Chapter - III
Nature and Culture:
Intermingling of Soil and Water

“Nature and culture cannot be willed together by glibly naturalizing culture,
by culture simplistically proclaiming itself part of nature.”

(Jhan Hochman “Green Cultural Studies”)

Literary studies, as Wallace and Armbruster have pointed out in their
introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology, have given
more standing to culture than nature, and nature has acted merely as “a backdrop for
human drama”. However, the advent of ecocriticism, with its “continued focus on
nature and wilderness writing,” shifted the focus from culture to nature. But Wallace
and Armbruster have a lingering fear that this might still reinforce the “same nature-
culture dualism ... this time, privileging nature over culture” (4). The reason perhaps,
as Buell warns, is that in the field of ecocriticism, over a period of time, texts came to
be judged by the ecocritical criteria which has been “either too broad, incorporating
any of the vast array of literary works in which ‘nature’ figure[d] at all, or far too
narrow, excluding all but the most clearly ecologically orientated work” (qtd. in
Garrard 53). In recent times, one of the main aims of ecocriticism has been to
challenge the dualistic thinking. So, the purpose in this chapter is to find out how
nature and culture, which were seen as “separate sides of a dualistic construct” in the
early phase of ecocriticism, have intertwined in Frost’s poetry.

and Literature in America,” Dana Phillips has reiterated the views of his “fly fishing
“buddies” that “culture is essential if nature is to be properly appreciated” thus highlighting the importance of both nature and culture. This, however, does not indicate that nature and culture are opposites and in order to appreciate one, the other need to be criticized as is the case with the genre of pastoral in literature where the purity of nature is highlighted contrasting it with the culture of the cities, which it is said, has resulted in man’s alienation from nature. This trope has enforced a dualism that sets nature against culture. The obvious aim of pastoral is to prove the supremacy of nature over culture. The study of Frost’s pastorals has also been carried out somewhat in the same vein. This chapter intends to find out the relevance of Frost’s pastoral in the present time.

Both John F. Lynen and Robert Faggen have found that Frost’s poems can be called pastoral only in form. Frost’s pastoral, according to Robert Faggen, has much to do with the “origin, the locative voices of his characters” (53). But, if pastoral goes by the classical definition of “any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” (Gifford 2), Frost’s poetry does qualify because, in many of his poems, he has presented the contrast between the rural world of New England and the life of city. There is a clear demarcation between the country and the city in the poem “Christmas Tree” where “The city had withdrawn into itself / And left at last the country to the country.” But despite technological advancement, the city is still dependent on the country and in the form of a stranger, “who looked the city,” comes to the countryside

To look for something it had left behind

And could not do without and keep its Christmas. (105-106, 1-11)
The stranger had come to buy the Christmas trees. But he had come to the wrong place because the commercialization of cities had not yet touched this place. It was a place “Where houses all were churches and have spires” (106, 14) and the people had never thought of selling their balsam trees as Christmas trees to earn money.

The poem “New Hampshire” also brings out the uncorrupted state in which New Hampshire still existed; it was untouched by the commercialization of the cities and retained its purity.

Apples? New Hampshire has them, but unsprayed,  
With no suspicion in stem end or blossom end  
Of vitriol or arsenate of lead,  
And so not good for anything but cider.  
Her unpruned grapes are flung like lariats  
Far up the birches out of reach of man. (164, 159-164)

Not just New Hampshire but even Vermont – both are delightful states for their absurdly  
Small towns — Lost Nation, Bungey, Muddy Boo,  
Poplin, Still Corners (so called not because  
The place is silent all day long, nor yet  
Because it boasts a whisky still — because  
It set out once to be a city and still
Both the places haven’t lost their purity because they are still close to the wilderness and have not yet transformed into cities.

The city is full of evil. This is what Jonah tries to tell in *A Masque of Mercy* when he says that it is the seventh time he has been sent “to prophesy against the city evil.” When the Keeper asks Jonah: “What have you got against the city?” Jonah replies, “We have enough against it, haven’t we? / Cursed be the era that congested it.” The Keeper chides him for talking like an agrarian, however, he himself would “rather be lost in the woods / Than found in church.”

Frost presents the contrast between the country and the town in his poetry. Angyal feels it is because Frost had lived such a life first-hand and understood the town-country dichotomy realistically that he presents it “as a brute reality rather than merely as a pastoral convention.” Frost’s realistic treatment of the country and town life shows him “not as an aristocrat writing pastorals but rather as a sophisticated rustic who knows a country world well enough to use it precisely and expertly” (Isaacs 73). Frost was, in fact, “a New Englander who shows what that part of country is like, the quality of the people” (Gerber 39).

Frost’s New England is not “a democratic utopia,” according to Faggen, and because of that reason his poetry at times does not fit into the strict definitions of the pastoral: “his landscapes are often barren, his shepherds seem to be rather tough farmers, and contemplation always appears threatened and mingled with hard labor” (50). Frost’s New England is “a place of labor, struggle, and warfare” perhaps because “Frost’s agrarians appear at a time of great threat of extinction from highly developed technology and industry as well as social upheaval from immigration”.

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However, “these threats yield in Frost neither nostalgia nor messianic longing” (Faggen 50), as should be the case in pastoral genre in which “a pointed contrast of rural retreat and the harms consequent on civilization” is usually incorporated (Garrard 36).

