Chapter - IV

Towards A New Ecological Vision

“We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.”

(A Native American Proverb)

In response to the present environmental crisis, one of the two goals that ecocriticism pursues, besides obviously “the interrogation of the ideologies that support environmental destruction,” is “a canon of works modelling a proper attitude toward nature” (Beyers). So, in order to justify the whole exercise of applying ecocritical approach to Robert Frost’s poetry, we will try in this chapter to trace in Frost’s poetic text some “ethical orientation,” as Lawrence Buell puts it, toward “human accountability to the environment” (Introduction The Environmental Imagination 7).

Science is perceived in some sections of the green movement as “one of the root causes of current ecosystem degradation in its historical conjunction with technology, industrialism, and urbanization,” according to Ursula K. Heise, yet it plays an ambiguous role in environmentalist thought, because though some environmentalists do not see eye to eye with science yet on many occasions the findings of science are “readily called upon to support environmentalist policies.” In voicing his concern for the malicious effects of science which reached “its nadir in the nuclear explosions” after the Second World War and the portrayal of “the Frankenstein overtones of man’s overreaching” (Gerber 42) in the poems like “Why Wait for Science”, “The Planners”, “Bursting Rapture”, “U.S. 1946 King’s X”, Frost
will definitely be hailed and lauded by those ecocritics who consider science and technology to be the main contributing forces to the present ecological crisis.

Through several eras, science, especially natural science, as Lynn White, Jr. traces in his essay “Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” has been relied upon by several people “to understand the nature of things” and there isn’t even anything wrong in it. However, “a marriage between science and technology, a union of the theoretical and the empirical approaches to our natural environment” and with it the emergence and acceptance of “the Baconian creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature” marked “the greatest event in human history since the invention of agriculture, and perhaps in nonhuman terrestrial history as well” (White 4-5). It changed the whole outlook of the people towards nature by giving man uncontrolled power over nature. It got strength from religion as well because modern Western science, White argues, was “cast in the matrix of Christian theology” and, therefore, it too inherited the “orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature” (11).

Frost was wary of the truths about science— what guided science and how it had changed the mindset of the people and he gave expression to this view in his very first poem on science “The Demiurge’s Laugh” (24). Demiurge is a lesser deity in Greek and Platonic mythology and it is believed to control the material world where science reigns supreme. The speaker in Frost’s poem sets out happily “in Demon’s trail” only to realize later that all the while it was he who was being pursued by the demon: “The sound was behind me instead of before”. In the first edition of A Boy’s Will, Frost made a comment: “He resolves...to know definitely what he thinks...about science” (qtd.in Quinn 71). Stanlis finds in this poem
Frost’s warning to the twentieth century that material monism and science are not capable of creating a sound civilization. His poem expresses his distinction between admirable science, which serves the material needs of human nature, and corrupt science, which serves destructive practical ends and sacrifices humanity to a materialist ideology.... Positivism, with its unbounded faith in a monism of matter and in a discursive reason pursued along abstract mathematical lines and with its exclusion of the whole realm of spirit, prepares the way for a corrupt and brutal civilization. (108-109)

Stanlis finds implicit in the poem “Frost’s early satire on the uncritical belief of many modern persons that science is the supreme instrument of man’s inevitable ‘progress’ toward an eventual Utopian world society” (109). Frost, according to Gerber, was “cynical of science and particularly of the material progress which for too many was synonymous with improvement of the race” and because science was “earth bound,” in Frost’s opinion, so “it could never discern value” (Gerber 42). Frost’s inclination was towards philosophy to know the “nature of things” which, as Frost claimed in his talk with Daniel Smythe, “science will never know” (101-102).

Frost found science “formidable” no doubt, but while talking about his relation with science in “Some Science Fiction” he feels that he might be blamed for “not keeping pace with the headlong human race” and “[t]hough as yet they only smile/At how slow I do a mile”, he knows “what” those people are, who:

As they get more nuclear

And more bigoted in reliance

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On the gospel of modern science (466, 14-16)

He is willing to stay “back behind/To take life at a walk/In philosophic talk;” and even being banished “to the penal colony” for being a non-adherent, not of science as such, but due to his disapproving of the role science has played in changing human thought and through their thoughts their lives.

In “Why Wait for Science,” which obliquely alludes to nuclear explosion, Frost highlights the situation man is caught in, in relation to science:

Sarcastic Science, she would like to know,

In her complacent ministry of fear,

How we propose to get away from here

When she has made things so we have to go

Or be wiped out. (395, 1-5)

The invention and use of the nuclear bomb was a watershed in man’s relation with science. It brought humanity to the crossroads from where there was no turning back. Science left people with no choice — either they went along with her or they should be ready to get destroyed by her.

Frost found that it was not easy to get out of the precarious situation the people had put themselves into. But it was necessary to put an end to “This” (another nuclear phenomenon perhaps), keeping in mind the welfare of the future generations, so that

...the unborn would never miss
What they had never had of vital bliss (397, 2-3)

The few conscientious people, who in their day faced “the burst of nuclear phenomenon” and also tried to raise their voice against it, according to Frost, might be questioned in what capacity they have the right to say something today ("...anyone might ask them who were they"). Frost asks, given a choice,

Who would they be? The guild of social planners

With the intention blazoned on their banners

Of getting one more chance to change our manners?

In their times it was not easy to change the manners because the voice was submerged in the general fervor. However, they would like to tell everyone what they had finally learnt, though in a hard way, that

...it was important

That human life should not be shortened. ("The Planners” 397)

The people, however, don’t seem to have realized this bitter truth and science still preoccupies everyone’s mind as is evident in “Bursting Rapture,” which too includes nuclear allusions. The persona complains to the physician how drastic the change has been in the mindset of the people: in the past times, a simple way of earning a living was farming, but in the present time, any sort of gain “was made by getting science on the brain.” The physician, however, finds that it is a complaint that:

“...all the nations share.

