Frost has so often written about the rural landscape and wildlife that one can hardly avoid thinking of him as a nature poet. ‘To the Thawing Wind’, ‘Hyla Brook’, ‘The Oven Bird’, ‘Birches’, ‘A Drumlin Wood Chuck’- one could cite such titles by the score. Frost began as a nature poet; ‘To a Moth seen in Winter’, ‘Going far water’, ‘Rose Pogonias’ are representative of his work before 1913, and the interest in nature was to persist throughout his career. Frost’s nature poetry is so excellent and so characteristic that it must be given a prominent place in any account of his art.

Frost’s love of nature is more comprehensive, many-sided, and all inclusive than that of Wordsworth. Wordsworth loved to paint only the spring-time beauty of nature, or what Coleridge called, ‘Nature in the grove’, but Frost has an equally keen eye for the sensuous and the beautiful in nature, as well as for the harsher and the unpleasant. A Boundless Moment, gives us one of those fresh glimpses of beauty which have made Frost’s nature-poetry so popular:

Oh, that is the Paradise-in-bloom, I said,
And truly it was fair enough for flowers.

The Pasture is often prefixed to collections of Robert Frost’s poetry as the poet’s invitation to readers to dwell a while on his poetic pasture:
I’m going out to clean the pasture spring
   I’ll only stop to rack the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may)
   I shan’t be gone long.—You come too.
I’am going to fetch the little calf.
   That’s standing by the mother. It’s so young.
   It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
   I shan’t be gone long.—You come too.

Even so brief a lyric displays some of the most irresistible aspects of Frost’s poetic ware. The disarming casualness of tone, the intimately conversational idiom, the apparently artless realism: most of what is best in Frost is undoubtedly here. But if this poem serves to welcome some readers to Frost’s patch of poetry, it should serve equally well to shore off those readers who insist that every poet and that every nature-poet is either a Wordsworthian pantheist or an Emersonian transcendentalist, or both. The very first line of the poem should be enough to make us feel that the life Frost invites us to share is one of fruitful, exacting farmyard activity: not one of aesthetic ecstasy. Frost often conceded his incompetence as a farmer, and at least one critic has contested Frost’s claims to have spent his childhood on farms. Yet no one can deny his affinity with nature. Even if he was not so familiar with farming during his childhood, yet all along his acquaintance with the New England area brought him into close communion with nature that gave him the insight to see nature in its wide variety. His experiences at the Derry farm mainly between 1900-1905 were the years which he spent solely dependent on farming, yet they provided him with material that would serve him throughout his career creating an image for him as a farmer poet.
Frost is a great lover of nature, and his love, like that of Wordsworth, is local and regional. It is the region that lies to the North of Boston, which forms the background to his poetry. It is the hills and dales, rivers and forests, trees, flowers and plants, animals, birds and insects, seasons and seasonal changes of this particular region, which have been described in one poem after another, and his descriptions are characterized by accuracy and minuteness. The descriptive power of Frost is the most wonderful thing in his poetry. A snowfall, a spring thaw, a bending tree, a valley mist, a brook, these are brought not to, but into, the experience of the reader. The method is simple and vivid to the reader as, in our singing strength’ we follow him disputing with birds on a bit of a roadway; in *A Hillside Thaw*, and we almost see him on his knees trying to feel with his hands the process of snow turning into water. The numerous poems of Frost, written at different periods of his life are devoted to the description of the various objects of nature, and his descriptions always reveal minuteness of observation and fidelity of description. Thus in *Birches* we get a concrete and faithful description of the ‘habit’ of birches and how they react to a storm:

When I see birches bend to left and right,
Across the lines of straighter, darker trees,
I like to think some boy’s been swinging them.
But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay
Ice-storms do that. Often you must have seen they
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain..............They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-coloured
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
The details in these lines are precise and deceptively neutral. The entire passage contains nothing to suggest that nature is superior to man, nor are we to infer that the two are equal. As description these lines exemplify what Frost calls the “matter-of-fact” of ‘Truth’. But Frost does not stop with the conclusion that ice storms, and not swinging boys, are the cause of birches bent ‘down to stay’. He approaches, finally, the idea that man’s acts upon nature have their own meaning and beauty: approvingly Frost decides that, given a choice, he should prefer to have some boy bend birches. In the midst of swinging, boys are not observers of nature; they actually collaborate with nature by taking the ‘stiffness’ out of birches. Frost would have a bent tree signify that some boy, swinging from earth, has gone beyond that ‘pathless wood/where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs/broken across it’. ‘Birches’ suggests that nature’s beauty is somehow enhanced when man has worked an effect upon nature. In this sense Frost’s poem may stand as a qualified reply to Thoreau’s recurrent strain of illimitable nature worship.

Many of the poems written by Frost testify to his fascination for nature. He uses nature as a backdrop to many human activities and ideas. For him, nature was a part of his poetry but not the be all and end all. Generally speaking, Frost is regarded as a nature poet but he himself never regarded his poetry in this light.