Pastoral, as Garrard finds, idealises rural life to an extent that it obscures the realities of labour and hardship (33). The “Virgilian eclogue” from which Frost claimed to have drawn his inspiration is often associated with “a retreat into a natural landscape into colloquy free from labor and strife” (Faggen 54). But Frost does not portray such a picture of rural life in his poetry. He gives us a realistic picture of the rural world, in which “the American working farmer was an integral part of his New England landscape. Far from being indifferent to human needs, or to the dignity and worth of labor, as some of his critics have implied, Frost’s poems, according to Angyal, ‘hold as an ideal that human situation in which ‘love and need are one, / And the work is play for mortal stakes’.” Many of his poems show that “Frost pays tribute to yankee values of hard work, good craftsmanship, and ingenuity. His regional vision invokes an egalitarian society of yeoman farmers and their wives, laborers, and rural townspeople” (Angyal 49). This might be the reason why Ezra Pound called Frost’s poems “modern georgics”; poems, which, according to Faggen, are “about farm work that stand, as a tradition, in contrast to pastoral; it is a type of didactic poetry extolling hard labor and a scientific approach to nature” (49). “Build Soil: A Political Pastoral” has been called a fine example of “modern georgics.”

Frost not only presented the realistic life of people in New England in his spatial pastorals but also deflated a conception about the life in the natural world. Frost’s poems often “poke fun at the pretenses of urbanity and sophistication,” at the same time, they “reveal the brutal and sinister qualities of country folk, deflating
romantic fantasies of natural innocence and virtue” (Faggen 51). Cook finds that, “Frost is not a regional apologist, either for the behaviour of its people or for the vagaries of its natural phenomena. He gives us insights into lonely hill wives who suffer in their loneliness “finalities / Besides the grave” and hired men who have “nothing to look backward to with pride, / And nothing to look forward to with hope” (22). There are instances of his characters suffering even when they were in the midst of nature and Frost’s people, according to Gerber, most certainly “do not ordinarily suffer from the modern diseases” (138). Frost, if Bagby can be believed, “was well acquainted with...the squeamish and fearful kind of attitude toward the wild which he generally takes to be symptomatic of neurosis.” Frost, Bagby finds, like Thoreau “knows that, without constant exploration beyond the road we know, [even] ‘Our village life would stagnate’” (28).

Frost’s spatial pastorals do not attest to the qualities of pure pastorals. His temporal pastorals also run the same risk. They are, no doubt, characterised by nostalgia for the lost world as is evident in “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” where the poet bemoans the loss of heaven

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down today.

Nothing gold can stay. (222-223, 1-8)

Genesis 3, the story of Man’s fall, according to Garrard, is essentially an elegy of lost pastoral bounty and innocence (37) and Frost also seems here to exploit that myth. But looking at another of his poem, “Away,” makes it clear that the speaker, when he leaves behind good friends in town, does not do so inspired by the myth of the lost world

Don’t think I leave

For the outer dark

Like Adam and Eve

Put out of the Park.

Forget the myth.

There is no one I

Am put out with

Or put out by. (413, 9-16)

He obeys the urge of a song and if dissatisfied, he may return “with what I learn/ From having died.”

Many poems, such as this, make it clear that Frost’s retreat into the woods is of metaphysical nature. Frost’s pastoral belongs to “a rich and complex tradition, a mode by which,” according to Faggen, “great authors like Theocritus, Virgil, Dante, Milton, Wordsworth and Thoreau explored “questions of human equality, man’s place
in nature, and the nature of faith” (49). Frost also intended to know man’s place in nature. Therefore, in his poem “Into My Own,” the persona expresses his desire to be lost in the woods, “so old and firm they scarcely show the breeze, / Were not, as ’twere, the merest mask of gloom, / But stretched away unto the edge of doom” (5, 2-4). The speaker wishes that

I should not be withheld but that some day
Into their vastness I should steal away,
Fearless of ever finding open land,
Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand. (5, 5-8)

The persona’s intention to get away from the highway may lead the reader to believe that he wishes to escape from the ills of society. Frost, however, insisted that retreat should not be considered escape but “pursuit” and that life was “a pursuit of a pursuit of a pursuit of a pursuit” (qtd. in Faggen 50). His poetry, according to Faggen, depicts “retreat, rather, than escape from universal chaos as a way to reflect upon and strengthen the self” (50).

The seeker retreats to the natural world. But he does not get any respite from the natural world of the countryside because he is seeking solitude neither from the humdrum of the city life nor the ills of society. His pursuit is of metaphysical nature and the seeker finds that in his metaphysical pursuit “no landscape provides innocence or happiness except, perhaps, ‘a momentary stay against confusion’ ” (Faggen 51). If as posited in pastoral, nature is the only place where all of man’s quests lead to, and end, then it is an illusion. The wanderer in “Reluctance” has gone through the fields and the woods; he has even climbed the hills and after looking at the world from there
he descended and finally came back to the highway home and he is surprised that his quest has ended. But the heart aches “to seek, / But the feet question “Whither?”

Ah, when to the heart of man

Was it ever less than a treason

To go with the drift of things,

To yield with a grace to reason,

And bow and accept the end

Of a love or a season? (30, 19-24)

So, Frost, more than a pastoral poet emerges as an anti-pastoralist. It is the realistic portrayal of New England life in his poetry and also the deflating of a life free of care in midst of nature that makes him an anti-pastoralist. The endeavour in this chapter, however, is not to prove that Frost is a pastoral poet or claim he is an anti-pastoralist. The aim is to find out, through the study of his poems, how relevant pastoral is as a trope in the present time and what hope does it hold for the future in the field of ecocriticism.

One of the problems in the classical pastoral’s conception of nature, in Garrard’s opinion, is that classical pastoral was disposed “to distort or mystify social and environmental history,” and so it provided “a locus, legitimated by tradition, for the feeling of loss and alienation from nature to be produced by the Industrial Revolution” (39). This proves a hurdle not only in the present environmental movement but it may also hinder the progress of the field of ecocriticism which challenges dualistic thinking. Frost used this genre at a time when the changes
wrought by the industrial revolution were going on in New England. Frost told interviewer Richard Poirier in 1960 that people expected “to hear me say nasty things about machines” (qtd. in Hecht 64). But he did not do so. Rather, the study of his poetry reveals his “deep ambivalence toward modern technology and its social consequences” (Hecht).