Their effort is a mounting ecstasy

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That when it gets too exquisite to bear
Will find relief in one burst. You shall see
That’s what a certain bomb was sent to be.” (398, 10-14)

Frost alludes directly to the nuclear bomb, the most dangerous invention of
science so far, in his poem “U.S. 1946 King’s X.” Kirk C. Allison calls it a “chiastic
quatrain”— an example of “a new topos — nuclear literature” (392):

Having invented a new Holocaust,
And been the first with it to win the war,
How they make haste to cry with fingers crossed,
King’s X – no fairs to use it anymore! (399)

Allison elaborates that “King’s X!” is “a truce term called with fingers
crossed” and it “invokes ‘time out’ during tag” and this “children’s idiom”, which
embodies hypocrisy, according to him, carries the satire because “folly, politics,
science, and things nuclear” — all are the elements of this poem (392). Besides
bringing out the hypocrisy of the users of “the bomb,” who preach to others not to use
it, the poem implies their foolishness too, if they think that it is in their hands to
control the actions of others and more so of science.

Besides playing with the life and preoccupying the thought of human beings,
science, Frost found, in “its historical conjunction with technology” also encroached
upon nature. In many of Frost’s poems, Susan Burns opines, a viewer looks toward
the night sky and stars for inspiration and insights but in “Four-Room Shack Aspiring
High,” “the visions one receives by virtue of the mast atop the house are paltry and
worthless by comparison”; it is an expression of the changing nature of the New England countryside — a change wrought by the advent of technology (122). There was a time when there were church spires visible from a distance but now there is “an arm of scrawny mast” atop each house reaching for “the visions in the sky.” In the poem, “An Encounter,” the speaker sometimes “…wander[s] out of beaten ways/Half looking for the orchid Calypso” but finds that technology with its “yellow strands/Of wire with something in it from men to men” has changed the face of nature and there stood in a swamp of cedar

... a resurrected tree,

A tree that had been down and raised again-

A barkless specter. (125, 12-14)

Frost in his poetic text, thus, alludes to the derisive impact of science and technology on the lives of the people as also on nature. However, to read Frost as hostile to science and technological development is to misinterpret and misrepresent him. His relation with science is as ambiguous as the role of science in the life of human beings and the environmentalist thought.

Science, according to ecocritics, is to some extent part of the problem, but is it also a part of the solution? The “ecologic backlash,” Lynn White, Jr. is sceptical, cannot be “avoided simply by applying to our problems more science and more technology,” as is believed by many environmentalists, because

Our science and technology have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man’s relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly
regard themselves as post-Christians. Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are not, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim. (12)

More science and more technology are definitely not going to get man out of the present ecologic crisis. Then where does the solution lie? Tim Hayward suggests a solution in the preface to his book *Ecological Thought: An Introduction*:

The devastation which humans are wreaking with increasing intensity upon their environment and upon other species, as well as upon their own kind, requires a radical response; and if ecologically and socially deleterious practices are to be transformed, this cannot occur without a radical transformation of the attitudes and values which sustain and are sustained by them. (Preface x)

This is a conviction, according to him, which is shared by people across the world. Brennan, Andrew and Yeuk-Sze Lo also feel that “it has now become very clear that any deliberate attempt to reach a rational and enduring state of equilibrium by planned measures, rather than by chance or catastrophe, must ultimately be founded on a basic change of values and goals at individual, national and world levels” and “the call for a ‘basic change of values’ in connection to the environment reflected a need for the development of environmental ethics as a new sub-discipline of philosophy.”

Environmental ethics, the discipline in philosophy, came up in 1960s and 1970s. It studies the moral relationship of human beings to the environment and its nonhuman contents. Environmental ethics emerged as a new sub-discipline of philosophy in the early 1970s to pose a challenge to traditional anthropocentrism.
Many traditional western ethical perspectives are anthropocentric or human-centered. They either assign intrinsic value to human beings alone or they assign a significantly greater amount of intrinsic value to human beings than to any nonhuman things.

One of the major influences on contemporary environmental ethics has been the Deep Ecology movement propounded by the Norwegian philosopher and climber, Arne Naess. The “deep ecology movement” endorses “biospheric egalitarianism”, the view that all living things are alike in having value in their own right, independent of their usefulness to others. There are two core components of Naess personal environmental philosophy, or “ecosophy” — “Self-realization” and “identification” and, according to Diehm, the followers of Naess find that “identification is the path to Self-realization, the process by which one develops one’s ‘ecological Self’” (2). Often, “the development of such an expansive sense of self is depicted as a process proceeding from identification with our immediate surroundings, to identification with nature-at-large” (Diehm 8). Naess himself believed that “from identifying with ‘one’s nearest,’ higher level unities are created through circles of friends, local communities, tribes, compatriots, races, humanity, life, and, ultimately...unity with the supreme whole” (263).

The “identification” principle of Deep ecology has been criticized, especially by the ecofeminists like Val Plumwood, according to Carolyn Merchant, because “Identification and holism neglect differences” (111). The ecofeminists have found the deep ecological theory of the “self-in-self,” in effect, a disguised form of “totalizing subsumation” which erases difference between humans and the rest of nature (Mallory 7). Plumwood puts it very clearly that “respecting the other involves acknowledging the difference as well as the connection between our needs,” and, therefore, “We need to recognize not only our human continuity with the natural
world but also its distinctness and independence from us and the distinctness of the needs of things in nature from ours" (178). Gilcrest also, as Bennett finds, does not approve of the “identification of the human and the nonhuman,” rather, he necessitates the “conservation of difference” (209).

