CHAPTER TWO

FROST AND OTHER NATURE POETS

“The poetry of the earth is never dead”

John Keats

Nature has inspired poets since time immemorial. It requires an observant eye and a sensitive mind to listen to the silent music in the sea waves, to appreciate the beauty of changing seasons and to recreate something in poetry which is otherwise invisible to the naked eye. Nature poetry as a popular genre emerged in the eighteenth century after the publication of William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 and his famous call, "back to nature" which marked the beginning of Romantic Revival:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

But traces of nature in English poetry dates back to the Anglo-Saxon period, which records one of the oldest surviving epic poems in English, *Beowulf*. The poem was composed between 975 and 1000, by some anonymous writer, referred to as the Beowulf poet. The poem is about a hero named Beowulf, who comes to the rescue of the king of Danes who had been abducted by a monster.

In this poem one finds an amalgamation of three different elements of nature- the land, sea and fire. The hero battles for his life for seven days in the sea and fights various sea creatures during the period. Long writes, “With fourteen companions he crosses the sea. There is an excellent bit of Ocean poetry here (II.210-224)”:

The windy headlands, perilous fen paths,
Where, under mountain mist, the stream flows down
And floods the ground. Not far hence, but a mile.
The mere stands, over which hang death-chill groves
The wood fast-rooted overshades the flood;
There every night a ghastly miracle
Is seen, fire in the water.  

The description of the path with ferns, the mountain mist, the stream and the fire in water, is all the way similar to the description of nature in many contemporary and modern poems. Following the traditional pattern of discussion, if poetry is to be traced from its origins in English literature, one cannot, however, ignore the immense contribution of the famous English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400), who had been hailed in as the “Father of English Poetry” by John Dryden. Apart from his other pieces of work like “The Book of the Duchess”, “The House of Fame”, “Parliament of Foules”, “The Legend of Good Women”, etc. “The Canterbury Tales”, gave him his acclaim as a poet. While he composed several magnificent works, his reputation as a master poet rests chiefly upon “The Canterbury Tales” published in 1387. The poem is about a group of 29 pilgrims en route to the shrine of Saint Thomas A Beckett. From an amusing and light-hearted description to profoundly moralistic, the Tales mirror not only the customs and manners of 14th century England but also throw light on the independent characters of the speakers. Chaucer joins the group of pilgrims as the chief speaker and observer at the same time. The Prologue gives full length sketches of the pilgrims, including a Knight, a Squire, a nun, a Yeoman, a Monk, a Prioress, a Summoner, a Pardoner, a Doctor, a Reeve, a Ploughman, and the Wife of Bath to name a few. The opening lines of the poem allude to the month of April and March and paint a beautiful picture of seasons. Here according to the poet, April rain has put an end to the drought of March:

Whan that April with his showres soote
The drought of March hath perced to the roote

The references to seasons, rains, zephyrs, crops, heath, birds and the like clearly depict Chaucer's interest in nature. Though the tone of the poem changes from natural surroundings to the description of human nature, the opening lines set the festive theme of the poem. Spring symbolically represents beginning and the reference to Spring and the month of April hints that the Pilgrimage is a new beginning for all the pilgrims who
will discover their own selves in the journey. In another very important poem called the “Book of Duchess” he uses the ‘dream vision’ technique which was made popular during the mediaeval times by various poets, including Chaucer. The speaker in the poem describes a dream where once he lay in his bed in the month of May and was awakened by the chirping of birds outside his room. He is delighted by the melodious song and finds it harmonious. Once again Chaucer’s use of birds who sing melodiously upon a window sill in the month of May throws light on his capabilities as a poet who could paint a picture of natural surroundings with ease and comfort. Although Chaucer's poetry is chiefly associated with "human nature” because portraying the actual follies and customs of his times was his primary concern, his poetic earnestness and honest picturesque descriptions about people and places, prompt Matthew Arnold to comment that "with him is born our real poetry”.

After Chaucer's great body of work the next poet who can be considered as a major contributor to the canon of English Poetry is Edmund Spenser (1522-1599). Spenser gave to English poetry a tradition of pastoral poems and the famous style named after him called the Spenserian sonnet. “The Faery Queen” is one of his most popular poems in English literature. It is a collection of six books, each dealing with a particular virtue like holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice and courtesy. Una in the allegory is symbolic of truth who is to be saved from falsehood, which is represented by Duessa. Finally after a number of combat battles the Red Cross knight succeeds in saving Una.