The poem “A Lone Striker,” dramatizes before the readers the pastoral retreat of the lone striker. The mill gates were closed on him because he was late. If someday they [the people at the mill] needed him, they knew that they had to search for him in a wood, which he praises as a place where

... tall as trees, were cliffs;

And if he stood on one of these,

’T would be among the tops of trees,

Their upper branches round him wreathing,

Their breathing mingled with his breathing. (274, 36-41)

He would be singing about the beauty of nature in its midst, away from the humdrum of the mill. But, there seems to be no bitterness in him towards the mill and the culture it has brought with it.

The factory was very fine;

He wished it all the modern speed. (274, 50-51)

There is an acceptance of change.
The broken man with his legs lost to the machine in the poem “The Self Seeker”, according to Hecht, “is a heartbreaking evocation of the way the new machines of modern industry can diminish and destroy human lives” (67). His well-meaning friend also holds the machinery responsible for making him invalid and thus hindering him from enjoying the beauty of his orchises; he even calls it “our death” but the self-seeker admonishes him light-heartedly:

You make that sound as if it wasn’t so
With everything. What we live by we die by. (94, 47-48)

The broken man has accepted the changes brought about in their life by machinery:

You can hear the small buzz saws whine, the big saw
Caterwaul to the hills around the village
As they both bite the wood. It’s all our music.
One ought as a good villager to like it.
No doubt it has a sort of prosperous sound,
And it’s our life.” (94, 40-46)

The saw-machine in the poem “Out, Out—” has also become a part of the life of people living in that place and the people, from where they were working on the saw, could lift their eyes and

...count

Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont. (136, 3-5)

And though it was responsible for snuffing out the life of the young boy, Frost, as Hecht finds, “refuses to demonize it” (65). It is the thing to which the people returned: “And they, since they were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.”

Technology had definitely made inroads into the lives of the people inhabiting Frost’s poetic world as it had the lives of the people living at that time. “With a laugh, /An oath of towns that set the wild at naught,” was brought “the telephone and telegraph” into the lives of the people of “The Line-gang” (141, 11-13). Frost’s critique, as Hencht finds, “bears on the way new technologies and their wealthy beneficiaries had begun to intrude into what might have remained (and, to a small degree, has remained) a traditional society of selfreliance, cautious but genuine fellowship, and respect for the sublimity of nature” but there is no “thorough rejection or an uncritical nostalgia for a vanishing past” (65) which characterizes a conventional pastoral.

In the dated popular-science medley, “The Literate Farmer and the Planet Venus,” the mysterious light observed in the western sky at evening did attract a traveller who stops and knocks at the door of a house and compliments the residents of that house on “this star”

“You get the beauty of from where you are
To see it so, the bright and only one
In sunset light, you’d think it was the sun” (368, 10-12)
The mighty farmer, though glad to see the traveller’s curiosity, informs him that it is not the star “serious” as is commonly perceived nor the star of Bethlehem, rather it is not a star at all.

“...It’s a new patented electric light,
Put up on trial by that Jerseyite
So much is being now expected of,
To give developments the final shove
And turn us into the next specie folks
Are going to be, unless these monkey jokes
Of the last fifty years are all a libel,
And Darwin’s proved mistaken, not the Bible.
I s’pose you have your notions on the vexed
Question of what we’re turning next.” (369, 39-48)

The traveller tries to interpret the situation in metaphysical light:

We need the interruption of the night
To ease the attention off when overtight,
To break our logic in too long a flight,
And ask us if our premises are right. (370, 80-84)
The mighty farmer tells the traveller the reality of the times. His son in Jersey has a friend who knows Mr. Edison and

... nobody’s so deep [as Mr. Edison]

In incandescent lamps and ending sleep.

The old man argues science cheapened speed.

A good cheap anti-dark is now the need.

Give us a good cheap twenty-four-hour day,

No part of which we’d have to waste, I say,

And who knows where we can’t get! Wasting time

In sleep or slowness is the deadly crime.

He gave up sleep himself some time ago,

It puffs the face and brutalizes so. (371, 96-105)

These are the characteristics of the “Marvelous world in nineteen-twenty-six” (372, 141). This is the world Frost’s characters were inhabiting where if nature was accepted as a hard fact of life, the advent of science and technology was also acknowledged. So, in such an environment, what sort of relationship did Frost envision between man and nature?

Leo Marx, while talking about the “middle landscape, argues that “American literature, emerging in the nineteenth century in the midst of massive industrialisation, can attempt to mediate between competing values, ‘the contradiction between rural myth and technological fact ’ ” (qtd. in Garrard 49). Frost, in his poetry, also seems to
suggest such a “middle landscape.” In “The Vantage Point,” the persona expresses his
desire to be placed in the middle ground which might metaphorically act as his
“middle landscape” — a place between nature on the one hand and civilization on the
other. He retreated from the mankind to the woods but when he gets tired of the trees
as well he seeks

... again mankind,

Well I know where to hie me — in the dawn,

To a slope where the cattle keep the lawn.