So, the Western civilization is now pleading for a new religion, a new ethics, a new aesthetics, a new metaphysics “with responsibility for nature lying at its centre (ecocentric view)” but John Passmore fails to understand because, according to him, the emergence of new moral attitudes to nature is dependent upon, “the emergence of a more realistic philosophy of nature” which “is the only adequate foundation for effective ecological concern” (Passmore 136, 141).

The more realistic philosophy of nature would be based on more practical conception of nature which takes into consideration the changed environment. The answer to the present ecological crisis is in Environmental pragmatism as suggested by DesJardins in Environmental ethics: An introduction to environmental philosophy:

Environmental pragmatism is the attempt to join the methods and precepts of philosophical pragmatism to environmental issues and solutions.... Environmental pragmatists reject the view that environmental ethics must embrace a commitment to any specific theory or value to achieve solutions. Solutions and methods used should be specific to each situation. The environmental pragmatist believes values emerge in the ongoing relationship between humans and environments, not within a specific view. (qtd. in Watts 3)

The term pragmatic, as Crystal Watts explains it, “relates to being practical and focusing on what can be achieved instead of reaching for unattainable ideals” (2).
Therefore, the rational critics, who have been apprehensive about some of the methods of Deep ecology to develop the ecological self, find the “relational, total-field” still helpful. This perspective views “humans not as discrete entities or substances, but as beings whose identity is a product of relationships to, among other things, the non-human environment” (Diehm 3). It has found some acceptance also in the environmental ethics, especially in the form of the “land ethics” of Aldo Leopold.

In Frost’s poetry it is necessary for the characters to make a living from nature. So, it is very important to know the type of relationship they shared with nature in his poetry? The characters in Frost’s poetry do not “master nature, but conduct themselves according to a sort of unspoken land ethic” (McDowell 97). The unspoken land ethics of Frost that McDowell refers to has many of the traits of the “land ethic” as propounded by Leopold in his Sand Country Almanac (henceforth referred as SCA) which came out in 1949. It is interesting to note that Frost has depicted in his poetry way back in his times and also without any deliberate attempt to be didactic the same features of land ethics as presented by Leopold.

Leopold’s “land ethic” came as a protest against the American traditional notions of land which postulated that land is real property and is owned by people. In the introduction he wrote that he believed that “the land can survive the impact of mechanized man and man can reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture only when the humans see land as a community to which they belong and may begin to use it with love and respect” (viii). He found it “inconceivable ... that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land” (223). He proposed treatment of land as an “extension of ethics,” the idea that “land” — the environment — is not to be treated as a commodity, or a
thing owned, but instead as a member of a community that also includes human beings.

“All ethics,” according to Leopold, “so far revolved around a central premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” and “The land ethic,” according to him, “simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land. In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow members, and also respect for the community as such” (200).

The “our” and “ours” that Frost has used in his poems in relation to his brooks, fields and place do not tell about his persona’s dominion over the place, rather it brings out the sense of community that his characters share with the objects in nature. His characters are particularly fond of their brooks and know the course that their brook would take. Take for instance, the speaker in the poem “Hyla Brook” who knows that by June the Hyla brook would have “run out of song and speed” and all that would remain of the brook would be “A brook to none but who remember long.” Still, the speaker feels “We love the things we love for what they are” because they have a sort of bond with them. (119)

In the autumn season all the wells in the place have dried up and the persona along with a group of his friends sets out “to seek the brook”; they need no excuse to draw water from the brook

...because the fields were ours,

And by the brook our woods were there.
They lead a life of dependence on the entities of nature — the fields, the woods and obviously the brook. Because the speaker and his friends, all belong to the same place and are bound by the same values, they share the same experience.

Each laid on other a staying hand

To listen ere we dared to look,

And in the hush we joined to make

We heard, we knew we heard the brook. (18, 17-20)

They all could hear the brook and relate to it because as Gerber writes, “Clear running water [was] emblematic of the life-gift of the natural world” for all of them (159). They all realized their dependence upon running water “not only for material subsistence” but it was also for all of them something “in nature we are from’,” and, therefore, they felt it their duty that “the woods-hidden brook” must be kept clear and flowing at all costs (Gerber 162). The couple in the poem, “West-Running Brook” also realize the importance of the brook in their life: “It is from that in water we were from / Long, long before we were from any creature” (259, 40-41).

In the poem “A Brook in the City,” it is the relation of the speaker to the brook, “…as one who knew the brook, its strength/And impulse” that gives him the right to know how the new city intended to

... dispose of an immortal force

No longer needed? (231)
A new city is built and “the farmhouse lingers” despite the aversion of the square. But what about the essential landmark of the place

…the brook

That held the house as in an elbow-crook?

The city has done away with the meadow grass and the apple trees but what will happen to the brook. The speaker is definitely concerned and at the same time he is aware that a natural force cannot be subdued for long.

The characters in Frost’s poetry, in their dealing with their land, bring out the same qualities which Ray Dasmann has attributed to “ecosystem people,” the communities which have “the practical knowledge of the place they live in: those are communities ‘totally dependent, or largely so, on the animals and plants of a particular area,’ deeply accustomed to that area and in stable, sustainable relation to the local ecosystem” (qtd. in Kerridge 137). In Frost’s case, the other elements of nature like the brook, the mountains, the fields, etc. can also be added with whom the characters in his poetry share an intimate relationship.

