrator leads to an acceptance of the values
expressed by the authorial voice. As Reave Thurso is brought back to the farm from
the hospital, the narrator intervenes to comment:

No life

Ought to be thought important in the weave of the world, whatever it
may show of courage or endured pain;

It owns no other manner of shining, in the broad gray eye of the ocean,
at the foot of the beauty of the mountains

And skies, but to bear pain; for pleasure is too little, our inhuman God
is too great, thought is too lost. (2: 242)

The theme of human insignificance present throughout the poem is here explicitly
stated. At the end of the poem, Helen takes Reave to the headland, slits his throat and
poisons herself. The narrator concludes:
The platform is like a rough plank theatre-stage

Built on the brow of the promontory: as if our blood had labored all round the earth from Asia

To play its mystery before strict judges at last, the final ocean and sky, to prove our nature

More shining than that of the other animals. It is rather ignoble in its quiet times, mean in its pleasures,

Slavish in the mass; but at stricken moments it can shine terribly against the dark magnificence of things. (2: 278)

The human drama is enacted on the theatre-stage of the world; the poet personifies the ocean and sky as “strict judges” as humankind strives to prove itself. The authorial voice passes judgement: humanity is ignoble, mean, and “slavish in the mass.” But at stricken moments, it displays extraordinary courage and an ability to endure. Reave compares the world to a stone, “[. . .] for no reason falling in the night from a cliff in the hills, that makes a lonely Noise and a spark in the hollow darkness, and nobody sees and nobody cares. There’s nothing good in it / Except the courage not to be beaten” (2: 261). Through his willingness to suffer, even though he realizes that “nobody sees and nobody cares.” Reave achieves the stature and potential that the authorial voice has advocated for humanity.

Jeffers suggests that constrained by unnatural necessities, man fails to consider the purposiveness in the natural process. He fails to realize that the meaning of the world is in its totality. Man being only a part, cannot be a definition of the whole. Man’s history is not the world’s history. A perspective outside man is needed to provide a glimpse of this totality. Jeffers tries to attain such a perspective—often by distancing, a sudden widening of focus, a removal from the immediate scene of
action. This is not just to dwarf or diminish human actions but also to lend them a
grandeur that they lack in themselves. Perspective thus becomes a powerful device in
Jeffers’s poetic strategy. Transcending the innate pettiness in human actions,
perspective lends a dignity to the human drama as part of the cosmic whole.

In the presumptuousness of characters like Reave Thurso and Cawdor, Jeffers
seems to critique the presumptuousness of the human race. In spite of the relationship
of the male characters to the land which they inhabit, in spite of their integrity,
strength and stoicism, there is a narrowness in their vision and a lack of awareness
and understanding of other individuals and of their environment that mark them out
for tragedy. The female characters like Helen and Fera emerge as more balanced
individuals and in spite of the ambivalences in their minds, are more in tune with the
natural processes. From an ecofeminist perspective, Cawdor and Thurso are men who
are unable to break out of rigid patriarchal institutions. Helen longs for liberation from
the bonds of patriarchy. The linear hierarchical nature of patriarchal thinking fails to
grasp the complexity of life. Thurso and Cawdor do not have a perspective that is able
to integrate the many problems of life and approach life holistically.

The portrayal of Clare Walker, the protagonist of “The Loving Shepherdess,”
assumes significance, as she is an unlikely Jeffersian character. Among Jeffers’s
characters, Clare Walker would seem to be the figure that embodies a kind of ecologic
humility. She is described as “meek as one of ewes;” simple things like finding a
hollow of autumn grass to spend the night fill her with happiness; she shares her bread
with the sheep and any needy passer by, “gay with delight at having something to
give”. Clare is clothed in rags, lives a primitive life, which she shares with her sheep.
She lives off the land, availing herself of whatever sustenance the land can offer. The
freedom that she enjoys as she rambles across the countryside may seem perfect, but
 intimations of disaster suggest that all is not well. The staff she carries never could offer any threat and she finds that she cannot even use it against Fogler’s dogs who attack her sheep. The beauty of the dawn and the beauty of the sea lions dazzle her: “Clare stood and trembled at the simple morning of the world” (2: 52). She projects herself into the landscape: “Then Clare took home her soul from the world and went on” (2: 53). When Vasquez wonderingly observes that “‘You love All creatures alike.’” she can say dismissively: “‘I’m doing like most other people; take care of those that need me and go on till I die’” (2: 60). Like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, she has learnt to love all things: “‘The beetle beside my hand in the grass and the little brown bird tilted on a stone. / The short sad grass, burnt on the gable of the world with near sun and all winds: there was nothing there that I didn’t Love with my heart’” (2: 88). R. W. Butterfield in an essay “Loving to Death: A Consideration of the Loving Shepherdess.” sees Clare’s generous promiscuity as “a partial expression of a larger vision that extends beyond the human to embrace all beings, all things, all deeds even” (Centennial Essays 201). Such a pantheistic love enables her to sacrifice herself as she goes on her journey extending love to all in need, without emotional attachment. Butterfield sees in Clare a “Franciscan quality” as she moves across the landscape where “‘All the deer knew me; / They’d walk in my flock’” (2: 91).