There amid lolling juniper reclined,

Myself unseen, ... (17, 1-5)

It is the place on the one side of which he can see

...in white defined

Far off the homes of men, and farther still,

The graves of men on an opposing hill,

Living or dead, whichever are to mind. (17, 5-8)

And when, by noon, he has had enough of these, he has just to turn on his arm

...and lo,

The sunburned hillside sets my face aglow,

My breathing shakes the bluest like a breeze,

I smell the earth, I smell the bruised plant,
I look into the crater of the ant. (17, 10-14)

While talking about the poem “Rose Pogonias,” Faggen finds that nature in Frost’s poetry creates “rare objects of beauty” whose presence “reflects a larger, encompassing nature that includes human labor and technology (58). That is why

A saturated meadow,
Sun-shaped and jewel small,
A circle scarcely wider
Than the trees around were tall;
Where winds were quite excluded,
And the air was stifling sweet
With the breath of many flowers, –

A temple of the heat. (13, 1-8)

Frost had realized that the times were changed. “Pan with Us” is a poem that expresses the poet’s predicament as to what he should write about in such changed times. To sing of “pagan mirth” in the changed circumstances would be of no good.

Like a long forgotten character from a story, Pan, with his skin, his hair and his eyes, all turning gray, came out of the woods one day and stood

On a height of naked pasture land;

In all the country he did command

He saw no smoke and he saw no roof.
That was well! And he stamped a hoof. ("Pan with Us," 23-24, 7-10)

Nobody came to this place now except “someone to salt the half-wild steer,/ Or homespun children with clicking pails”

He tossed his pipes, too hard to teach

A new world song, far out of reach,

For a sylvan sign that the blue jay’s screech

And the whimper of hawks beside the sun

Were music enough for him, for one. (24, 16-20)

If seen from the ecocritical point of view, it implies that the trope of old pastoral would not suffice in the present times because

Times were changed from what they were:

Such pipes kept less of power to stir

The fruited bough of the juniper

And the fragile bluets clustered there

Than the merest aimless breath of air. (24, 21-25)

They were pipes of pagan mirth,

And the world had found new terms of worth.

He laid them down on the sunburned earth

And ravelled a flower and looked away.
Play? Play”—What should he play? (24, 26-30)

Does this imply that the world needs a new world song or the pastoral trope can still be of some use with some revisioning?

“A pastoral for the present and the future,” Love asserts, “calls for a better science of nature, a greater understanding of its complexity, a more radical awareness of its primal energy and stability, and a more acute questioning of the values of the supposedly sophisticated society to which we are bound” (Love 234-235). What is required in the present times is the redefinition of pastoral, in which, as Love elaborates, “contact with the green world be acknowledged as something more than a temporary excursion into simplicity which exists primarily for the sake of its eventual renunciation and a return to the ‘real’ world at the end”.

In the early twentieth century, US ecologists such as Frederick Clements firmly believed in nature’s original and intrinsic identity. George Perkins Marsh also said,

Nature, left undisturbed [by human interference], so fashions her territory as to give it almost unchanging permanence of form, outline, and proportion, except when shattered by geologic conclusions; and in these comparatively rare cases of derangement, she sets herself at once to repair the superficial damage, and to restore, as nearly as practicable, the former aspect of her dominion (qtd. in Botkin 54).

Botkin calls it “the classic statement of the belief in the constancy and stability of nature” (54) which he finds has been dominant in the Western history, rather “it has propelled the thoughts about environment for long”. And it is, perhaps, this limited
assumptions that we make about nature, “the unspoken often unrecognized perspective from which we view our environment” that has thwarted our efforts “to make progress with the environmental issues” (5).

Nature’s original and intrinsic identity, in Garrard’s opinion, was “essentially a version of pastoral, since it postulated a stable, harmonious state of nature in the absence of human ‘interference’” (57). The idea of nature as “a harmonious and stable machine” as stable in the pastoral, according to Garrard, got support from both Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman tradition and it was accepted by the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (56).

The Clementsian theory was rejected by ecologists in the 1940s, but its rhetoric continued to shape environmental discourse. The association between biological diversity, ecosystem stability and an ideal, mature state of nature is an article of faith for most ecocritics and philosophers. Colleen Clements dismissed this “fairy tale ideal of an ecosystem of achieved and unchanging harmony”, claiming that stasis is unusual in natural systems. She points out that “ecosystems do maintain a kind of equilibrium, but it is characterised as much by change as by stasis” (Clements 218). Daniel Botkin also stressed “that nature undisturbed is not constant in form, structure, or proportion, but changes at every scale of time and space” (62).

After going through Frost’s poems, one will find that changes occur in nature even when it is undisturbed, especially by human. What better example of natural drama could be seen than in the poem “Design,” in which the main protagonists are the spider, the moth and the white heal-all and not man. There is no interference of man in nature; he is merely an observer and he enters the scene when the whole of the deadly natural drama has already been played.

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In “Mending Walls” also the main action of nature, that necessitates the speaker’s and his neighbour’s task of mending wall, happened when man is away from the scene

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast (21)

The speaker may not straightaway name nature as the culprit but it is clear that it was nature that was at work while man was away from the natural scene.

Just as it is difficult to find nature at its work in “Mending Walls,” similarly, it is difficult to find out how the blueberries appeared from nowhere in the poem by the same name

That’s always the way with the blueberries, though:
There may not have been the ghost of a sign
Of them anywhere under the shade of the pine,
But get the pine out of the way, you may burn
The pasture all over until not a fern
Or glass-blade is left, not to mention a stick,
And presto, they’re up all around you as thick
And hard to explain as a conjuror’s trick. (“Blueberries 14-21)
Difficult though it is, yet it is not a conjuror’s trick but the process of nature that goes on, unnoticed by any human eye.

Nature goes on irrespective of man’s presence or absence; its reclaiming its territory in the absence of man shows the futility of human effort to give form to nature. The deserted house in the poem “Ghost House” is reclaimed by nature and

Over ruined fences the grapevines shield.