The characters in Frost’s poetry possessed the wider conception of community, an attitude which is the proper content of the environmental ethic. And this conception of community comes from the fact that they recognized their dependence on nature. In Frost’s note to F. S. Flint written in July, 1913, he asks Flint,

Did I reach you with the poems[?] . . . Did I give you the feeling of and for the independent-dependence of the kind of people I like to write about [?] (qtd.in. Sanders 74)
The people Frost wrote about led a life of dependence on their landscape. The characters in Frost’s poetry see themselves as members of the environmental community and appreciate their dependencies on natural elements as also on animals.

When the people are so considerate toward the non-animate entities, it is hard to expect anything other than love and concern for their animals, which they domesticate for purposes other than merely earning money from them. Andrew I. Cohen in his essay “Dependent Relationships and the Moral Standing of Nonhuman Animals,” raises the sceptical issue whether dependent relationships among human beings and nonhuman animals can justify an animal’s moral standing and he is optimistic that “if dependencies generate reasons for extending direct moral consideration, such reasons will admit of significant variations in scope and stringency” (1) in the ethics that govern man’s relation with animals and which make man treat animals only as resources to be exploited.

In the poem, “The Housekeeper,” John’s dependence on cocks and hens is for monetary purposes; he earns his living by cock fighting. But even when he is offered good money for his cocks and hens, he is not willing to sell them.

He never takes the money. If they’re worth
That much to sell, they’re worth as much to keep (86, 140-141).

His dependence on cocks and hens for money might be a yardstick to justify his not selling them. But his refusal to sell them for more money and the way he has instructed the other people to treat his animals with care speaks of the moral standing he accords to his animals. As claimed by the woman

“…You don’t know what a gentle lot we are:”
We wouldn’t hurt a hen! You ought to see us
Moving a flock of hens from place to place.
We are not allowed to take them upside down,
All we can hold together by the legs.
Two at a time’s the rule, one on each arm,
No matter how far and how many times
We have to go.” (85, 124-131)

John does not treat his domesticated animals only as the resources to be exploited but as a part of the community in which they have moral standing and consequently a moral value and, therefore, right to be treated in the just way.

Callicott thinks that “we do in fact have duties and obligations – implied by the essentially communitarian premises of the land ethic – to domesticate animals, as well as to wild fellow-members of the biotic community and to the biotic community as a whole” and, as members of what Mary Midgley calls the “mixed” community, “Farm animals, work animals, and pets have entered into a kind of implicit social contract with us which lately we have abrogated” (29). This might explain the unusual behaviour of the cow in the poem “The Cow in Apple Time.” The cow has, perhaps, been forsaken by its owner because “her udder shrivels and the milk goes dry” and now

She runs from tree to tree where lie and sweeten
The windfalls spiked with stubble and worm-eaten.
She leaves them bitten when she has to fly.

She bellows on a knoll against the sky. (124, 7-10)

The owner has been mean, but this is not the way animals are usually treated in Frost’s poetic world. In Frost’s poetry people consider domesticated farm animals as a part of the “mixed” community and this is demonstrated in the poem “The Runaway,” in which a colt is out in the open while it is snowing. Because it is domesticated it is not used to such a weather

“I think the little fellow’s afraid of the snow.

He isn’t winter-broken. It isn’t play

With the little fellow at all. He’s running away.

I doubt if even his mother could tell him, ‘Sakes,

It’s only weather.’ He’d think she didn’t know! (223, 9-13)

The people have deep concern for the domesticated animal

“Whoever it is that leaves him out so late,

When other creatures have gone to stall and bin,

Ought to be told to come and take him in.” (223, 19-21)

The colt is out in the open in the winter and the people who look at him are angry at the owner who has let the colt out in such an inclement weather.

Though dependency, as Cohen admits, cannot be the only justification for moral standing yet it can definitely be one and Frost in his poetry has shown this. His one poem, “The Draft Horse,” though is an exception to the ethics of dependence. As
Monteiro has observed, “At the time of the poem and in an earlier day, the loss of a man’s horse may be as great a loss as that of one’s life — probably because its loss would often lead to the death of the horse’s owner” (53). This poem, however, presents a horse being stabbed without any rhyme and reason by a man who appears out of nowhere in the woods. This might set the animal activists against Frost. But the critics have found metaphysical implications in the death of the horse. The horse in “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening” is an important part of the speaker’s life. He gives his harness bell a shake to remind the man on his back that they both might get buried under the snow. The speaker also resumes his forward journey in order to fulfil his “promises” or obligations, as many critics have suggested. But, perhaps, the immediate duty of the speaker was towards the horse (“my horse,” as the poet calls it) who would have been buried under the snow had the speaker stayed in the falling snow for a much longer time.

Even when the people inhabiting Frost’s world are not dependent on animals or birds for whatsoever reason, they treat them with concern considering it their moral duty as in the poem “The Exposed Nest.” The speaker found the persona bent low in the poem. First, he thought that he was up to some new play. Then, he thought he was busy with his hay but he found that what his real concern was

'Twas a nest full of young birds on the ground

The cutter bar had just gone champing over

(Miraculously without tasting flesh)

And left defenseless to the heat and light.

You wanted to restore them to their right. (109, 13-17)
Though they

... saw the risk we took in doing good,

But dared not spare to do the best we could

Though harm should come of it; so built the screen

You had begun, and given them back their shade.