In one of his television interviews, Frost said, ‘I guess I am not a nature poet.’ I have written only two poems without a human being in them. R.L. Cook quotes Frost saying, “Literature begins with geography and the
land is always in my bones". His main themes are Nature and Man and physical nature appears to be the dominant one. Unlike Wordsworth, Nature is not supreme for him. He regards man and nature as two equal entities created by God. He gives more importance to the immediate experience derived from nature. He talks about the objects of nature and is fascinated by them but realism is a marked feature of his nature poetry and beauties of nature cannot detain him because as he says in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep
But I have promises to keep
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep

Consequently, reality is never long absent form Frost's nature's poetry. He is not concerned with nature as such, he is more concerned with the human activity that goes in her lap as mowing, apple picking, birch swinging, wall mending etc. By noting such everyday activity, he seeks to study man in relation to his physical environment and to the lower creatures that live with nature. It is difficult to agree with him when he denies being an outright nature poet. Though man is at the centre in his nature poetry. He has written so much about the rural landscape and the wildlife that one can hardly call him anything else but a nature poet. He began his poetic career with poems like *To a Moth Seen in Winter, Rose Pogonias* and *Going far Water* which are representative of his work before 1913. His interest in

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nature grew with age. His nature poetry is so excellent and so characteristic that it must be given a prominent place in any account of his art.

Frost’s view of nature is unique. Though he has some affinity with the great Romantics like Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley, his attitude towards and treatment of nature is different from theirs. It is interesting to compare Frost’s nature poetry to that of Wordsworth, the acknowledged high priest of nature. Wordsworth considers nature as a living entity, and asserts the close affinity between man and nature. He looks upon nature as a benevolent force, a great educator, as he calls her in his famous poem ‘Tintern Abbey’. On the other hand, Frost’s attitude towards nature is marked by a rugged realism and a sense of practical utility. He finds no harmony between man and nature. What he sees are essential barriers between the two which must be recognized and respected. In, ‘Two Look at Two’, there is a man-made fence that separates the lovers from the world of nature represented by a doe and a buck. This barrier between man and nature is not merely physical; it is mental as well, because there is an absence of any communion between the two. In ‘The Mountain’ nature represented by the mountain is just an obstacle in the growth of the human colony.

In the poetic world of Frost, nature is often looked upon as an impersonal, insensitive and even hostile and sinister force. In ‘The Most of It’, the buck that comes out of the lake represents the remoteness of nature. In ‘The Onset’, nature represented by snow is an evil and sinister force, and is likened to death. Man is exhorted not to lose hope, as in due course, this snow-death is likely to disappear:
And I shall see the snow all go down hill
In winter of a slender April rill
That flashes tail through last year's withered brake
And dead weeds.......... 

The snow here is imagined as a crawling serpent, the symbol of evil and death thereby reinforcing the idea of nature as a destructive force. In ‘Design’, too, Frost, through the perceived view of a white heal-all where a white spider has killed a white moth, projects the idea that there is a malevolent dark force that weaves such a terrible pattern. He seems to challenge the Romantic notion that nature or God who governs this world is benevolent and kind. Similarly in ‘The Bereft’, the poet finds something sinister in the hissing of leaves.

Frost has also warned us against the design of nature which often seems to be hostile even to those who love it:

There is much in nature against us.

But we are at a vantage point also. In order to sustain such injuries as nature inflicts on us. It’s well to have all kinds of feeling....... So at times, Frost writes of the natural world. As Montgomery says, “in a cavalier fashion which Wordsworth would consider heretical. He seems to make fun of the reasons in Two Tramps in Mud Time.” In ‘The Star-Splitter’, he says in a light vein: “You know Orion always comes up sideways.”

Some of his passages depicting nature reveal his keen observation and love for the landscape. In “Two Tramps in Mud Time”, the image of the bluebird is sensuous and concrete:

A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight
    And fronts the wind to unruffle a plume
His song as pitched as not to excite
    A single flower as yet to bloom

In “Birches”, there are lines depicting natural phenomenon which are a sheer delight. We are told how the birches bend down with the load of ‘ice’, and keep bending for long. When the ice starts melting in the warmth of the sun, it cracks and falls:

“Soon the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystal shells
    Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
    You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.

A striking feature of Frost’s nature poetry is the use of personification. The device is quite common in the Romantics. The modern reader may take an unfavourable view of it as it suggests sentimental pantheism of over-simple allegorization. But while personification remains a brief metaphor in the Romantics, it is a sustained comparison in Frost. This sustained comparison is possible only because of Frost’s view of nature and man as distinct entities operating on different planes. And it is because of this contrast that the effect verges on the absurd and the extravagant. It is through humour and irony that Frost tries to counter this effect of absurdity.
In ‘Waspish’, for example, his humour seems to save the personification for going out of hand:

On glossy wires artistically bent,
He draws himself up to his full extent.
His natty wings with self-assurance perk.