The woods come back to the mowing field;

The orchard tree has grown one copse

Of new wood and old where the woodpecker chops;

The footpath down to the well is healed.

In “The Black Cottage,” the owner, the old lady is dead and her sons have decided that “they won’t have the place disturbed.” But how naive they are because though no human disturbs the place, nature had already started its work: bees had made their home on the windowsill and when the minister struck the clapboard, “fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted.”

Nature is always on a lookout to catch man unawares as the speaker “In the Home Stretch” feels that it is

Waiting to steal a step on us whenever

We drop our eyes or turn to other things,

As in the game ‘ten-step’ the children play.
Nature also claims the labour of man left unattended. The persona in “The Wood-Pile” “in turning to fresh task” had forgotten his handiwork: a pile of wood and now it was decaying in the woods. Nature had begun reclaiming what was its own and “Clematis / Had wound strings round and round it like a bundle.”

“The ‘ecological rhetoric’ that draws on the outmoded and poorly understood scientific models,” according to Garrard, “need to be cast off” (56). In showing a nature which is not static and stable and one which goes on irrespective of “human interference,” Frost seems to provide an “ecological rhetoric” which is more scientific. He sees nature in continuous process and perhaps that is why he finds hope even in decay and the end of seasons.

The leaves in the poem “In Hardwood Grove,” before they “can mount again / to fill the trees with another shade” the next season must

... must go down past things coming up,

They must go down into the dark decayed.

They must be pierced by flowers and put

Beneath the feet of dancing flowers.

Nothing goes waste in the scheme of nature. Even the “soft petals fallen from the apple tree” in the poem “Putting in the Seed,” in the process of nature have their importance. They may be soft “but not so barren quite, / mingled with these, smooth bean and wrinkled pea” because after mingling with the soil and acting as manure they have led to the germination of the seeds.
In the “slow smokeless burning” that marks the decay of the log of woods left unattended in the woods in the poem “The Wood-Pile” there is the process of nature going on. Nature is a continuous process and it holds hope. Though the Hyla brook in the poem “Hyla Brook,” as the native claims “run out of song and speed” by June yet after running through all of its course, having “gone groping underground” “Or flourished and come up in jewelweed, / Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent, / Even against the way its water went,” it will have completed its natural process. And though “its bed is left a faded paper sheet / Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat,” the next season it will again gain its “song and speed.” This running out of and gaining speed is the continuous process.

So, Frost, in and through his poetry, breaks the pastoral conception that propagates “a stable, harmonious state of nature in the absence of human ‘interference’.” Nature as it emerges out of the poetry of Frost does not exist in the state of stasis; it is a continuous process which goes on even without the interference of man. So, to always see good in nature, only when man is not present, is a wrong conception of nature. Similarly, human influence on nature is not always corrupt and nature and culture can exist together. Frost has provided us with a new, sound “ecological rhetoric” which is more scientific than the one postulated in the pastoral tradition.

For critic Vera Norwood, “nature and culture are interactive processes: human culture is affected by the landscape as well as effecting change on it” (qtd. in Garrard 76). Critic John C. Kemp commented that Frost’s world is not “a world of orchards and pastures only. There is a social world, too, composed of men and women who struggle unsuccessfully to live and work together” while also experiencing “the good and bad of rural life, its joys and satisfaction, its fears and limitations” (qtd. in Ryden
Ryden too finds the people in Frost’s poetry as “grounded and located people” who are “firmly embedded in a specific regional landscape by the circumstances of their lives and work and as such cannot be fully understood apart from it” and nature is so “deeply implicated in patterns of local life and economy” that “any attempt to analyze the presence and meaning of nature in Frost’s poetry must therefore do so within the context of, and in conjunction with, the specific regional culture that Frost draws on and depicts in his New England poems” (299).

“The common omnibus term used for designating the sphere of the nonhuman environment in literary works is setting,” according to Buell, and “It deprecates what it denotes, implying that the physical environment serves for artistic purposes merely as backdrop, ancillary to the main event” (The Environmental Imagination 85). However, in Frost’s poetry the natural environment emerges as a powerful presence that plays an important role not merely in the imagination of the people but the whole of the lives of the people of New England. It is used not merely as a setting for human drama, rather it becomes a character that plays an important role in human drama, determining the life and actions of man. Nature is “not a mere background but one of the cast” in human dramas for Frost (Monroe 204).

Frost has been maliciously called the “expositor of Yankee virtue” by Thompson in his official biography of Frost (Faggen 2). Frost has never denied the fact that he writes of a particular place and its people, rather he has acknowledged it in his poetry (The North of Boston is his “book of people”) and in his other writings too. He has written about those people so truthfully that in his poem “On Being Chosen Poet of Vermont,” he can proudly claim that

Breathes there a bard who isn’t moved
When he finds his verse is understood
And not entirely disapproved
By his country and his neighbourhood? (469, 1-4)

His people do not contradict him, perhaps because in his poetry he has presented their life, which is implicated in the natural environment of that place, so truthfully and precisely that they have nothing to complain or counter.

Take for instance the poem “The Death of a Hired Man,” which reveals a lot about the Yankee character. Frost, in March 1915 wrote to William Stanley Braithwaite of the Boston Evening Transcript:

It would seem absurd to say it (and you mustn’t quote me as saying it) but I suppose . . . that my conscious interest in people was at first no more than an almost technical interest in their speech — in what I used to call their sentence sounds — the sound of sense. . . . There came a day about ten years ago when I . . . made the discovery in doing The Death of the Hired Man that I was interested in neighbors for more than merely their tones of speech — and always had been. (qtd. in Sanders 73)

In the character of Silas, Frost portrays the Yankee pride, “pride that can be brought low but never wholly vanquished” (Scott 70). Radcliffe Squires has found this poem “almost meaningless for the reader since it is meaningless for the characters” because the characters in this poem are “incapable of change” and therefore, “incapable of learning” (qtd. in Scott 70). But Scott defends the characters
because he finds in their “obdurate resistance to change” “a reflection of the hard New England country that has shaped them” (Scott 70).