All this to prove we cared. (109, 27-31)

Val Plumwood has found that “special relationships with, care for, or empathy with particular aspects of nature as experiences rather than with nature as abstraction are essential to provide a depth and type of concern that is not otherwise possible.” “Care and responsibility for particular animals, trees, and rivers that are known well, loved, and appropriately connected to the self are,” according to her, “an important basis for acquiring a wider, more generalized concern” (“Nature, Self, and Gender” 7). However, in Frost’s world, care and concern extend even to the things with which the people are not intimately connected. For instance, in the poem “The Rabbit-Hunter,” the speaker does not see any rhyme or reason behind the hunter’s act

... to rend

And deal a death

That he nor it

(Nor I) have wit

To comprehend. (360, 14-18)

He detests the action of the hunter and his yelping hounds.
The characters in Frost’s poetry inhabit a particular world in which they live by certain ethics which they imbibe early in their life from their elders. The elders also are too generous in passing on their knowledge of nature to the next generation. Education of nature is imparted early so that the young may learn their ethical lessons early and work accordingly. This characteristic in Frost’s poetry seems to stem from Frost’s personal life in which, “There was such a direct and necessary relation between thought and action learned in childhood,” according to Harris, “that the desire to make those two opposites coherent became very strong in Frost’s adult personal ethic” (14). Frost’s mother, as Harris has noted, used to walk with her children to Woodward’s Gardens near their home in San Francisco, where they could “directly observe varied forms of changing life” after reading poems on daffodils and water fowl (14).

Robert Frost gave to his children the sort of early education he himself had received. His daughter Lesley’s journals show that most of the children’s study of nature was conducted on the farm in Derry. She recalls that “the children were taught ‘all the constellations’” (Harris 22) when they went out after cows at night. Even as a child of eight, Lesley could see how the laws of nature were being taught to her. Her father’s intention, as Harris notes, was “to stretch the imagination as a prelude to more strictly intellectual discussions” (23). Andrea DeFusco has also noted the type of education that Frost was imparting to his children:

Frost taught his children to identify tiny plants, insects and flowers, to examine snow crystals as they fell on the dark fabric of their coats, to identify the stars and constellations, to recognize an animal by its call, and to be aware of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth in nature (17)
The poem “The Last Word of a Bluebird” (As told to a child), is a good example of how the children are taught about the change in season and natural facts in Frost’s poetic world. Their imagination is enlivened by telling them how the bluebird has gone away in winter and would be back when winter is over and spring is around. What better way could there be to tell the child Lesley about the transition of weather from winter to spring than speak through the bluebird himself who had sent his messenger to tell the child

That the north wind last night

That made the stars bright

And made ice on the trough

Almost made him cough

His tail feathers off.

He just had to fly! (135, 9-14)

While the bluebird is away, the child, in the snow of winter, should

... look for skunk tracks

In the snow with an axe –

And do everything! (136, 18-20)

“Locked Out” (As told to a child) is again a poem where the children are being imparted their morals without the tone becoming didactic.

When we locked up the house at night,

We always locked the flowers outside
Yet nobody molested them! (135, 1-7)

If anything wrong happened to the flowers then ethically responsibility must be taken. That is why when the speaker

... find one nasturtium

Upon the steps with bitten stem.

I may have been to blame for that:

I always thought it must have been

Some flower I played with as I sat

At dusk to watch the moon down early. (135, 8-13)

Some of the lessons are learnt by the young when they are given a free hand to interact with their environment. A small girl in “A Girl’s Garden,” asks her father to give her “a garden plot/To plant and tend and reap herself” and her wish is readily granted because the father does not want to dampen her spirit. Though the father gave the girl “an idle bit/Of walled-off ground where a shop had stood,” the girl worked very hard on it and finally

Her crop was a miscellany

A little bit of everything,

A great deal of none. (134, 37-40)
The experience gave the girl the confidence to talk of “village things.”

Just when it seems to come in right,

She says, “I know!

“It’s when I was a farmer....”

The children gain the confidence to talk about nature with authority because they have been taught about natural facts early by their elders.

When the children have learnt their lessons by heart like the little girl Anne in the poem “The Self-Seeker,” they behave in an ethically responsible way towards nature. She did not pluck all the Ram’s Horn orchid (“there were four or five”) because she wanted that “there should be some there next year,” and, therefore, she “left the rest for seed, / And for the backwoods woodchuck.” See how considerate she is not only towards the needs of human beings who get aesthetic pleasure from nature but also towards the woodchuck who, she has been taught, has equal rights over the Ram’s Horn orchid.

Besides the natural facts which the young generation must know, they also have to be well-conversant with the environment in which they are living and work in accordance with it. To make the best use of the thing in their life, the young have to be taught some tricks of the trade which they may not get through their education in schools and colleges. This perhaps explains Frost’s disapproval of formal education which comes out in his poems “The Death of the Hired Man” and “The Ax-Helve.”

Silas in the poem, “The Death of the Hired Man,” had the perfect knowledge of the farm life. It was his one accomplishment that
He bundles every forkful in its place,
And tags and numbers it for future reference,
So he can find and easily dislodge it
In the unloading. Silas does that well.
He takes it out in bunches like big birds’ nests.
You never see him standing on the hay
He’s trying to lift, straining to lift himself.” (37, 88-95)

He wanted to pass on this knowledge of his to young Wilson, who he thought
was “a likely lad, though daft / On education.” Silas felt that in order to live in
a place a person needs to know the things around him and work accordingly.
Silas feels disappointed that

… he couldn’t make the boy believe
He could find water with a hazel prong—
Which showed how much good school had ever done him.
He wanted to go over that. But most of all
He thinks if he could have another chance
To teach him how to build a load of hay——” (37, 79-87)

He wanted to pass on his knowledge of building a load of hay which he feels
no school or college education could have taught Wilson.