The poem has immense allegorical significance. The imagery taken from both nature and religion, is grand and thus it makes the poem a perfect example of a religious allegory. Another major work by the poet is “The Shepherd's Calendar” written in 1579. It consists of around five different forms of heroic lines or ten syllabled lines. The tradition of pastoral poetry dates back to the Greek poet, Theocritus and the famous Roman poet, Virgil whose “Ecologues” are considered as the primary inspiration behind Spenser’s “Shepherd's Calendar”. “The Shepherd's Calendar” is a pastoral poem with the speaker as a Shepherd and the surroundings representing the rural English countryside. In a pastoral poem, the poet usually disguises himself as a shepherd. In this poem Spenser disguises himself under the name of Colin Clout. Pastoral poetry usually presents an idyllic form of rural life. Spenser’s poem comprises twelve ecologues, each representing a different month of the year. The love-story of Rosalinde and Colin Clout is the central theme of the poem. The entire setting of the poem and the full circle it
makes beginning with January and ending with December, itself sets nature both in the backdrop and forefront of the poem:

You naked trees, whose shady leaves are lost,
Wherein the byrds were wont to build their bowre:
And now are clothd with mosse and hoary frost,
Instede of bloosmes, wherwith your buds did flowre:
I see your teares, that from your boughes doe raine,
Whose drops in drery ysicles remaine.\(^7\)

The description of leafless trees, covered with frost and snow, which could not provide shades for the wandering birds paints a picturesque image of winter. The last Eclogue, “December” ends with Colin Clot’s final goodbye. Since winter is symbolic of death, December too becomes for the Shepherd a remainder of the inevitability of death. He bids adieu to the surroundings, his sheep, lambs, woods and everything which had been a part of his journey. The entire episode from January to December is replete with nature imagery and pastoral elements. The shepherds lament over love, discuss life and give critical views and satiric comments over philosophical questions involving man and his surroundings. Finally the long poem ends with the following lines:

Gather together ye my little Flock,
My little Flock that was to me most lief:
Let me, ah! let me in your Folds ye lock,
E'er the breme Winter breed your greater Grief.
Winter is come, that blows the baleful Breath,
And after Winter cometh timely Death.

Adieu Delights, that lulled me asleep;
Adieu my Dear, whose Love I bought so dear;
Adieu my little Lambs and loved Sheep;
Adieu ye Woods, that oft my Witness were\(^8\)

Though Spenser is often acclaimed for his long narrative poems like “The Faery Queen” and “The Shepherd’s Calendar”, one cannot, however, put aside his sonnet
sequence, *Amoretti*, which is also one of his best collection of poems. “One Day I Wrote her Name” belongs to this collection, which has been praised by critics, for its lyrical quality and romantic imagery. The themes of love and time are commonly seen among the Elizabethan writers. Spenser too laments over the transitoriness of life but finds solace in the power of his verse and promises his beloved that their love would last for eternity.

Where when as death shall all the world subdue

Our love shall live, and later life renew.⁹

The victory of love against the ravages of time is manifested perfectly in the sonnets of William Shakespeare (1564-1616). He delves deep into the ideas of death, time, love and eternity. Primarily concerned with beauty and human relationships in all their complexity, these sonnets have outlived the damage caused by time, as promised by the poet himself. The word ‘Time’ occurs around seventy-eight times in the entire collection of his 154 sonnets. This points to Shakespeare’s pre-occupation with the ruinous effects of time on beauty, age and memory. He universalises these themes using various images from nature. Nature abounds in all its variety and playfulness in the forms of seasons. Seasons are very often mentioned by him in many of his sonnets. In sonnet 5 he writes:

For never resting time leads summer on

To hideous winter and confounds him there¹⁰

In sonnet 7, he refers to sunlight and compares man’s life with the rising and falling hours of the day. Again in sonnet 12 he refers to the transitoriness of summer which soon gives way to winter. Likewise man too is subject to death and decay. One can see how beautifully he transforms an object of nature into a remainder of death. Clear references to seasons can be seen in sonnets 5, 7, 12, 18, 53, 56, 97, 98, 102. Not only seasons, but in his sonnets we can see flowers of different kinds with intricate details. His reference to roses, lilies, cankers and other summer flowers occur in sonnets 25, 35, 94, 95, 98, 99, 124. Other aspects of nature like rain, clouds and storm can be seen in sonnets 14, 33, 34, 35, 90,117. The reference to celestial objects like the sun, moon, and stars can be noted in Sonnets 14, 15, 25, 35 etc.
Seasons are mentioned in the following sonnets:

For never-resting time leads summer on (Sonnet 5)
And summer’s green all girded up in sheaves (Sonnet 12)
Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? (18)
Speak of the spring and foison of the year (53)
Or call it winter, which being full of care/ Makes summer’s welcome thrice more wished, more rare. (56)
How like a winter hath, my absence been (97)
From you have I been absent in the spring (98)
Our love was new, and then but in Spring (102)

References to flowers can be seen in the following:

But as the marigold at the sun’s eye (Sonnet 25)
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud (Sonnet 35)
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds (Sonnets 94)
Which like a canker in the fragrant rose (Sonnets 95)
Nor did I wonder at the Lily’s white (Sonnet 98)
The roses fearfully on thorns did stand (Sonnet 99)
Weeds among weeds, or flowers with flowers gathered (Sonnet 124)

Thunder, Rain and clouds are visible in the following sonnets:

Pointing to each his thunder, rain and wind (Sonnet 14)
The region cloud hath masked him from me now (Sonnet 33)
To let base clouds overtake me in my way (Sonnet 34)
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and Sun (Sonnet 35)
Give not a windy night a rainy morrow (Sonnet 90)
That I have hoisted sail to all the winds (Sonnets 117)

Celestial objects can be seen in:

And constant stars, in them I read such art (Sonnet 14)
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment (Sonnet 15)
But as the marigold at the sun’s eye (Sonnet 25) 
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and Sun (Sonnet 35)