Poor egotist, he has no way of knowing
But he's as good as anybody going.

In ‘Tree at My Window’, too, Frost uses humour as a safeguard against absurdity arising out the use of personification, and perhaps also as a counter against any charge of high seriousness. “Not all your light tongues talking aloud/could be profound”, he says in a humorous and satirical tone, as he goes on to elaborate the analogy between the tree and persona. Montgomery rightly observes that what “is high serious in Wordsworth is fancy or humour in Frost.’

Frost’s nature poetry is akin to the pastoral. In the manner of the pastoralist, he uses nature to illustrate and define a particular viewpoint, mostly of the Yankee rustic. In ‘The Onset’, ‘The Unharvested’ and ‘Evening in Sugar Orchard’ we have beautiful pictures of landscape, but the Yankee point of view projected through the scene is as much important, if not more than the scene itself.

Thus, in Frost we have a nature poet who is at once unique and striking. In one type of poems, nature holds the centre of interest, though the number of such poems is not large. In the other, nature acts as a backdrop to
project a viewpoint, a moral or a philosophy. In contrast to the Romantics, he is a different kind of nature poet. His views of nature are unique, complete and realistic.

**PRESENTATION OF MAN AND NATURE IN FROST’S POETRY**

Each and every poet of nature has to contend with the roles that he assigns to man and nature in his poetry and the inter-relationship shared by the two. In the poetry of Robert Frost too we find this duality but with a twist where the poet emphasises the position of man in the midst of nature. One of the popular misconceptions about Frost's world of nature is the view that it is a simplification, a kind of spiritual drift, a strategy of evasion, and an escape from the complex and compelling problems of modern urban life. Even Mr. Trilling, in his controversial but famous speech at the poet's eighty-fifth birthday dinner, has complained that Frost 'manifest America' is not the America that has a place in his own mind and that it excludes the complexity, uncertainly and anxiety of urban life. This belief is further strengthened by the poet's life-long preference to live on various farms in Vermont and New Hampshire. There is no doubt that Frost loved rural New England but he made New England a medium and a mythic world to gain a new artistic perspective. It is a literary device from which he formulated his poetic idiom and derived his themes and images to express the alienation of modern man. This mythic world also provides him with a frame of reference, an effective centre of value and judgement to convey and to evaluate what is significant in his felt experience. It is not difficult to see that the New England in his
poetry is more or less an abstraction, for it excludes the immigrants, the
cities, the religious minority problems or even the tensions of village life.

Frost's attitude to the universe, of which the bucolic New England is a
prototype, is not entirely original. In some of its obvious implications, it can be
traced back to Lucretius. It has been pointed out by his biographers that
during the two years that Frost spent at Harvard as a student, shortly after
his marriage, he had shown uncommon aptitude for classical language and
Lucretius must have been one of his favourite poets as seen in poems, like
'Too Anxious for Rivers' and 'Lucretius versus the Lake Poets'. As against
the Christian concept of the universe ordained by God, Lucretius envisaged a
universe born of accidental collisions of the atoms without any specific
motivation or even meaning. Such a universe, according to Lucretius, was
impersonal and indifferent to the human predicament and was marked by its
separateness and otherness. The apparent resemblance between Frost and
Lucretius ends at this point. There is no need to go into further details but it
needs to be pointed out that Lucretius was a disciple of Epicurus and in his
envisioned world, man was neither to be afraid of the non-existent unknown
nor strive after the unattainable but to enjoy what was available and to avoid
such suffering and hardship as was reasonably avoidable. These ontological
implications do not find place in Frost's body of thought or poetry and in
these matters he differs from Lucretius. But Frost's nonchalant otherness of
the universes has Lucretian undertones.

These characteristics are not, of course, novelties in American thought
and writing. New England Puritanism, even after its initial Calvinistic rigors
had been modified, regularly saw man in relationship with an impersonal
other, a God whose decrees were arbitrary, in no way conditioned by one’s personal merit. Even Emerson’s happy conviction that everything is implicit in anything left room, at least once, for the intuition that nature’s moral benevolence is not always and equally apparent. And Thoreau, who knew nature more intimately than did Emerson, exhibited a more complex awareness of it.

Frost also presents the inner tussle in nature and points admiringly to elements which defy the drift to death or keep the cycle of life going. This fact of survival against grim forces within nature’s precincts both complements and reinforces man’s ability to hold out against nature’s hostility. The Oven Bird persists in singing even in a diminished universe. Hyla Brook, though reduced by heat to a mere trickle, draws our love and appreciation as an example of endurance. The tree in Tree at My Window, lashed by fierce storms, is all but lost but not altogether lost. Frost reacts to the destructive powers of nature broadly in different ways: when nature appears to be violent and overwhelming, as in Once by the Pacific, Frost does not try to romanticize its sinister and intractable aspects; when the threat from nature is looming and slow-acting, Frost counteracts it with human will and reasoning, as in Spring Pools, A Leaf-Treader and The Onset; when he sees in nature itself a counterpoint to destructive forces, Frost finds in it a reflection of harmony between man and nature, as in West-Running Brook. A sense of hope seems to prevail over all decay and death in nature only at moments when life is seen as a cyclic process in which creation predominates over destruction. Frost himself perceives a clash between man and nature, but in terms which are fundamentally modern. In Frost’s case the concept of an ideal nature is tempered and modified by the necessity of man’s survival.
Frost nevertheless appreciates the joy of man’s spontaneous association with nature. In Blueberries one of the characters shows his enthusiasm for nature’s freedom:

\[
\text{It’s nice way to live,}
\]

\[
\text{Just taking what Nature is willing to give,}
\]

\[
\text{Not forcing her hand with harrow and plow.}
\]

In Rose Pogonias, Frost longs for the beauty of unspoilt nature. Unharvested expresses a plea for autonomy and spontaneity in nature and human life.

\[
\text{May something go always unharvested!}
\]

\[
\text{May much stayout of our stated plan,}
\]

\[
\text{Apples or something forgotten and left,}
\]

\[
\text{So smelling their sweetness would be no theft.}
\]

The Gum-Gatherer brings into focus the simple relish of living in nature’s company at an unhurried pace:

\[
\text{I told him this is a pleasant life,}
\]

\[
\text{To set your breast to the bark of trees}
\]

\[
\text{That all your days are dim beneath,}
\]

\[
\text{And reaching up with a little knife,}
\]

\[
\text{To loose the resin and take it down}
\]

\[
\text{And bring it to market when you please.}
\]

But in spite of his acknowledgement of nature’s bounty, Frost does not assign it an apical role. On the contrary, he often questions its dominion over
man. The farmer in The Mountain resents nature’s overshadowing presence:

We can’t in nature grow to many more:
That thing takes all the room!

Here is a fundamental clash of interests between human nature and the world of matter. In The Census-Taker, the counting official bemoans the tragedy of deserted settlements relapsing into a bleak soulless wasteland:

The melancholy of having to count souls
Where they grow fewer and fewer every year
Is extreme where they shrink to none at all.

Frost abhors the vacuum caused by the displacement of human settlers from the country more than he dislikes the uprooting of nature for man’s needs. The worst offence that he can think of is to ‘bring back nature in people’s place.’

A Boundless Moment is a short anti-transcendental poem. The ironical title is used to underline the illusoriness of the romantic perception of nature. The illusion is indeed optical, but it is certainly aided by the observer’s willing suspension of disbelief. However, the haze lifts into time. What appears initially as a feast for the eyes and miraculous gift from nature turns out to be a sign of nature’s decay:

Oh, that’s the Paradise-in-Bloom’, I said
And truly it was fair enough for flowers
Had we but in us to assume in March
Such white luxuriance of May for ours.
In The Need of Being Versed in Country Things, Frost lays bare with great subtlety the romantic habit of attributing human emotions, particularly those of sympathy, to nature. The poem begins with the vivid description of a farmhouse almost burnt down to cinders. The destruction of fire, although a pitiable thing, is not without a strange austere beauty:

The house had gone to bring again
To the midnight sky a sunset glow.
Now the chimney was all of the house that stood,
Like a pistil after the petals go.

However, the absence of human inhabitants and visitors creates a sense of vacuum. The stark desolation of the scene seems to affect the birds as well. Their murmur resembles the sighs of grief man utters over the inexorable process of decay and loss. As if to console the birds in their poignant grief, the lilac and the elm renew their foliage. Even the dry pump and the lone fence post, mute witnesses to an orderly past, seem to suggest that all is not lost yet. But the birds’ grief is a mere illusion of the human mind and so is the notion that other forms of nature share their sorrow. It is man who likes to dwell too much on what has been. Nature takes things in its stride and does not indulge in sentimentalities. Apart from a temporary inconvenience, the burning of the house can not have meant anything to the birds. They are happy enough that their nest has survived the conflagration—

For them there was really nothing sad.
But though they rejoiced in the nest they kept
One had to be versed in country things
Not to believe the phoebes wept.
The use of the poetical term ‘phoebe’ goes well with the romantic ascription of human feelings to birds which Frost obliquely ridicules. For the sake of establishing the truth about nature, Frost is ready to shock himself as well as us out of our cherished and comfortable notions. One versed in country things, Frost seems to tell us, will not make the same mistake of believing that they share or reciprocate man’s feelings. The ways of the human and the nonhuman are fundamentally unlike.

In The Wood-Pile, the habitual stroller comes to the edge of the wood and after a moment’s hesitations enters it. The vacillation reflects the uncertainty about the fulfillment of man’s expectations of nature. The landscape is undistinguished; the only thing that strikes the speaker is that he is far from home. The implied contrast with ‘home’, which offers him a sense of moorings and security, brings out the strangeness of the environment. A small bird, the first sign of animation, flits away from him. The man reflects amusedly on the ‘foolish’ bird’s reaction to his movement:

He thought that I was after him for a feather
The white one in his tail; like one who takes
Everything said as personal to himself.