“He thinks if he could teach him that, he’d be
Some good perhaps to someone in the world.
He hates to see a boy the fool of books. (37, 96-98)
Baptiste in the poem “The Ax-Helvæ” also did not hold a very high opinion of bookish knowledge. He kept his children “from school, or did his best to keep.” The speaker in the poem is curious to know

...whether the right to hold

Such doubts of education should depend

Upon the education of those who held them? (188, 91-93)

Baptiste himself never went to school; he lived by practical knowledge of the land. That knowledge was adequate for him to live in harmony with his environment. Perhaps that is the reason behind his doubts about the formal education. For him the knowledge that makes a person work better in his environment is more important.

When the children know the nature around them and also the environment in which they live, they develop a better understanding of their environment and hence a good relationship with them. The little girl Anne in the poem “The Self Seeker,” who according to the broken man has been unfairly “pressed into service” which “means pressed out of shape” but still, like the Nature in Wordsworth’s “Three Years She Grew in Sun and Shower,” he is hopeful that

Somehow I’ll make it right with her—she’ll see.

She’s going to do my scouting in the field,

Over stone walls and all along a wood

And by a river bank for water flowers,

The Floating Heart, with small leaf like a heart,

And at the sinus under water a fist
Of little fingers all kept down but one,

And that thrust up to blossom in the sun

As if to say, ‘You! You’re the Heart’s desire.’

Anne has a way with flowers to take the place

Of what she’s lost: she goes down on one knee

And lifts their faces by the chin to hers

And says their names, and leaves them where they are.” (98, 147-162)

Knowledge of nature is essential not just for the children who live in that environment. It is equally important for all children. In the poem “The Fear,” the people who are living at the edge of the woods find a man and a child taking a walk who they mistake for robbers. But the man, who is perhaps an outsider and was “stopping for the fortnight down at Dean’s,” tries to convince them that “a robber wouldn’t have his family with him.” But “What’s a child doing at this time of night— —?” The man has an explanation for this. He feels that

... Every child should have the memory

Of at least one long-after-bedtime walk. (92, 79-88)

He was perhaps trying to utilize his fortnight’s stay at that place to acquaint the child with nature. This also reminds of the late night walks that Frost used to take with his children to acquaint them with natural facts.

It is good for children to learn things about their environment early. Then there are the ethics of their land to guide the children. They imbibe their values from their elders. Frost’s characters live by certain land ethics. Frost’s characters, like the gum
gatherer in the poem by the same name, find it immoral to take from nature more than “necessary for immediate, personal need” (McDowell 97). McDowell finds in Frost’s poetry that his characters are fully aware that it is “the scale on which human beings go against nature [that] makes all the difference in the world” and moderation in their dealings with nature seems to be the right way to live, as it is in “New Hampshire” (98), the people cannot think of things like “Diamonds/And apples in commercial qualities”; “It never could have happened in New Hampshire.” They can’t even think of their own gold in “commercial quantities” and there is

Just enough gold to make the engagement rings

And marriage rings for those who owned the farm.

What gold more innocent could one have asked for? (162, 113-115)

Greed has no place in Frost’s poetic world, rather, as is found by McDowell, there is a sort of “tithing nature at harvest time” in Frost’s poems like “Unharvested,” “The Tuft of Flowers,” “Rose Pogonias” and “West-Running Brook” (98-99).

In “Unharvested,” the speaker earnestly wishes that

May something go always unharvested!

May much stay out of our stated plan,

Apples and something forgotten and left,

So smelling their sweetness would be no theft. (305, 11-14)

The traveller sees value in the apples which is other than economic. He was tempted to deviate from his “routine road” by “a scent of ripeness from over a wall” and he stopped before an apple tree “that had eased itself of its summer load, / and of all but

its trivial foliage free.” The apples are already going to benefit their owners. There
was “one circle of solid red” that showed the bounty of the harvest for man.
According to the ethics of the place, to claim other’s property might be wrong but as
the traveller says “smelling their sweetness would be no theft.” The apples were, thus,
a source of pleasure for the other people also other than their owners.

The wish of the people in “Rose Pogonias” is also similar in nature. They
come across “a thousand orchises” in “a saturated meadow.” Their simple prayer is:

That in the general mowing

That place might be forgot;

Or if not all so favored,

Obtain such grace of hours

That none should mow the grass there

While so confused with the flowers. (14, 19-24)

Their wish seems to find a fulfillment in “The Tuft of Flowers,” where the
mower had left “…a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,/A leaping tongue of bloom the
scythe had spared” perhaps because he “…had loved them thus./By leaving them to
flourish…”

Even the stream, according to McDowell, recognizes “the universal tendency
to tithe,” its duty toward its source (98). In “West-Running Brook,” the speakers find
in the stream’s

…backward motion toward the source,
Besides giving back to nature something always as a tribute, another way in which we can have a healthy relationship with nature is to leave nature to itself; human beings should feel responsible toward nature but as McDowell says, they should not “assume responsibility for nature” (99).

In “October,” the speaker assumes responsibility for nature by requesting the October wind to be

Slow, slow! 
For the grapes’ sake, if they were all, 
Whose leaves already are burnt with frost, 
Whose clustered fruit must else be lost- 
For the grapes’ sake along the wall. (28, 17-21)

This poem appeared in *A Boy’s Will*, his first collection of poems and as the title suggests it is the boyhood phase of life. By the time *New Hampshire* appeared, which was the fourth of his poetry collection, Frost had realized certain truths about nature, one being not to assume responsibility for nature. In “Good-By and Keep Cold,” there is threat to the speaker’s young orchard from grouse, rabbit and deer as also from the heat of the sun and though he has made the orchard “secure” against the sun,

If certain it wouldn’t be idle to call

I’d summon grouse, rabbit and deer to the wall
And warn them away with a stick for a gun. (228, 9-11)

He even wishes to, if he could, “to lie in the night/And think of an orchard’s arboreal plight”, but finally, he realizes that “something has to be left to God.” Nature must be allowed to take its course.