The poem “Brown’s Descent” also brings out not only the true Yankee spirit in the humorous character of Brown but also the harsh reality of the natural environment that has formed his character thus. Thompson found that the way in which the Yankees “took their hardships as a matter of course, without complaining and without seeming to find any reason for the expectation that circumstances should change” had “something casually stoic” in it (283); and it is a fact their stoicism is the result of the difficulties which mark their life in New England. They know that they cannot change the hard facts of their life which are the result of the natural environment in which they are living and, therefore, like Brown, it is best for them to bow “with grace to natural law.”

The people in the poem “The Mountain” have realized the limits that nature has imposed upon them

We were but sixty voters last election.

We can’t in nature grow to many more:

That thing takes all the room! (41, 25-27)

“The thing” that they refer to is the huge mountain which “held the town as in shadow” and exercises a great control over their lives too. They have to live by the rules of nature otherwise they will have to face the same fate that the people in “On Taking from the Top to Broaden the Base” had to face due to their arrogance and pride. They had challenged the mountain, which had grown old; they called it “squat old pyramid” unable to roll even one stone. But no sooner did they utter these words
that the mountain showed its power and in one avalanche of mud it drowned everyone
and

...none was left to prate

Of an old mountain’s case

That still took from its top

To broaden its base. (298, 17-20)

Frost’s poetry reveals that the life of the people, inhabiting Frost’s poetic
world, less out of necessity and more due to their choice, is determined by the natural
environment, and thus, it would not be an exaggeration to point out that the character
of the people living at that place is moulded by the environment in which they are
living and this does determine the way in which they envision their natural
environment. Thus, Frost’s poetic text emerges as an ecologically-oriented text
envisioned by Buell, in which “Human history is implicated in natural history” and
“the nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a
presence” (7).

Ecocriticism, according to Heise, also examines “how the concept of ‘nature’
is defined, what values are assigned to it or denied it and why, and the way in which
the relationship between humans and nature is envisioned” and this, as has been
mentioned above has to be done with reference to “a cultural community at a specific
historical moment.” It has already been noticed that nature was a major influence in
the life of the people of New England and at the same time there were certain
changes, technological as well as social, that were going on around these people
which were to determine their conception of nature and the way they treated it. “Frost
portrays members of the rural New England working class, he creates figures who interact with their environment not only with their minds but also with their hands” (Ryden 299). Nature is a real presence in their lives with which they interact either “in work or in play.” In Frost’s poetry, a balance is struck between nature and culture. If, on the one hand, “the human history is implicated in the natural history,” on the other, New England culture does not seem to have an all-corrupting influence on nature, rather some of the cultural artefacts help in better understanding of human relationship with nature.

Thomas K. Dean finds that “ecocriticism is a study of culture and cultural products (art works, writings, scientific theories, etc.) that is in some way connected with the human relationship to the natural world.” If art works, writings, even scientific theories are studied in ecocriticism to show the human relationship with the natural world then vernacular artifacts can also be read “as environmental texts of a sort, interpretive expression of a local culture’s working relationship with a particular geographical setting” (Ryden 301).

“Frost,” according to Ryden, “developed a version of nature poetry that was true to the place in which he lived, “a place where notions of nature and culture were inextricable and in which eloquent material environmental texts lay thick on the ground” (Ryden 310). The vernacular artefacts like the stone walls, cellar holes, barn foundations, tools, haystacks, woodpiles, and other such relic, found in the poetry of Frost, according to Ryden, might look like culture’s invasion on nature, however, these vernacular artifacts, “do not erase nature but rather help us understand nature—or, more particularly, the attitudes toward and relationships with nature held in the mind of people who create that artifact” (297).
One of the cultural artefacts which may be seen as “human manipulation of the natural world,” according to Ryden, is the stone wall which is a recurrent feature in many of Frost’s poems. It is present in “Mending Walls,” “In The Home-Stretch,” “The Cow In Apple Time,” “Brown’s Descent,” and “Tresspass.” The wall has gained somewhat of a symbolic significance in Frost’s poetry. Asked once about his intended meaning in the poem “Mending Walls”, Frost recast the question: “In my Mending Wall was my intention fulfilled with the characters portrayed and the atmosphere of the place?” Montiero feels, Frost answered obliquely. The wall in this poem, Ryden finds, has become “richly symbolic, deeply metaphorical, but at the same time it has literal presence as an actual stone fence of the sort that was built all over New England, fences that communicated intertwined social and environmental meanings” (304). Tracing the history of these walls, Ryden finds that stone wall building was “a common part of rural New England material folk culture,” and, besides “their immediate functional purpose, walls carried two primary meanings within the communities in which they were made, seen, and used.” The first use, according to Ryden, “enacted and objectified the New England farmer’s desire and ability to master his physical environment” as they “enabled New England farmers to control and reshape the environment so that it would support an agricultural economy and be subservient to human needs and desires, and walled-in fields embodied order and cultural control over natural materials and processes” (303). The second use, Ryden finds, is that “The walls communicate and facilitate social relationships within the agricultural world that depended on that environment” (303-304).