The bird’s instinctive suspiciousness of human motives suggests a kind of pre-established barrier between man and nature. The wanderer’s attention is next arrested by a wood-pile stacked away in a relatively secure place. The pile seems to have been carefully composed, but now it bears all the marks of dereliction. Even in its decaying state, it represents a triumph of form in the surrounding formlessness, a silent testimony to man’s creative
endeavour. The speaker has mixed feelings about the man and his handiwork. He admires the absent wood-cuter for leaving behind this reminder of man’s creativity in a non-human environment. Yet he is sorry that the man should have allowed the pille, on which he had spent his time and labour and love, to rot and go waste:

I thought that only
Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks
Could so forget his handiwork on which
He spent himself, the labour of his ax,
And leave it there far from a useful fireplace
To warm the frozen swamp as best it could
With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

The poet’s love for these fragile and beautiful forms of nature and his sorrow at their nearing departure permeate these lines. Frost deplores the grim violence which prevails under the innocuous surface of seasonal operations of nature:

The trees that have it in their pent-up buds
To darken nature and be summer woods-
Let them think twice before they use their powers
To blot out and drink up and sweep away
These flowering waters and these watery flowers
From snow that melted only yesterday.

The phrase ‘Let them think twice’ sums up the poet’s attitude. It voices the poet’s sense of outrage at the predatory action that will be carried out by
the trees against the ‘flowery waters’ and the ‘watery flowers’. The poet’s words are directed not only to particular trees but to the process of nature of which this is just an isolated instance:

In *Lodged* nature indulges in a wanton act of destruction, again the stronger elements turning upon the vulnerable forms. The rain and the wind gang up, almost sadistically, to smash the flowers in the garden:

> The rain to the wind said,  
> ‘You push and I’ll pelt.’  
> They so smote the garden bed.  
> That the flowers actually knelt,  
> And lay lodged-though not dead.  
> I know how the flowers felt.

The sonnet *Design* deals with the ambiguity of good and evil, of innocence and experience in nature. Here Frost does not react to a single, contingent aspect of nature, but to the totality of the universe seen through the powerful prism of a symbolic occurrence. The classical argument of design rests on the assumption that a world which runs according to immutable laws must have a benevolent supreme power to direct and control it. Frost turns this view of the world upside down. If the evidence of harmony and order in nature could support the existence of a beneficent master craftsman, the abundance of evil and ugliness could be cited, by the same token, to prove the presence of a maleficent manipulator.

In the poem *‘New Hampshire’* Frost enters the main theme when he describes the New Hampshire mountains for it is through this that Frost sets
forth his conception of regional art. As before, his method is that of ironic comment. We are told of certain criticism raised against New Hampshire. Under the guise of replying to these attacks, Frost examines the problem of the relation between the universal and the particular. First, he states the issue in terms of his own writing.

I may as well confess myself the author
Of several books against the world in general
To take them as against a special state
Or even nation's to restrict my meaning.
I'm what is called a sensibilitist,
Or otherwise on environmentalist..........  

This passage is the focal point of the poem. It expressed more clearly than any other lines Frost has written the central fact of his regionalism: that it presents the world of rural New England, not for its own intrinsic interest, but as a symbol of the whole world of human experience.

The mountains, are the dominant image of this section, and when Frost finally comes to describe them they emerge as the culminating symbol of his art. He has been busy contradicting the Emersonian dictum that God 'Taunted the lofty land with little men'. It begins when the poet discovers a discrepancy between what he imagines and what he sees. The idea alone is a flat abstraction, like the mountains on the map; but it has a certain fertility, so that once it is discovered, the imagination works unremittingly until it has so changed reality that the idea is embodied in it. While Frost humorously recognizes the humble nature of his inspiration, this only serves to
emphasize how great creative power is which can produce so impressive and meaningful, a vision from such material. Thus although his explanation, how he came to wish the mountains twice their real height, at first seems to give us a comic letdown, actually it supplies a more explosive climax than could normally have been expected; just as in the poem as a whole the seeming levity of the poet’s manner turns out to be the medium for serious speculation. The poet-

\begin{quote}
Can not rest from planning day or night,
How high I’d thrust the peaks in summer snow.
To tap the upper sky and draw a flow
Of Frosty night air on the vale below
Down from the stars to freeze the dew as starry.
\end{quote}

The sudden heightening of dignity in these lines has a great dramatic value. One senses that here Frost is touching upon something deeply felt that we have at last reached the exact centre of his thought. This centre is the concept of a kind of art in which the regional subject, without ever losing its local identity, is so shaped that it becomes the symbol of an idea. Neither the pure idea, the drawing on the map, nor the reality, the New Hampshire mountains as they actually are, is enough to be expressed only through poetry. Thus New Hampshire stands not just for itself but for the whole of existence.