The wanderer in “The Wood-Pile,” on looking at the bundle of woods, is at first amazed how

Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks

Could so forget his handiwork on which

He spent himself, the labor of his ax,

And leave it there far from a useful fireplace (102, 35-38)

But at the same time he seems to feel glad that the pile of woods would do best

To warm the frozen swamp as best it could

With the slow smokeless burning of decay. (102, 39-40)

What can be deduced from Frost’s poetry after looking at it from McDowell’s point of view is that in Frost’s poetry we come across the two forms of environmentalism — preservationism and conservationism. These two thoughts have guided the American Conservation policy since 1900s. Preservationism aims for the complete protection of specific areas based solely on their intrinsic value and not on their future usefulness as economic resources. In this way, it emphasizes the moral, spiritual, aesthetic, and biocentric rationales for the environment. Conservationism aims to use natural resources keeping in mind the need of the future generations. Its method is sustainable development. There is conservationist as well as preservationist streak in Frost’s
many poems. When the characters in his poem think of taking from nature only what is required for their personal immediate need, they are guided by their conservationist streak. And, in fact, they are also guided by the rules of the land ethics: as Clark, Stephen puts it “Take no more than your share; no more than what you must to sustain the particular value that you carry for the whole” (qtd. in Environmental Ethics Brennan 195). What McDowell calls tithing, is also, from the environmentalist’s perspective, nothing other than conservationism. And finally when he talks about leaving nature to itself he is indeed showing his preservationist streak. Frost’s environmentalism is an amalgam of the preservationism and conservationism.

Another thing that emerges repeatedly in Frost’s poetry is the difference in the outlook of the natives and the outsiders towards their environment. There is a difference in the outlook of each towards the environment and, therefore, the treatment of environment by both is different. Among the several kinds of relationship possible between man and environment, F. Sparshott has suggested, “that the only one that is really relevant to a discussion of man and environment is the relation of self to setting” (qtd.in Evernden 99) There is a difference in the way how a native and an outsider look at a place and consequentially how they treat it:

The tourist can grasp only the superficialities of a landscape, whereas a resident reacts to what has occurred. He sees a landscape not only as a collection of physical forms, but as the evidence of what has occurred there. To the tourist, the landscape is merely a façade, but to the resident it is “the outcome of how it got there and the outside of what goes on inside.” The resident is, in short, a part of the place, just as the fish is the part of the territory. (Evernden 99)
In “Christmas Trees,” when a stranger from the city comes to the owner’s (of the Christmas trees) door to buy his “young fir balsams,” the person is amazed because he hadn’t thought of his woods, which he calls “my woods,” as “Christmas trees.” He was not tempted, even for a moment, to sell them because it would have left the landscape of that place barren; he knew the importance of those trees for that place:

To sell them off their feet to go in cars

And leave the slope behind the house all bare,

Where the sun shines now no warmer than the moon. (106, 17-19)

The trees acted as a shield from the direct heat of the sun and balanced its warmth. He lets the stranger have a look at his trees but he is determined from the very beginning that the stranger should not expect that he is going to let him have them. His determination turns more steelly when the stranger puts the worth of his thousand trees at thirty dollars

...thirty dollars seemed so small beside

The extent of pasture I should strip... (107, 47-48)

The person is almost always guided by his duty towards maintaining the ecological balance in that place, so the readers might be somewhat amazed when the owner confesses that

Yet more I’d hate to hold my trees, except

As others hold theirs or refuse for them,

Beyond the time of profitable growth-
The trial by market everything must come to. (106, 21-24)

But as McDowell provides the defensive that “even those who might scorn trade for its soiling effect must make a living” (99) and even viewed from the ecological point, it would not be advisable to hold the trees beyond the time of their profitable growth.

At some place, a critic has pointed out that had the offer from the stranger been of greater sum of money, the owner would have agreed to sell his trees. But given the temperament and the ethical orientation of the characters in Frost’s poetry it is quite difficult to draw this conclusion.

To say that economics does not influence the life of the people living in Frost’s poetic would be wrong. It does. Having “forever done with potato crops” which fetched him only “thirty cents a bushel,” Meliboeus, the potato man in the poem “Build Soil,” realized that interval farming was of no use. So, he bought a mountain farm, which was “all woods and pasture” and fit only for sheep. It was a beneficial shift, according to him, in terms of money because “at least the sheep’s wool would be worth “seven cents a pound.” The people in Frost’s poetic world realize the importance of economics in their life. Tityrus, while talking about the need of commerce, says, “To market ‘tis our destiny to go.” At the same time, he expects that

... much as in the end we bring for sale there,

There is still more we never bring or should bring;

More that should be kept back—the soil for instance,
To sell the hay off, let alone the soil,

Is an unpardonable sin in farming.

The moral is, make a late start to market. (321-322, 172-181)

It is Tityrus’s wish that

Let those possess the land, and only those,

Who love it with a love so strong and stupid

That they may be abused and taken advantage of

And made fun of by business, law, and art;

They still hang on... (322, 187-193)

And he urges Meliboeus to

... refuse to be

Seduced back to the land by any claim

The land may seem to have on man to use it.

Let none assume to till the land but farmers. (322, 206-209)

So,

.... Plant, breed, produce,

But what you raise or grow, why, feed it out,

Eat it or plow it under where it stands,

To build the soil. For what is more accursed
Than an impoverished soil, pale and metallic? (323, 214-218)

Tityrus commands Meliboeus to

Build soil. Turn the farm in upon itself

Until it can contain itself no more (323, 234-235)

This also perhaps explains the reason why some of the people refused to give up farming when their land bore them hardly anything. Even when many people turned to more profitable jobs, they refused to leave their land.