Like the wall, there are many other artifacts like abandoned houses, barns, cellars, etc in Frost’s poetry. Such cultural artefacts which dotted the New England landscape give insights into the changes occurring in man’s relationship with nature.
The changes that were brought about in the New England society are attributed to large scale industrialization and technology at that time. And if examples are taken into account, they might furnish some reason for their abandonment. New England was the scene of the first Industrial Revolution in the United States, with many textile mills and machine shops operating by 1830. As the textile industry grew, immigration grew as well (History of New England). According to Faggen, “Frost’s agrarians appear at a time of great threat of extinction from highly developed technology and industry as well as social upheaval from immigration”(50). “The retreat of independent farming within a growing, impersonal, capitalized economy,” according to Sanders, “took particular and poignant form in New England” (78). People were abandoning farming and the deserted farms and abandoned houses, like the one in “Ghost House,” were an evidence of the change that industry and technology was bringing about in the countryside.

As Daniel Boorstin puts it down in The Americans: the Democratic Experience, “[By] 1910, a midpoint for the creative process of North of Boston.... rural life was radically altered. Where, in 1800, roughly eighty percent of American men were self-employed, mainly in farming, by 1900, eighty percent were working for wages. Significantly, even those who remained self-employed, including farmers, were now working mainly for money rather than subsistence” (qtd.in Sanders 76 Endnote 18).

The exodus of characters in Frost’s poetry from their place may be due to industrialization and technology but it also speaks of the harsh landscape that the people were placed in. The natural landscape that made farming impossible in that place and the harsh rocky terrain forced people to give up farming. Many a farms were abandoned because it was impossible to carry out farming in them as Meliboeus
finds in “Build Soil.” The man in “Star Splitter” failed to sell his farm for money therefore he burned down his house to buy a telescope. People were not willing to buy his farm perhaps because they did not want to take to farming which was a tiring and unprofitable work in that place. There is the mention of “an old cellar hole” in the poem “The Generation of Men” in the “rock strewn town” of Bow in New Hampshire “where farming had fallen off”.

The nature in Frost’s poetry is the nature of New England, which had quite a rough and hard terrain for the people to live in and equally harsh weather.

New England is made of granite, is mountainous, densely wooded, and its soil is poor. It has a long severe winter, a summer that is milder and more pleasant than in most parts of the States, a short and sudden Spring, a slow and theatrically beautiful fall. Since it adjoins the eastern seaboard, it was one of the first areas to be settled but, as soon as the more fertile lands to the West were opened up, it began to lose population. (Auden 61)

So, “one of Frost’s favorite images is the image of the abandoned house” which, in Britain or Europe, might recall “either historical change, political acts like war or enclosure, or, in the case of abandoned mine buildings, a successful past which came to an end, not because was too strong, but because she had been robbed of everything she possessed. A ruin in Europe, therefore, tends to arouse reflections about human injustice and greed and the nemesis that overtakes human pride,” according to W. H. Auden, “But in Frost’s poetry, a ruin is an image of human heroism, of a defense in the narrow pass against hopeless odds....” (62). The people in Frost’s poetic world tried very hard to survive in harsh circumstances and when they
could not take it any longer, they left the place, leaving behind the signs of their efforts to survive against odds in the form of farms, barns, cellars, etc.

In many of Frost’s poems, Renigald Cook finds “the recurrent image is the melancholy one of decline by defeat and abandonment by default. The image of back-country New England with its old cellar holes, moss-covered gravestones, and tree-choked clearings is a moving and nonsentimental one” (18). In *Robert Frost: A Living Voice*, Cook talks about Henry James visit to the New Hampshire country around Chocorua late in his life, the vivid impression of which he recorded in *The American Scene* thus:

The history was there in its degree and one came upon it, on sunny afternoons, in the form of classic abandoned farms of the rural forefather who had lost patience with his fate. These scenes of old, hard New England effort, defeated by the soil and climate and reclaimed by nature and time—the crumbled, lonely chimney stack, the overgrown threshold, the dried-up well, the cart-track vague and lost—these seemed the only notes to interfere, in their meagreness, with the queer other, the larger eloquence that one kept reading into the picture. (17-18)

Cook finds that James reported accurately, candidly, and feelingly what all honest Yankees must admit: “the decline and fall of one phase in New England’s history” (18). The realistic portrayal of New England countryside affirms his work as being “ecologically oriented.” In an ecologically oriented work, according to Buell, “some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text” (8). Frost, in and through his poetry, reveals New England in a
process of transition from countryside to a town, and situates it at the middle of country and town. If seen through Buell’s eyes, Frost’s poetic text is “a faithful environmental text” (8).

Many characters in Frost’s poetry abandoned their place but there were many who were still left behind in the countryside and for them the place was special. An anthropologist-writer Richard Nelson says, “What makes a place special is the way it buries itself inside the heart, not whether it’s flat or rugged, rich or austere, wet or arid, gentle or harsh, warm or cold, wild or tame. Every place, like every person, is elevated by the love and respect shown toward it, and by the way in which its bounty is received” (Qtd. in Love 234). For them, the artifacts played a role in “negotiating, enabling, and expressing social interaction” (Ryden 302). “Many of Frost’s New England poems,” in Ryden’s opinion, “center on questions of simultaneous social and environmental relationships, on a speaker or character negotiating a connection with, or demonstrating his distance from, a local rural culture grounded in and dependent on the New England landscape” (302-303). Ryden illustrates it through the poem “Mending Walls,” in which the speaker, in looking only at the utilitarian purpose of the wall, distances himself not just from the neighbour but

he holds himself apart from an entire environment and its attendant system of social and material discourse; he separates himself from a complex world of meaning in which vernacular artifacts such as stone walls played an important role, where the natural landscape was intimately known and carefully controlled, and in which handmade objects, in the process of embodying and transmitting this knowledge, perpetually made and re-made good neighbors. The speaker is a placeless person, alienated from his environment, and he is wilfully
ignorant of the meaning lodged in the landscape and in the artifacts that have been built from this landscape and that give it a human shape” (308).