Victor Hugo in his book, William Shakespeare, writes:

In Shakespeare the birds sing, the bushes become verdant, the hearts love, the souls suffer, the cloud wanders, it is hot, it is cold, night falls, time passes, forests and crowds speak, the vast eternal dream hovers about. The sap and the blood, all forms of the fact multiple, the actions and the ideas, man and humanity, the living and the life, the solitudes, the cities, the religions, the diamonds and pearls, the dung-hills and the charnel-houses, the ebb and flow of beings, the steps of the comers and goers,—all, all are on Shakespeare and in Shakespeare; and this genius being the earth, the dead emerge from it.\(^\text{11}\)

Hugo’s observations sum up the exceptional potentialities in the poet and dramatist, William Shakespeare. His use of nature and human life in his works, his acute observations regarding the changing seasons, the celestial objects, the stormy skies and the flowers, all bring together the nature poet hidden behind those long dramatic soliloquies that put human existence into question. Indeed he has every bit of an observation which makes him a poet of nature.

Time, according to Shakespeare, is the biggest enemy of life and beauty but time’s heavy hand cannot dishearten the poet who believes in the eternal power of his verse. Time is indeed merciless which takes away all that man loves and preserves, but love can conquer this fear of death. The poet’s faith in his work compels him to claim eternity in a world where nothing is permanent.

So Long as Men can breathe or eyes can see
So Long lives this and this gives life to thee.\(^\text{12}\)

Shakespeare had a whole list of admirers, who referred to him time and again in their works and held him in high regards when it came to being an inspiration to poets and dramatists. Percy Bysshe Shelley in his Defence of Poetry writes, “Shakespeare, Dante, and Milton ... are philosophers of the very loftiest power”\(^\text{13}\). Not only Shelley, but writers like Samuel Johnson, and Dryden consider Milton to be a true successor of the
late dramatist and poet, Shakespeare. John Milton’s (1608-1674) poems offer to us a great deal of variety, including pastoral poems, religious and political satires, hymns and sonnets. William Wordsworth in his poem “London”, which was written as a tribute to Milton, writes:

Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as naked heavens, majestic, free.\textsuperscript{14}

“Gerard Manley Hopkins, in his \textit{Letters} to Robert Bridges and R.W. Dixon, acknowledges Milton as a major influence upon his own radical, iconoclastic experiments with sprung rhythm and counterpoint.” \textsuperscript{15} Indeed Milton paved the way for many poets to experiment with new forms of writings like elegies, and religious satires. Out of his entire collection of poetry, “Lycidas” stands in the prominent ones. The poem was written in 1637, as a pastoral elegy to mourn the death of Milton’s friend and classmate at Cambridge, Edward King. The Renaissance poets used the pastoral form of poetry to present an ideal state of life. Milton too uses the same genre to highlight his loss and grieve the death of his beloved friend. Mark Womack asserts that, “By naming Edward King "Lycidas," Milton follows "the tradition of memorializing a loved one through Pastoral poetry, a practice that may be traced from ancient Greek Sicily through Roman culture and into the Christian Middle Ages and early Renaissance."\textsuperscript{16}

The poem opens with the following lines:

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more

Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,

I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,

And with forc’d fingers rude

Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.

Bitter constraint and sad occasion dear

Compels me to disturb your season due;

For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime\textsuperscript{17}
From the very first line we find a reference to nature and its beautiful sights. The poet says that he wishes to prepare a wreath of flowers for his dead friend, but he is sad to pluck the flower buds before they mature. It reminds him of Edward’s pre-mature death. He is grief stricken and hence everything in the surroundings appear as if they shared his loss. Describing their routine at the Cambridge University where they studied together, he writes:

   For we were nurs'd upon the self-same hill,
   Fed the same flock, by fountain, shade, and rill;
   Together both, ere the high lawns appear'd
   Under the opening eyelids of the morn,
   We drove afield, and both together heard
   What time the gray-fly winds her sultry horn,
   Batt'ning our flocks with the fresh dews of night,
   Oft till the star that rose at ev'ning bright
   Toward heav'n's descent had slop'd his westering wheel. 18

The University is referred to as the “self-same hill” where the poet and his friend were “nurst” Milton paints a picturesque image of Cambridge countryside, where he and his friend are in the guise of the shepherds who take their sheep to pastures and remain together till the sun descends. The reader almost loses himself in the description and finds it realistic and surreal at the same time.

Milton affirms the fact that death of someone in the world corresponds and coincides with the death of something in Nature too.:

   As killing as the canker to the rose,
   Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze,
   Or frost to flowers that their gay wardrobe wear
When first the white thorn blows:

Such, Lycidas, thy loss to shepherd's ear.\textsuperscript{19}

Barbara K, writes in her \textit{Life of John Milton : A Critical Biography}, :

The first collapse of pastoral obliterates the poignantly nostalgic pastoral scene enjoyed by the youthful companion shepherds, in which nature, humankind, and poetic ambitions seem to be in harmony, unthreatened by the fact or even the thought of mortality. Lycidas’s death shatters this idyl, revealing in nature not the ordered seasonal processes of mellowing and fruition that pastoral assumes, but rather the wanton destruction of youth and beauty: the blighted rosebud, the taintworm destroying the weanling sheep, and the frostbitten flowers in early spring.\textsuperscript{20}

Barbara’s assertion about the relationship between man and nature in “Lycidas” is appropriate in Miltonic terms. The poet believes that his loss is reciprocated by Nature itself. Everything which was lively had turned eerie and desolate after Edward’s untimely death.