For the people living in Frost’s poetic world, the value of certain things in nature cannot be judged by their utility or economic potential; but certain things, in their opinion, should be loved for themselves. This same view is propounded by environmental ethics. The stranger, being an outsider, did not know the value of the trees; he was a businessman and he was more concerned with the profits he would make by buying the trees for less and selling them in the city for more. The owner, being the native of that place, knew the true worth of those trees. He wished he could lay one in a letter to his friends who would be buying those trees for more in the cities and if possible

...could send you one

In wishing you herewith a Merry Christmas. (107, 59-60)

The people of New Hampshire live by the ethic that

Just specimens is all New Hampshire has,

One each of everything as in a showcase,
Which naturally she doesn’t care to sell. (161, 61-63)

And the people being the residents of that place liked to maintain the harmony of that place by not falling into the traps of commercialization. The outsiders to that environment may not be able to appreciate the ethics of these people for it is difficult for an outsider to comprehend the ethics of a place until and unless they become a part of that place.

“The communal knowledge,” according to Kerridge, “comes up from growing up, living, and working in a stable ecosystem. It is lost when social mobility carries a person away from their community and work” (136). The speaker’s friend in “New Hampshire” committed the mistake of going against the ethics 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.

He had “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)
The one with a consumerist approach looks at the whole world as simply “fodder and feces,” according to Sparshott; he is “blind to all the aspects that make it an environment” and, therefore, he cannot think of a given environment in a way a resident does because the resident is the one “who is in an environment in which he belongs and is of necessity a part.” (qtd. in Neil Everenden 99).

So, in order to maintain harmonious relation with nature it is best for man not to succumb to greed. One of the speakers in “Blueberries” finds Patterson to be quite selfish for hoarding all the blueberries for himself and his large Loren family. However, the other speaker finds Patterson working in compliance with nature and it is right too

…it’s a nice way to live,

Just taking what nature is willing to give,

Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow. (61, 54-56)

Lorens consider it their sole right to pick berries from that place and the speaker justifies their behavior which

…won’t be too friendly- they may be polite-

To people they look on as having no right

To pick where they are picking.

The speaker “won’t complain” because, according to the ethics of the land they live in, it is wrong to transgress into the fields of others; boundaries ought to be maintained. It is a different thing if the neighbours pick “as their right” peaches from a place “[w]hen the house wasn’t lived in” (“In the Home Stretch” 110). Everyone has
got the right over what grows naturally but once the owners occupy their place the right of others automatically ends.

The natives maintain the boundaries themselves and expect others also to respect them. If somebody does not follow their unspoken ethic, they feel bad. The persona in “Trespass” (364) felt humiliated whenever his right of his woods and his brook was ignored by the trespassers. The native had neither put the prohibiting sign nor was his land fenced but he felt he was being trespassed whenever someone took the freedom of “busying by his woods and brook.” He felt restless. The trespassers

... might be opening leaves of stone,

The picture book of the trilobite,

For which the region round was known,

And in which there was little property right. (AWT 364, 9-12)

The native also knew that he would not lose anything “[i]n specimen crab in specimen rock,” it was “his [the trespasser’s] ignoring what was whose” that irked him. And it was the trespasser’s acknowledgement with request for a drink that made the owner happy because he felt that it “made my property mine once more.”

The natives do not have the consumerist approach that the outsiders have. For Frost’s characters also nature has other uses than its utilitarian purpose. As for the “The Broken One” in “The Self Seeker,” the orchids in his place

...seldom to be had

In bushels lots- doesn’t come on the market.
Yet to “a discriminating appetite” as his, the Ram’s Horn orchid is “better than farmer’s beans. Its value cannot be counted in utilitarian terms at least for “the broken man.” When his friend, Willis urges him to demand higher compensation for his accident making him realize that

“But your flowers, man, you’re selling out your flowers.”

He tells his friend

“...I’m not selling those, I’m giving them;

They never earned me so much as one cent:

Money can’t pay me for the loss of them.

Again the friend urges him to reconsider “your flora of the valley” but he questions him back “you didn’t think/that was worth money to me?” the orchids for him do not have the utilitarian value; they have aesthetic value and the lawyer who comes to pay him the compensation for his lost legs does not realize what “the broken man” has lost by losing his legs — he lost contact with his orchids by losing his legs with which he had run his “forty orchids down.” Now he is an invalid and he knows the lawyer won’t be able to comprehend the loss which he has faced because he is an outsider, dead to the sensibility that he, Willis and even the little girl Anne possess.

To Leopold, it is human instinct to appreciate natural beauty. While making his famous statement, “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise”, he has been urging his reader to take into account not just economics but what is ethically and aesthetically right as well (SCA 224-25). Some things are valued for
their purpose other than utilitarian. The utilitarian streak can be corrected by realizing
the intrinsic value of nature — nature exists for purposes other than utility.

Leopold’s land ethics came in 1949 but what he propounds as his ethics was
already present in Frost’s poetry — all the components of the environment are bound
in a community in his poetry. Aldo Leopold understands nature’s value and moral
significance to be greater than its utilitarian or instrumental value. Frost, too, found in
nature something more than its utilitarian value. In Frost’s poetry the question of
proper attitude towards nature becomes more pertinent because in his poetry it is
necessary for the characters to make a living from nature. In their relationship with
their environment Frost’s characters are guided by their land ethic which can help
conventional Western philosophy focus on the “broad human ethical responsibility to
the nonhuman natural world” (Callicott 223).