The artifacts have “a voice within his [Frost’s] poetry,” in Ryden’s view, and “Those people in Frost’s New England poems who remain deaf to the discourse of objects seem disconnected from both their physical and social environment, while those who grasp the meaning of artifacts inhabit the landscape deeply in imagination as well as enter more fully into a local society whose ways of living, are grounded there” (310-11). That is why, Ryden finds that, through his vernacular craft in the poem “Ax-Helve”, Baptiste, though an outsider to the place (he is a German), “discloses himself to be deeply rooted in place, and certainly more rooted than his neighbor who is the native.” Baptiste passes on to him both “an artefact” (the finest of his ax-helves) and also “the environmental awareness behind that artefact” and thus, “helps root his neighbor more firmly in place—materially, imaginatively, and socially” (310).

So, just as the outsiders can become natives; in the same way the natives can become outsiders due to their distance and estrangement from the place and consequently from the culture and community they belonged to. Doctor Magoon, a professor in the poem “Hundred Collars,” was born in Lancaster—

…such a little town,

Such a great man. It doesn’t see him often

Of late years, though he keeps the old homestead

And sends the children down there with their mother
To run wild in the summer—a little wild.

Sometimes he joins them for a day or two
And sees old friends he somehow can't get near.

They meet him in the general store at night,
Preoccupied with formidable mail,
Rifling a printed letter as he talks.

They seem afraid. (44, 1-10)

They find it hard to break the ice with him with his “formidable mail from which he can hardly take his eyes off. They are the people who want undivided attention when they wish to speak to someone. As in “A Time to Talk,” the speaker knows that:

When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don’t stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven’t hoed,
And shout from where I am, “What is it?”(124, 1-5)

Without thinking twice about his work, one friend goes up to the other

...to the stone wall

For a friendly visit. (124, 9-10)
The wall stands between the people still they maintain friendly relationship; and it is no surprise because, as Ryden has made clear in his essay, the people who know the New England material culture know the importance of walls in the natural landscape of that place and also the role of wall in forging a healthy relationship amongst the people inhabiting that place.

In contrast to the professor is Lafe, the person with whom the professor is hesitant to share the room and who is more than willing to share his hundred collars with him. Layfayette is a collector who collects “a dollar at a time/All round the country for the Weekly News, / Published in Bow.” Though he does not belong to that place, he almost knows “their [his clients’] farms as well as they do”. In knowing their landscape as well as they do, Lafe has forged a relationship with their environment and also with them. He likes his work, business though it is. But he admits that better than that

What I like best’s the lay of different farms,

Coming out on them from a stretch of woods,

Or over a hill or round a sudden corner.

I like to find folks getting out in spring,

Raking the dooryard, working near the house.

Later they get out further in the fields. (49, 124-129)

He is very well conversant with each and every activity of those country people because he has observed them too closely. He has found that sometimes everything is
shut except the barn and all the family is “away in some back meadow” because
“[t]here’s a hay load a-coming”. Sometimes “they all get driven in” when

The fields are stripped to lawn, the garden patches

Stripped to bare ground, the maple trees

To whips and poles.
Then there are times when there is nobody about yet the chimney “keeps up a good brisk smoking.” Whenever the collector visits these people, he is welcomed by “all in a family row down to the youngest” and according to him they are as pleased to see him as he is pleased to see them because he doesn’t want

Anything they’ve not got. I never dun.

...............................

I go nowhere on purpose: I happen by. (50)

And wherever he happens by, he is well received.

The speaker’s friend in “New Hampshire,” however has “put forever out of mind/The hope of being, as we say, received” and thus “like a lone actor on a gloomy stage” he has built his house with

...a noble mansard roof with balls

On turrets, like Constantinople, deep

In woods some ten miles from a railroad station (160)

He had given up all hope of being received because he had worked against the ethical culture of that place: he was “the only person really soiled with trade/... in old New
Hampshire” and “had just come back ashamed/From selling things in California.” He had become an outsider now:

His farm was “grounds,” and not a farm at all;

His house among the local sheds and shanties

Rose like a factor’s at a trading station.

Thus “vernacular artifacts,” in Ryden’s opinion, “encode shared standards of seeing, thinking, and acting, and the extent to which individuals within the poems recognize these standards when they see or use those artifacts marks the degree of their membership in or estrangement from both the local society and the landscape in which that society lives” (Ryden 300). Thus, Frost, through the use of vernacular artifacts in his poetry, enables readers “to gain a deep and subtle perspective on those New England landscapes where nature and culture are so inextricably tangled” (Ryden 298).

“Any substantial (reciprocal) merging of nature and culture,” according to Jhan Hochman, “will take generations of internal cultural struggle” (192). However, the study of poetic text of Frost reveals how nature and culture, which were seen as “separate sides of a dualistic construct” in the early phase of ecocriticism, can be brought together. The natural environment plays a very crucial role in the life of the people of New England; their life is implicated in the natural history, rather their life is determined by the natural environment. But the changes brought by culture in their life also play an important role in determining their attitude towards their environment. To create a balance between the two, Frost suggests a middle ground in his pastorals. The study of his pastorals also provides a revised version of it, which is more scientific. His poetry reveals the intermingling of nature and culture, which forms such an environment in which the natives learn to live in harmony with their
environment which keeps on changing and which determines and governs their lives to a very large extent. William Howarth looks out for a viable ecocriticism, in which nature and constantly mingle “like water and soil in a flowing stream” (69) and in the poetry of Robert Frost, there are instances where nature and culture intertwine.