\textit{Thee, Shepherd, thee the woods and desert caves,}

\textit{With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,}

\textit{And all their echoes mourn.}

\textit{The willows and the hazel copses green}

\textit{Shall now no more be seen}

\textit{Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays.}

\textit{…}
The glowing violet,

The musk-rose, and the well attir’d woodbine,

With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head,

And every flower that sad embroidery wears;

Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,

And daffadillies fill their cups with tears.\textsuperscript{21}

The poet’s effortless description of natural surroundings and the minute details in the poem portray his skills as a unique nature poet. William Hazlitt writes, “The gusts of passion come and go like the sounds of music borne on the wind”, by which he means that the poem’s structure and mood appear to replicate the fluctuating emotional registers of death and loss\textsuperscript{22}. Hazlitt thus highlights the lyrical quality of the elegy, which truly moves like the ebb and flow of tides. The words seem to appear and play upon a chord of an old musical instrument which has no name but one can relate to the song, long after it stops playing. This element of musicality and use of nature as a medium of expression by Milton, is not only limited to “Lycidas”. But it can be seen in various other poems by the poet, like the companion poems “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso”. According to Barbara K:\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{L’Allegro} portrays the lifestyle of youth as a cyclic round, beginning with Mirth’s man awakening from sleep and ending with the drowsing Orpheus. Melancholy’s man begins with the evening and ends in waking ecstasy, the vision of heaven, all embracing scientific learning, and prophecy. In these poems Milton stages an ideal solution to his youthful anxieties about slow development, lifestyles, and poetry.

The “slow movement” referred here best suits to pastoral imagery where people still derive joys from basic things. A critic says:\textsuperscript{23}

Most of ‘L’Allegro’ draws its pleasure from an idealized version of the countryside, with whistling ploughmen and singing milkmaids; like the
pastorals of Theocritus, they reflect the experience of a comfortable city dweller in the countryside, not that of one who has ploughed a Weld or milked a cow. 24 One can find references to birds, winds, roses, violets, cankers, lark, hills, greenery, furrowed land, shepherds, daisies, hamlets, elms, rain, etc. in the poem which add more to the pastoral element of the verse. Milton’s genius as a poet of nature rests primarily upon his use of pastoral imagery which reflects picturesque images of the English countryside.

Milton belonged to the Puritan age, which was known as the age of reawakening or second renaissance because it marked the intellectual reawakening of man. William. J. Long writes, “Poetry took new and startling forms in Donne and Herbert and prose became sombre as Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy”25 Milton was the only poet of this age whose huge body of work fetched him immense recognition. The age saw metaphysical poets like Donne and Herbert and Cavalier poets like Marvell, Crashaw, Cowley, Vaughan etc. From the Puritan age to the beginning of eighteen century, there was a major decline in nature poetry. The Puritan age gave way to the Restoration period (1660-1700) which was marked by sheer portrayal of realism and hence the poetry of the age could find no respite in Nature. To this spirit of stoic realism, James Thomson (1700-1748) responded differently.

Thomson’s great merit lies in his restoration of nature to the domain of poetry from which it had been banished by Pope and his school. He dared to dispute, and he disproved by his own practice and the astonishing success which at once accompanied it, the dictum of Pope that in matters poetic ‘the proper study of mankind is man’. His wonderful observing power and his enthusiasm for his subject went far to make his treatment of nature a success. He was sincerely and healthily enamoured of nature. The wild romantic country was his delight.26

This is true that Thomson’s delight was the countryside, but this should not be overlooked that he never limited himself to the countryside or pastures. He made every bit of nature part of his poems. His most cited poem is The Seasons which was published in 1730, is considered his best work. It is a collection of four poems, beginning with Spring and ending with Winter, thus making a full circle. The opening lines set the festive tone of the poem.
Come, gentle Spring, ethereal mildness, come;  
And from the bosom of yon dropping cloud,  
While music wakes around, veiled in a shower  
Of shadowing roses, on our plains descend.²⁷

Everything is lit with colour and moisture in Spring. The description of this season has a reference to flowers, rain, breeze, greenery and the like, which added more to the Spring effect.