The poet, although a great lover of nature, lost in the bewitching beauty of nature, is not unconscious of duties, promises and commitments. Though he gets delight in nature yet wisdom prevails upon him.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep.
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

He has philosophized about nature in many of his poems and he discusses the question of man’s relation to nature. He approaches nature with different moods. Sometimes he does not find anything benevolent in nature. In *West-Running Brook*, Frost makes us believe that there is evolution in nature though there may be many reverse moments.

Man plays a very important role in Frost’s poetry. In this respect he differs from Wordsworth who got his impulse from a vernal wood. Frost himself once said, ‘I guess I am not a nature poet. I have only written two poems without a human being in them.’ Between nature and man he does not find any kinship as Wordsworth found.

Nature has different moods, sometimes it is indifferent and sometimes hostile to man, and therefore the poet also has the right to approach her with all kinds of feelings and expresses them also. In his poem, *A Minor Bird*, the poet admits that the song of the birds bores him but Wordsworth would never say so. He, like Wordsworth often speaks directly to natural objects but he does not establish any fraternity with them. Like Wordsworth he does not find any ‘Spirit in the woods.’ He does not know anything about the healing power of nature. His was not a simple approach to nature. It was rather serious. He would not take any theory about nature for granted. He would not believe in such slogans as ‘Back to nature’. Readers may think that Robert Frost was a nature poet in the tradition of Wordsworth but this assessment of Frost is not true.
A modern reader may not be able to understand that Frost’s view of nature is unique because the modern reader’s views about nature is determined by the poetry of the Lake poets and poetry has the same traditions as the poetry of Wordsworth and Tennyson has. But there is a great difference between the imagery of landscape found in Frost’s poetry and that in the poems of other poets. Frost’s imagery is foreign to even Wordsworth’s Cumberland. This can not be elucidated by the difference between localities. ‘The Oven Bird’, of Frost is entirely different from Wordsworth’s ‘To a Skylark’. Another element of uniqueness in Frost’s poetry is that his nature poems do not evoke the same variety of emotional response. Like Wordsworth, he does not exploit the emotional effects.

A modern poet can not free himself from treating nature in a romantic way, and in Frost we find many a reminiscence of Wordsworth, Keats and others. But whatever Frost has got from traditions he has adopted to his own purpose. Romantic harmonies can be heard in his poetry but they echo within a world quite changed. In Wordsworth’s poetry the theme is the spirit ‘immanent’ in nature and man. There is a union of mind and external reality. No such blending is found in the poetry of Frost nor does he see any spirit in the nature. Frost’s approach to nature seems not unlike Wordsworth’s in Resolution and Independence. It is true but it is more casual. Frost is anecdotal whereas Wordsworth is didactic, instructive and a moral teacher.

Frost’s lessons about nature are not overt and obvious as Wordsworth’s are. No doubt that Frost is a serious moralist and a serious artist but he is so peculiarly intimate with nature that he is not openly didactic. His attitude towards nature is of a realist and not of a romanticist. He does
not, as a realist, see any benevolent design in nature. Although, Robert Frost is not to be classified as a 'nature poet', he knows more about nature than most of the poets of the past with the exception of Virgil and Wordsworth.

John F. Lynen, regarding Frost's attitude towards nature, has rightly commented, "what he sees on the other side is an image of a hard, impersonal reality. Man's physical needs, the dangers facing him, the realities of birth and death the limits of his ability to know and to act are shown in stark outline by the indifference and inaccessibility of the physical world in which he must live. Thus Frost sees in nature a symbol of man's relation to the world. Though he writes about a wild flower or forest, his real subject is humanity. The remoteness of nature reveals the tragedy of man's isolation and his weakness in the face of vast impersonal forces. But nature also serves to glorify man by showing the superiority of the human consciousness to brute matter. In this respect, nature becomes a means of portraying the heroic. There is a fundamental ambiguity of feeling in Frost's view of nature. It is to be feared as man's cruel task master scorned as insensible, brutish, unthinking matter, yet it is to be loved, not because it has any secret sympathy to man—but rather because it puts man to the test and thus brings out his true greatness."39

Man in this world thinks, feels, he suffers, but nature is indifferent to human suffering. There is suffering in many nature poems of Frost. The contrast between man and nature enables Frost to deal with major issues of

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human life. But the contrast reveals beauty as well as horror, love as well as loneliness. Frost's affection for nature as well as his fear for it, is based on a sense of analogy. "Two Look At Two" is a perfect example.

Regarding Frost's views about nature, Nitchie has aptly remarked, "Frost is ultimately not very much concerned with developing a philosophically consistent concept of nature, important though nature is to him, he is not really concerned with it as an object of disinterested philosophical speculation, as something to be conceptualized. What really interest him is not definitions but attitudes, not what nature is in itself but how man responds to it in a world he never made, whatever the organisation of that world may be. Frost's writing does not lack intellectual content and the sifting concept of nature is related to a composite sense of man and his potentialities."  

