Preface

In an age of increasing apprehensions about the environment, a poetic voice that questions and resists the prevailing views that have contributed to the environmental crisis becomes relevant. Robinson Jeffers was an American poet who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, had a vision that a later age, concerned about the degradation of the environment, could readily relate to. This thesis is an attempt to study the ecological implications in the poems of Robinson Jeffers, and to explore the ways in which his poetry projects his ecocentricity. It examines the environment related aspects of his poetry, like his responsiveness to the natural world, his sensitivity to place, his apocalyptic tone, his representation of the man-nature relationship, and his use of other ecocentric devices, in an effort to clarify and highlight a vision that could prove to be the basis of an environmental ethic.

Chapter I. “Writing the Earth: Literature and the Environment” examines the anthropocentric attitudes that have led to the present environmental crisis. Pointing out that human cultural traditions and the advances in science have undermined the harmonious relationship between man and nature, the chapter looks towards literary works with ecological visions as offering correctives to anthropocentric arrogance. The chapter attempts to define the concept of ecocriticism and describes how ecocriticism can be applied to literary works in a meaningful manner. The second section is a brief overview of American writers who give emphasis to landscape, and briefly mentions how their relationship to the land and their ecological vision have shaped their writings. It places the poetry of Robinson Jeffers in the great tradition of Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman and connects him to explicitly ecological contemporary poets like Gary Snyder and W. S. Merwin.
The second chapter, "The Making of the Poet," touches briefly on Jeffers's biographical details, major works and themes, as well as his critical reputation. Despite the neglect in academic circles, despite the scornful dismissal by influential critics, Jeffers remains a troubling, brooding presence on the American literary horizon. The passion and power of his prophetic poetry seem to have instilled an urgency and relevance to contemporary environmental consciousness. Though he did not actively participate in any environmental movement, many poets with explicit environmental concerns have acknowledged their debt to the older poet. This chapter rejects the notion of Jeffers as an isolated figure on the American literary scene and relates him to major poetic predecessors and briefly notes his impact on later twentieth century poets. It points out that many modern poets who have called for a shift of focus from humanism to post humanism and insisted on man's position as a mere node in the great web of life have been directly or indirectly influenced by Jeffers. It traces the revival of interest in Jeffers in recent decades, and contends that he should be placed as a major poetic voice in the canon of American poetry.

Chapter III. "Revisiting Jeffers Country," explores the poet's relationship to his coastal landscape, which plays such a crucial role in his poetry; the land assumes more importance than the human characters in the poems, enabling a shift of emphasis from the human to the non-human parts of the ecosystem. It relates how the poet celebrates the rich diversity of life on the coast, looks at how the violence of the coast reflected in the poems facilitates the apocalyptic temper, and concludes that the place plays a vitally important role in shaping Jeffers's vision. The study reconfirms Jeffers's contention that the land is his "loved subject," the "protagonist" in his poems.
The next chapter, "Heralding the Apocalypse," examines the cultural and social apocalypticism of Jeffers and sees apocalypticism as the most powerful metaphor available to the environmental imagination in that it can easily arouse a sense of crisis. It examines how the geographic features of the Californian coast, where forest fires, storms, deluges and earthquakes were frequent occurrences, strengthen his apocalyptic tone. The chapter examines the violent imagery of cataclysm used by Jeffers to convey a sense of impending catastrophe and looks at how he uses the narrative methodology of the apocalyptists. It traces the ambivalence in Jeffers's apocalyptic stance and concludes that his catastrophe is followed by the revelation or "discovery" of the beauty of things and an ecocentric vision of organic wholeness. His stance apart, the detached, objective perspective and his prophetic utterances are in the apocalyptic mould. In spite of the ambivalence in the nature of his poetic apocalypses, one is able to see the intense environmental concern in his poems.

Chapter V, "Ecocentric Dimensions," focuses on the devices that enable Jeffers to put across his vision. The use of the myth of cyclic return as a metaphor for the cyclical nature of existence and thereby the unending ecological process of birth-death-decomposition-reabsorption-rebirth, is seen as an ecocentric device. An explication of the long poem "Tamar" examines the function of the theme of incest, and of poetic devices like myth, perspective, and choric interludes. While incest is a symbol for human introversion, perspective becomes an effective device to attain the ecological vision that is able to perceive the beauty of the whole. A few Jeffersian characters are examined as prototypes of modern man, and the obsessive traits that bring about their downfall are seen as symptomatic of man's compulsive self-
importance. The individual tragedies epitomize the tragedy of the human race and implicates the whole world in the imminent destruction.

Chapter VI, "The Web of Life," studies a few relevant short poems, relating them to the current trends in ecology and to environmental movements. It holds that Jeffers's ideas are remarkably congruent to the principles of ecophilosophies of the latter half of the twentieth century, like deep ecology, and later scientific concepts like the Systems Theory of Life and the Gaia Hypothesis, which instil a sacramental awareness of an earth that appears to be animate. Relating his poetry to these concepts helps to lend his poetic ideas a validity that make them acceptable in a later age nurtured in a scientific atmosphere.

The last chapter, "From Homo sapiens to the Ecosphere: A Shift in Focus," presents Jeffers's philosophy of inhumanism as a severe criticism of humanism and examines it as an ecological philosophy which could become an alternative to homocentric assumptions that are in many ways responsible for the environmental crisis and are in need of reassessment and redefinition. "The Double Axe" is explicated in an effort to understand the ambiguous inhumanist stance of ecological equilibrium and humility that very few are able to attain. Inhumanism emerges as a state of mind that is necessary though not sufficient to solve the problem of the broken balance between man and nature. The chapter interprets inhumanism not as a negative, misanthropic, pessimistic philosophy, but as a celebration of an optimistic view that looks beyond humanity to a transhuman magnificence.

The thesis stresses and expounds the poet's ecocentric dimensions in an effort to project him as a poetic predecessor to a later generation of environmentally conscious poets and ecologists, and as an environmental prophet who tries to communicate the sense of urgency at the imminence of man-made disaster. While
acknowledging that different topics, like the poet's philosophy, his apocalyptic stance, his poetic devices, his relationship to the land, are brought together to formulate the argument for an ecological vision, one hopes that by the end of the thesis these diverse strands would be seen integrated into a whole that would prove to be more than the sum of the parts.

It has to be acknowledged that an examination of the entire vast corpus of Jeffers's poetry has not been possible in this thesis. The study had to be confined to a few representative poems found to be relevant from an ecocritical perspective. The limitations of the overview of American literature are also acknowledged; constraints of time have allowed only a quick glance at and very brief references to each writer. Further, some major writers in whose work the landscape is not perceived to be a major influence have been omitted. The directions in the fifth edition of The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers have been followed in the preparation of the thesis with certain minor variations. A "Works Cited" list, which contains only those works that are cited in the text, appears at the end of each chapter, for easy reference. "Selected Bibliography" at the end of the thesis, on the other hand, consists of almost all the works that have been referred to in the course of this study.