In heaps on heaps the doubling vapour sails  
Along the loaded sky, and mingling deep  
Sits on the horizon round a settled gloom;  
Not such as wintry storms on mortals shed,  
Oppressing life; but lovely, gentle, kind,  
And full of every hope and every joy,  
The wish of Nature.²⁸

“Lovely, gentle and kind” is how he describes Spring. A subtle feeling of joy and celebration mark the very innate layers of the poem. Similarly Summer, Autumn and Winter mark their own distinctive features. Thompson’s Seasons has everything which adds to the canon of nature poetry. William Hazlitt in his Lectures on English Poets, says:

All that is admirable in the Seasons, is the emanation of a fine natural genius, and sincere love of his subject, unforced, unstudied, that comes uncalled for, and departs unbidden...The feeling of nature, of the changes of the seasons, was in his mind; and he could not help conveying this feeling to the reader, by the mere force of spontaneous expression.²⁹

Thompson’s poems had the capacity to surpass boundaries of time and space. The reader is slowly transported to the world of four seasons, where everything appears beautiful, be it death in winter or gloom in autumn. David Daiches asserts:

Though the Augustan poets believed that the proper study of mankind was mind, they were far from indifferent to the beauties of Nature, and throughout the eighteenth century is found a strain of descriptive and meditative poetry in
which natural description prompts moral reflections on the human situation. The pioneer here was James Thompson, whose four long poems on the seasons—*Winter* (1726), *Summer* (1727), *Spring* (1728), and *Autumn* (1730)…employ a quasi-Miltonic blank verse in describing the countryside at different times of the year.\(^{30}\)

To this progress towards Nature poetry or ‘romantic revival’, Thomas Gray (1716-71), was a major addition. He is often regarded as a pre-Romantic or transitional poet. His “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is considered as one of the most popular poems in the history of English poetry. A large part of his uniqueness rests primarily on the fact that the poet unlike his predecessors was more sensitive towards his subject. The opening lines of the poem have a solemn effect on the mind of the reader who cannot help but be a part of the landscape that the poet presents. The poem opens with the description of a day which is nearing its end.

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day

The lowing herd wind slowly over the lea

The ploughman homeward plods his weary way

And leaves the world to darkness, and to me.\(^{31}\)

The description of the evening with the sound of a death bell in the background hints at the sombre theme of the poem. The poet does not refer to evening directly, but calls it a ‘parting day’, which will soon give way to night and everything will come to an end. The owl perched on the deserted tower and the lonely traveller who wanders in its haunting premises, adds more to its eerie imagery. It also suggests the loneliness associated with night and likewise, also with death. This shows that Gray leaves no stone unturned to prepare ground for a solemn theme.

The poem was a result of Gray’s visit to a countryside graveyard at Stoke Poges. The poet while wandering in the lonely graveyard speculates upon the temporariness of life and the permanence of death. The description of the landscape, the approaching night, the owl, the trees, the cock’s echoing shrill, and the woods are some clear examples which affirm Gray’s preoccupation with Nature. When he mentions the “rude
forefathers of the Hamlet” who were buried under the elm trees, perhaps he wished to present an ideal resting place for the dead. The dead irrespective of their status or ambition lie with nature. The poem concludes with an epitaph which reads:

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth

This states in clear words that someone has died. There was nothing he could boast of, neither ambition nor fame. He died and hence returns back to earth, where we all belong.

The poem has a universal appeal because it deals with something which is inescapable - death. Its tone is melancholic and the poet asserts that “the paths of glory lead but to the grave”. Gray is recognised as a transitional poet because in him we find visible progression towards the Romantic Age. The Romantic poets were lovers of Nature who usually symbolised Nature for eternity. Unlike them Gray used Nature as a reminder of death.

Though the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is Gray’s most appreciated work, one cannot however ignore his other poems like “Ode on the Spring”, “The Progress of Poesy” and “The Bard”. As the name suggests “Ode on the Spring” by Gray alludes to the charm of Spring as a season. Each stanza describes some observations the poet had while he notices the season. In the first stanza Gray draws a picture of a beautiful Spring day, which boasts of colourful flowers, pleasant breeze and lingering fragrances. In the second stanza he mentions the oak trees with thick branches, which give shade to the poet, who sits by a river. In the third stanza he mentions the lives of those insects, which enjoy the season of Spring unlike the poet who is thoughtful of his miseries. In the last two stanzas the insects become a metaphor for happiness. Unlike human beings who spend their time imagining their future, the insects live for the moment and die unnoticed. They leave the poet with a message:

Thy sun is set, thy spring is gone—
We frolic, while 'tis May.

The poem does not deal with a new theme or subject matter, because speculating on seasons had been in vogue since the Elizabethan age or even before that. But Gray is
the first poet of his age who used vivid imagery from his surroundings and captured them in the form of his poems. “Ode on the Spring” is one of those poems which the poet wrote using nature as a medium of lamentation over death.

Robert Burns (1759-96) is another poet of the age, who though comes in the category of a minor poet, but his lyrics and scenic songs compel one to include him in the list of Nature poets who deviated from the main line poetry of the neo classical age and infused it with a new colour and vibrancy. Long observes, “After a century of cold and formal poetry, relieved only by the romanticism of Gray and Cowper, these fresh inspired songs went straight to the heart, like music of returning birds in springtime”. Burns’s poems are referred to as the songs, because the most distinctive quality in them is their lyricism. His Poems Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect, are quoted time and again for their simplicity and lyrical quality, which perhaps no other poet in the history of Scottish poetry possessed. Poems like, “A Red, Red, Rose”, “To a Mountain Daisy”, “To a Mouse” etc, are few examples which depict Burn’s fondness for simple rustic surroundings around him. A critic points out,

Robert Burns is the most lyrical of the rural poets, and perhaps the most universal. A ploughman himself, he was the closest to nature of his contemporaries. When he turns up a field mouse’s nest with his plough, he realises that he has destroyed a complete world, wrecked the hopes and plans of a ’sleeket, cowran’, tim’rous beastie’.