So far as the sentiments and human experiences are concerned. In both his nature poems and pastorals the poet portrays average human experiences by projecting it into a world remote and distinct. Nature, as Frost conceives it, is really a kind of wild-life Arcadia, and in writing of scenery and animals he uses it in much the same way as he uses the mythical rural New England in his pastorals. Like his rural New England, nature evokes paradoxical attitudes, on the one hand it is a realm of ideals where the essential realities are found in their pristine farms, on the other it is an inferior plane where life is crude, insensate, independent, cut off by itself away from man, just as the country North of Boston is separate from the urban environment of modern America.

Lynen continues “By insisting upon the remoteness of nature he directs attention to the patterns in nature which corresponds to those in human experience. Frost’s method of comparing a process in the human sphere with a process in nature is important. The natural world is better than man’s. It is pure, simple and innocent. Man’s cruel purposes can not invade it. It is depicted in “Range Finding”\(^{41}\)

For Frost nature was regardless of man. Nature may move slower than man but she destroys man for her own ends so that man may be used as manure for new growth. In some of his poems it appears that nature is bent upon hurting those who love it. The natural world seems to be advancing towards destruction, sweeping man along with it.

Frost in many of his poems has shown man’s helplessness in the face of natural calamities. For Frost nature is both a menace and comfort. Nature is the mother and home of man but it is also indifferent and hostile to man. This sense of duality is present in many of his poems on nature. Wordsworth said in ‘Tintern Abbey’, “Nature never did betray the heart that loved it.” Could Frost agree with Wordsworth? No, because Wordsworth saw only one-sided nature, had he seen the horrible and dreadful aspects of nature, he would perhaps not have said so.

For Frost there is separation between nature and man. Although nature meant a good deal to him, he was never a natural mystic. He could always draw a line of demarcation between man and nature. What once was regarded strength in nature ultimately became for Frost a brute force and hostility.

The poet is charmed by the outward beauty of the woods and he wants to enjoy it to the utmost. He stops to enjoy the beauty of a snow-fall in a wood. The poet has to perform many tasks and fulfill the commitments he has made. This creates a conflict in the mind of the poet. This conflict arises in the mind of the poet on the one hand on account of his love for scenic beauty and on the other on account of his commitments. The question before him is whether to enjoy the beauties of nature or to follow the (inner-whether), wisdom prevails upon the poet and delight is relegated into the background. The outer world becomes less important and his feelings compel him to leave the woods as he has to accomplish greater and nobler tasks lying ahead.

Frost's concern with nature springs from his childhood and periods of his adult life spent in the lap of New England natural world, where he grew aware of the activity, beauty and mystery of the exterior world. He nourishes his thoughts on man's relationship to natural order of the world. He was convinced that the human being belongs to the animal kingdom and that his initial behaviour is regulated by instincts. Man is endowed with a mind, which leads to a choice between either yielding to his instincts, especially to the sixth sense, or establishing the victory of his reason. Frost's personages live in the countryside and turn to the exterior world of nature for an understanding of their conflicts.
USE OF LOCAL SCENERY AND BACKDROP IN HIS POEMS

The beauty of nature in all the variety of its charms can be found chiefly in the rural areas. The poets who belong to, or who have lived, in the countryside and have observed natural phenomena from close quarters, have been great poets of nature. For example, Wordsworth lived in the Lake District, and observed the beauty of nature closely. Similarly, Frost passed a larger part of his life in the rural areas of New England, and became familiar with the natural scenes and objects, such as brooks, pastures, farms, trees, flowers and birds, that he described in his poems in detail. Having observed these objects personally, he was able to describe them realistically. He had distaste for modern industrial life of big cities, and a prediction for the rural life of the countryside, with its natural surroundings. He disliked the noise and bustle and sick hurry of the life in cities, and preferred the calm spread in what Wordsworth calls the ‘mute insensate things’ of nature. Naturally, when he came to write poems, he could not keep his eyes off the beauty and charm of Nature, and the fascination its various objects held for man. He had lived under the spell of natural beauty, and sought to portray it in his poetry. Being a poet of rural life, he had to deal with the objects and scenes of nature as seen in the sylvan surroundings of New England in most of his poems. His poems like ‘Birches’, ‘Snow’, ‘The Pasture’, ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’, ‘The Sound of Trees’, and ‘Desert Places’ depict these scenes and objects in an appealing manner. The years spent at the farm in Derry, roughly from the fall of 1900 until the house was sold in November 1911, might be thought of as a chrysalis in which the young poet could mature. But the time he emerged at the end of this decade of farming,
writing and teaching, he was fully farmed: a major modern poet who had found his voice. Many of his best poems were written those years, too, forming the bulk of his first two volumes, *A Boy’s Will* and *North of Boston*. In fact, later volumes—right up to *A Witness Tree* (1942)—were filled with poems (often in rough-draft form) composed during this fertile period. To the end of his life, he drew on imagery and incidents from this time. Frost himself said, “To a larger extent the terrain of my poetry is the Derry landscape, the Derry farm, Poems growing out of this, though composite, were built on incidents and are therefore autobiographical. There was something about the experience at Derry which stayed in my mind, and was tapped for poetry in the years that came after.”