Jeffers also examines Clare’s place in the landscape. While most Jeffersian protagonists are characters rooted to a place, Clare is uprooted and homeless. “The Loving Shepherdess” can be described as a pastoral idyll in a post pastoral world in which the shepherdess is out of place (Lagayette par. 15). The world views her with suspicion and wonder and she has to suffer the constraints of the civilized world when she is forced to avoid the ranches. The presence of a friendly Spanish Indian boy and
that of Onono Vasquez, the Spanish farm hand with visions, stand for the presence of
the earlier inhabitants, who are still untainted by modern civilization and who are
ready to accept Clare. Throughout the poem, Jeffers puts in deft touches that represent
her connection to the Californian landscape. Clare’s walking stick, “the bent staff”
was of “rosy-barked madrone wood” a tree that was a familiar sight in the Californian
landscape. Her journey through the land is a visitation to the entire Jeffers landscape.
References to earlier Jeffersian characters and events relate the poem to other poems
and integrate it into the entire corpus of Jeffers’s poetry.

The ambivalence in her character is seen in the manner in which she responds
to characters, both human and nonhuman. She loves and pities her flock, but at the
same time, refusing all offers of help and refuge, she insists on her obsessive journey
towards death, leaving her sheep vulnerable to disaster. Jeffers here seems to imply
that even a character like Clare, who epitomizes humility and love, is not free from
the presumptions and delusions that are characteristic of the human race. She knows
that she is going to die, and knowing this, Clare inexorably goes on, leading her flock
to their death. Jeffers underlines the detrimental effects of human sympathy:

The two coughing sheep

Brought her to a stand; then she opened their mouths and found
Their throats full of barbed seeds from the bad hay
Greedily eaten; and the gums about their teeth
Were quilled with the wicked spikes; which drawn, thin blood
Dripped from the jaw. The folds of the throat her fingers
Could not reach or relieve; thereafter, when they coughed.
Clare shook with pain. Her pity poisoned her strength. (2:73)
Clare is aware of her desire to help her sheep and of her limitations, as seen in her inability to pluck out all the barbed seeds. Her determination to die, in spite of Vasquez's suggestions of a Caesarean section that may save her life and that of her unborn baby, thereby denying her baby a chance to live, underlines that strange ambivalence.

Reconciling man with his human condition is what Jeffers does with Clare (Lagayette par. 18). Clare is aware of the futility of her journey. Her wandering is a way of translating into spatial movement, this slow, inescapable, approach to death. She knows she "must move or die." She sees her fate reflected in the fate of the salmon:

She watched a salmon
Row its worn body up-stream over the stones
And struck by a thwart current expose the bruised
White belly to the white of the sky, gashed with red wounds, but right itself
And wriggle up-stream, having that within it, spirit or desire,
Will spend all its dear flesh and all the power it has gathered, in the sweet salt pastures and fostering ocean,
To find the appointed high-place and perish. (2: 104)

Clare's solitude is compensated by chance encounters with other suffering humans, thirsty for life themselves, and by the freedom that her intimate contact with nature provides. Her presumption is her inexorable will to die. She will not do anything to save herself. For her, the perfect world is the world of the womb. She is obsessed with the idea that her unborn child is "'having the prime and perfect of life, The nine months that are better than ninety years' " (2: 94), and that she is like its
God. She lacks the detached indifference that would have given her peace. Her excessive pity for her fellow creatures causes her intense suffering. Having lost all notion of time, she does not know where she is going, “... to nowhere,” only that she must keep on going. Her journey is in a northward direction, as the continent’s end deprives the protagonist of any chance of advance beyond it, “along the last ridge of migration,” the final frontier beyond which she cannot advance:

Walking with numbed and cut feet
Along the last ridge of migration
On the last coast above the not-to-be colonized
Ocean, across the streams of the people
Drawing a faint pilgrimage
As if you were drawing a line at the end of the world
Under the columns of ancestral figures. (2: 74)

Jeffers thus makes her epitomize modern man who cannot go further forward, fatally caught up in his own tragic misapprehensions, having reached the very edge. Thus in spite of her apparent humility and tenderness, Clare too is one more example of deluded man who embodies an anthropocentric hubris.

To conclude, Jeffers’s poems stress the awareness of the unity and mutual relation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness. All things are seen as interdependent and inseparable parts of the cosmic whole, as different manifestations of the same ultimate reality. Jeffers calls for the attainment of a balanced tranquil state of mind in which the basic unity of the universe is experienced. Tamar is able to attain such an awareness, but obsessed with the desire for power, goes beyond it, with destructive intent to annihilate her world. Two other characters portrayed by Jeffers, Cawdor and
Thurso, fail to attain this awareness of being integral parts of their environment and consider themselves isolated fragments, strong enough to exist independently.

Through the character of Clare, Jeffers criticizes the arrogance inherent in the saviour syndrome, which implies man's presumption that he is a necessary agent in the scheme of events. Thus all the protagonists of Jeffers's long poems, with the exception of the Inhumanist in The Double Axe and Orestes in The Tower Beyond Tragedy are prototypes of the human race who, either in partial ignorance or overcome with delusions of grandeur, upset the laws of nature and disregard the fact that life is a complicated web of relations between the integral parts of a unified whole, comprising the human as well as the non human.

Works Cited