But Mousie, thou art no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:

One thing is common in his poems- his love for simplicity. This can be felt by noticing the central figures or elements around which his poems revolve, for example, a flower, a mouse, a mountain. Not only simplicity but Burn’s poetry is very close to the soil. His verse echoes with Scottish dialect and his inspirations primarily remind one of the Scottish countryside. Nature is found in abundance in his poems, be it crimson daisy or rose, or mouse which lived on a farm. Every bit of his poems is soaked into simple things within nature. Tim Fulford remarks, “Burns became a key figure for English Romantics, for he demonstrated that rural culture and rustic language could give the poet a language of moral power and critical authority that the polite poetry produced in commercial, metropolitan London utterly lacked”. Indeed Burn’s poetry is soft and
simple. It was not poetry for poetry’s sake. The sheer simplicity of its language, and imagery marks Robert Burns as one of the chief exponents of nature poetry.

Wee, modest, crimson-tippèd flow'r,
Thou's met me in an evil hour;
For I maun crush amang the stoure
Thy slender stem:
To spare thee now is past my pow'r,
Thou bonie gem.38

The list of Nature poets in the pre-Romantic age may be rendered incomplete, if one does not mention the poetry of William Blake (1757-1827). *The Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* are perhaps his most acclaimed works because of the simplicity of language and complexity of the varied themes. For every poem in the *Songs of Innocence* there is a counter poem in *The Songs of Experience*, each dealing with two contrary states of the human soul. Apart from this distinctive feature in his poetry, one cannot put aside the nature imagery in his poems. Poems like “The Echoing Green” and “Nurse’s Song” are two best examples to portray how nature forms an integral part in the poetry of Blake. The children in the “Nurse’s Song” are playing in fields until it is dark and the nurse calls them because soon it would be night:

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise;
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies
…
Besides in the sky the little birds fly,
And the hills are all covered with sheep39

The children playing in the fields, against the backdrop of the setting sun, where little birds are flying towards their nest and the hills are full of sheep, are representations of English countryside. In “The Echoing Green” too, nature has been used to appeal to the reader, and to impart a child like innocence to the description of the surroundings. The simplicity of an event where the sun rises and the skies reflect the happiness and the
bells ring to welcome the changing of seasons, is all the more suitable to be called nature poetry:

The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring
The Skylark and the thrush
The birds of the bush
Sing louder around

The above interpretations trace the development of Nature poetry over the years. The poetry of Gray, Collins, Blake and Burns was like a relief from the stereotypical poetry of the Neoclassical age, which aimed at moralising and mirroring the society. The Romantic period was basically the age of Nature poetry. This period saw some great poets of nature, including William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy. B. Shelley, Byron, Coleridge etc. Among these poets, William Wordsworth’s name stands out with all its uniqueness and superiority when it comes to the poetry of Nature. His “Lyrical Ballads” mark the beginning of the Romantic Movement in the history of English Literature. It is a collection of nature poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge, written in and around 1798. The collection included some famous poems like, Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”. “The Lyrical Ballads” became a landmark in changing the course of English poetry and the new dawn of Romanticism. The poetic diction and style of Wordsworth was very different from those of other Nature poets. In fact all the Romantic poets of the age differed from one another. In Wordsworth one can easily find the mysterious “presence” which is not found in any other nature poet. As a child he loved spending hours in the lap of nature, befriending trees, streams, flowers, and every bit of nature which came his way. He grew up with mountains and finally concluded that there is a “presence” amidst the scenery he loved. This theory of a certain mysterious presence lurking behind nature is
seen in many of his poems but very prominently in “Lines Composed a few Miles above Tintern Abbey” and “The Prelude”.

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns
And the round ocean and the living air
And the blue sky and in the mind of man
A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought
And rolls through all things (93-102)\(^41\)

It would not be wrong to call “Tintern Abbey” as the spiritual autobiography of the poet, because it traces his growth not only as a human being but also as a poet. Nature as a source of inspiration at various stages of the poet’s life is the central theme of the poem. Amidst the hustle and bustle of city life, the poet turns towards nature to find solace:

In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart--
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!\(^42\)

This “call back to nature” is not only limited to “Tintern Abbey” but also forms a central theme in the sonnet, “The World is Too Much With Us”. This poem became a landmark and is often cited by critics as Wordsworth’s plea to “return back to Nature”. The ease and the simplicity of language are two most important factors in the poetry of Wordsworth. The “Daffodils” dance with the breeze, while the solemn song of the
“Solitary Reaper” transcends barriers of age, language and class. This is the beauty of Wordsworth’s nature, which differentiates him from any other nature poet of the age.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), was a close friend of Wordsworth and one of the major poets of the Romantic age. He is known for introducing the bizarre and supernatural elements in genre of nature poetry. His major works include “Ode to Dejection”, “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, “Kubla Khan” etc. Though supernatural elements always form a prominent part in his poems but one cannot overlook his powerful nature imagery which gives the minutest details of the scenery he talks about. For example in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” he mentions everything from landscape to seascape with exact preciseness and accuracy. To describe the descending night in the tropical regions he writes:

The sun’s rim dips: the stars rush out
At one stride comes the dark

In “Kubla Khan” one can see the perfect amalgamation of the supernatural and natural. The imaginary tomb of Kubla Khan has been described picturesquely by Coleridge. As the poem ends, it leaves the reader in awe:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round;
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

It would not be an overstatement to say that in no other nature poet one can find this peaceful co-existence of the natural and the supernatural. Coleridge and Wordsworth
belonged to the group of early Romantics. The younger or later romantics included poets like, Byron, Keats and Shelley. John Keats introduced the sensuousness in nature poetry whereas Shelley’s poems seem pre occupied with the power of nature. Long observes, “The very spirit of nature which appeals to us in the wind and the cloud, the sunset and the moonrise, seems to have possessed him, at times and made him a chosen instrument of melody”45 Shelley’s lyrics were infused with a symphony which pleased the reader. Like Wordsworth, he too believed that nature has the power to heal man’s soul and self. At times, he becomes a poet who loves the miracle in nature and rest of the times he becomes an idealistic poet like Byron who aimed at transforming the world into a better place. A combination of both these ideas can be seen in his “Ode to the West Wind”, where he invokes the West Wind amidst chaos and lifelessness and in the end pleads it to make him its instrument of music.

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from a deep autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, spirit fierce
My spirit! Bee thou me, impetous one.46

Unlike Shelley, Keats never aimed at reforming the world, but only saw “Beauty” in different forms of nature. He believed that “poetry should be, not the vehicle of philosophy, religious teaching or social and political theories, but the incarnation of beauty. The famous opening line of Endymion- A Thing of beauty is a joy forever’ – strikes the key note of his work.47” He was obsessed with the concept of eternity, truth and most importantly beauty. Realising that soon he would fall a prey to death because of his incurable tuberculosis, he started finding the bliss of eternity in art, nature and beauty. In most of his poems one can see the concepts of immortality and mortality. In “Ode to a Nightingale” the song of the bird becomes a symbol of eternity, in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” the inscriptions on the Urn become symbolic of eternity once again. Each poem by him casts a spell on audience who cannot deny the mesmerising aftermath of
reading Keats. His odes, smaller poems and long poems are fused with Greek mythology and hence portray Keats’s inclination towards Greek literature. Sometimes his fancies would go above anticipation and this tendency to escape reality and seek refuge in an ideal world make him appear as an escapist. This escapism is part of many of his poems like “Endymion”, “Ode to a Nightingale”, “Lamia”, etc where the poet wishes to leave the earth for a better place, where there would be no worries and no death:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.  

The nineteenth century appeared as an age of nature poetry. Be it the pantheism of Wordsworth or sensuousness of Keats, nature poetry in the nineteenth century never failed to amuse the reader in a sensitive manner. This tide of change from moralising and classic poetry to Romanticism was not only limited to England but also touched upon the literary circles of America. In America this movement towards nature and self, was known as “Transcendentalism”. This may also be referred to as the American Romanticism. Many poets and philosophers came under its spell and started writing about man’s relation to his surroundings, to his own self and most importantly to nature. Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson were the initiators of this movement. Later many famous poets of the continent joined this literary movement. Prominent among them was Walt Whitman (1819-1892). He was a bard, who united the past, present and future in his poems. His voice was the voice of freedom and realism, which made his verse unique and largely acceptable by his nation and beyond.
I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others

Though Whitman was basically a mystic and used many personal and universal symbols in his poems, his poetry seems to be loaded with "seascapes". He was in love with the sea, be it the sea in "Out of the Cradle endlessly Rocking" or "On the Beach at Night", his poems are full of symbols taken from the sea:

On the beach at night,
Stands a child with her father,
Watching the east, the autumn sky.

Up through the darkness,
While ravening clouds, the burial clouds, in black masses spreading,
Lower sullen and fast athwart and down the sky,
Amid a transparent clear belt of ether yet left in the east,
Ascends large and calm the lord-star Jupiter,
And nigh at hand, only a very little above,
Swim the delicate sisters the Pleiades.

Ezra Greenspan in The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman, maintains:

The sky, the sea, plants, trees, roots, buds, sunshine, animals, the infinite universe. None of these natural phenomena had figured much in his early poetry and fiction, but suddenly they seemed all-important. He dreamed of his nature-filled poetry having an immense impact on American life. "The poets I would have must be a power in the state, and an engrossing power in the state," he wrote in his notebook (NP, I: 144). If America saw its problems and its people recast amid nature imagery, perhaps it would change. Sectional divisions could be repaired by an absorptive, poetic "I" who traveled joyously through all regions and who reveled in the cycles of nature. Corruption could be positively counteracted by a poetic re-creation of nature's beauties. The metaphors Whitman used to describe his mission were little less than messianic. Leaves of Grass was "the new Bible," to be read' outdoors by everyone every season of
The poet was "the age transfigured." The proof of the poet was that his country absorbed him as affectionately as he absorbed it. Wishful thinking, to be sure.51

The above statement sums up the importance of nature in the poetry of Walt Whitman. A contemporary of Whitman, was Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), who was also a Transcendentalist but she refused to relate herself to any school of poetry. She was a Puritan and hence grew up in a typical Christian family and poetry was the only way where she could be a non-conformist. A free thinker, a candid individualistic being, Dickinson was taken aback by the death of people close to her, which affected her in the worse ways. Out of her entire collection of poetry, more than a thousand poems deal with death as a principal subject. Her poems are a perfect example to portray her minute observations of nature. She would notice the migratory birds searching for a resting place, buds laden with frost, a grasshopper sitting idly on a cold winter afternoon and how seasons melt into another seasons of hopes and hopelessness:

NATURE, the gentlest mother,
Impatient of no child,
The feeblest or the way wardest,—
Her admonition mild

In forest and the hill
By traveller is heard,
Restraining rampant squirrel
Or too impetuous bird.

How fair her conversation,
A summer afternoon,—
Her household, her assembly;
And when the sun goes down

Her voice among the aisles
Incites the timid prayer
Of the minutest cricket,
The most unworthy flower.
When all the children sleep
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light her lamps;
Then, bending from the sky,

With infinite affection
And infiniter care,
Her golden finger on her lip,
Wills silence everywhere⁵².

Thus, it can be concluded that Nature has been a primary source of inspiration for poets across ages and continents. Be it the anonymous Beowulf poet of the Anglo-Saxon age or William Wordsworth of the nineteenth century, Nature poetry as a genre has evolved efficiently over the years. In Chaucer, Nature formed the backdrop of his narrations. One can identify the natural elements employed by him in his poems. In Spenser, this was brought out more prominently in the form of pastoral poetry, which was full of idyllic descriptions of English countryside. In Shakespeare “nature” as an inspiration features in almost all his sonnets, where seasons, celestial objects, flowers etc are used by the poet to demonstrate man’s fate. In the Restoration period, nature poetry was replaced by the realistic, moralistic and aphoristic poetry of Pope, Dryden, Congreve and Swift. This was short-lived and Nature as a main theme in poetry returned with James Thomson and more strongly with Thomas Gray. Poets like Robert Burns and William Blake, too added to the canon of nature centred poems in the pre-Romantic age. The eighteenth century was basically the age where the poetry of the clubs and coffee houses shifted to the poetry of nature. Popularly called the Romantic Age, this was the main period during which Nature poetry was experimented, tested and tried and finally emerged as the main theme which inspired almost all the major poets of the age, namely, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats and Shelley.

This spirit was not limited to the English literary circles, America also had a similar renaissance of nature poetry, which is termed as Transcendentalism. Major poets of the period include Whitman, Dickinson and Frost. Whitman on the one hand proclaimed himself as the bard whereas Dickinson was happy and contented to write for her own
sake. Frost was a mixture of both. He did not accept an alliance with any school of poetry but was partly inspired by the Transcendentalists. He wrote poems soaked in nature imagery, in colloquial language, and on topics which usually did not catch the normal eye. In William Wordsworth, the mysterious “presence” pervaded his hills, lakes, songs and silences. In Keats, his love for eternity and Greek mythology, in Shelley his fascination for the power in Nature and its elements, and in Byron the endless depths of the ocean and the night may be noted. The poetry of Robert Frost stands in contrast to this typical form of Nature poetry. He was a farmer poet like Burns and wrote in a language which was very close to speech. His inspiration included anything and everything which he came across, during his stay at New England. It sometimes appears that his poems were regional pieces of writing but his characters and their problems transcended barriers of boundaries; they were universal manifestations of emotions rendered as poetry. His poetry began indoors and then slowly moved out to fields, butterflies, thorns, abandoned barns, a fallen star, a burnt tree, homeless birds and boys, deserted places and crowded spots. Perhaps, nothing around him remained untouched in the nine books of poetry he wrote. According to Reginald Cook:

   Frost was a poet whose passionate devotion to the profession of poetry and consummate knowledge of art, whose tangy wit and ability to play provocatively with ideas, whose delight in an understanding of nature, and whose searing personal awareness of the tragic “tears in things” enabled him to evoke a searching vision of the simple but profound truth in human experience.53

---

3 William J. Long, English Literature: its History and Significance, Surjeet Publications, New Delhi, p.11
4 Ibid p.13


9 Edmund Spenser, “One Day I wrote her Name”, Fifteen Poets, Oxford University Press, 1941, p.53


11 Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare, Boston Publishers, 1864, p.36


18 Ibid

19 Ibid


21 John Milton. opcit, p.55


26 James Thompson, *Poetical Works*, Project Gutenberg Australia
   <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks08/0800951.txt>
27 James Thomson, *The Seasons*, Project Guttenburg
28 Ibid
32 Ibid
33 Ibid
38 Robert Burns, “To a Mountain Daisy”,
   <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43817/to-a-mountain-daisy>
39 William Blake, “Nurse’s Song”, *Songs of Innocence*, <
   https://hellowpoetry.com/poem/1004/nurses-song-innocence/>
40 William Blake, “The Echoing Green”, *Songs of Innocence*,
   <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56592/the-echoing-green>
41 William Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”,
42 Ibid

Ibid

William J. Long, op cit, p.410


Walt Whitman <On the Beach at Night, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45475/on-the-beach-at-night>