Frost is a pastoral poet, and depicts nature in so far as it serves as the backdrop of the rustic life he seeks to portray. The rustic folk, their activities, etc., are always in the foreground, and nature and its scenes remain in the background in Frost’s description. In fact, Frost is not predominantly a poet of nature, as Wordsworth is, and does not present it for its own sake or in its own right. ‘His best poetry is’, concerned with the drama of man in nature, whereas Wordsworth is generally best when emotionally displaying the panorama of the natural world.” It may be said that although Frost does deal with nature and the countryside, he is not chiefly a poet of nature.

Frost describes the most common scenes and occurrences of nature in the simplest possible manner. For example, he describes the lovely woods (in ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’) or the falling of a few

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pieces of snow-flakes on his head (in ‘Dust of Snow’), or the singing of a bird (in ‘Oven Bird’), and conveys a moral based on them. In ‘Dust of Snow’, his gloomy and depressed mood is shown being lightened by the falling of a few flakes of snow on his head, with the implication that the commonest object of nature can give Man joy, and relieve his gloom; he writes—

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree
Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had need.

The sound of the scythe in ‘Mowing’ conveys the moral that ‘fact is the sweetest dream that labour know’. The absorption in the beauty of the dark, lovely woods in ‘Stopping by Woods on Snowy Evening’ reminds him of his obligation, and refrains him from sleeping or taking rest. In ‘Oven Bird’, Frost exhorts us not to be worried by the change of seasons, and to try to know ‘what to make of a diminished thing.’

Frost has reproduced both people and scenery with a vividness which is extraordinary. Here are the huge hills, undraped by any sympathetic legend, felt as things hard and unyielding, almost sinister, not exactly feared, but regarded as some potent influence nevertheless. Here are great stretches of blueberry pasture lying in the sun; and again, autumn orchards
cracking with fruit which it is almost too much trouble to gather. Heavy thunderstorms drench the lonely roads and spatter rain on the walls of farmhouses ratting in abandonment; and the modern New England town, with narrow houses, visited by drummers alone, is painted in all its ugliness in his poems thereby bringing out the contrast between the beauty of the countryside and the ugliness of the town.

Rightly or wrongly, Robert Frost has achieved a reputation as a poet of nature; and it is true that one tends to think of him posed against the landscape of rural New England. He may in his poems be looking at birches, or stopping by woods on a snowy evening, or picking apples, or listening to the thrush or the oven bird; wherever he is, he seems to be participating in the life of nature, deriving sustenance from it and finding in it a deeply satisfying source of pleasure.

Certainly Frost's poetry is filled with local scenery; but to think of him as a nature poet; or as a celebrant of nature, is to distort his poetry by overlooking its darker complexities. While Frost has written poems that express a certain joy in local scenes—'Mowing', for example, or 'Putting in the Seed', or 'Two Look at Two'- he is far from being a lover of nature; reading through his works, one finds that a major tone in values feelings of profound uneasiness, even of fear, towards nature. Frost may present himself in a natural landscape, but he is far from comfortable there.

Frost shares something of Thoreau's concern for the distance between man and nature. 'Birches' for example- one of his best-known and most misunderstood poems- is not a poem about birches, primarily but about the desirability of escaping from this world, if only temporarily; “I'd like to get away from earth awhile”, he writes, “And then come back to it and begin
over.” Birch trees provide the poet with a useful metaphor, since a properly chosen birch tree will lower a person back to earth if he climbs it high enough; but the poem shows no great feeling for such trees, or for any trees. The young Wordsworth went to nature for consolation and spiritual renewal, but Frost never does that; nature offers no such blessings for him. His way out, if there is one, is not to go into nature, but to go beyond nature. In ‘Birches’ as in some other poems, nature has at best a morally neutral value; if it does not oppress, neither does it comfort.

In Frost’s poetry even such a natural process as the cycle of seasons seems bent on destruction. Conventional thought recognizes a pattern that moves from birth (spring) to maturity (summer) through aging (autumn) to death (winter); the pattern reaches its height with the maturity of summer, then declines into the death of winter. In Frost’s poems, however, the downward movement begins almost immediately; it seems as if the earth is hostile to the delicacy and beauty that humans value, so soon do the destructive processes exert their powers. Frost’s finely crafted little poem ‘Nothing Gold Can Stay’ provides a clear statement of this theme:

- Nature’s first green is gold,
- Her hardest hue to hold
- Her early leaf’s a flower;
  But only so an hour.
- Then leaf subsides to leaf.
- So Eden sank to grief,
- So dawn goes down today.
- Nothing gold can stay.
Similarly, in ‘Spring Pods’ the delicately lovely ‘flowery waters’ and ‘watery flowers’ are doomed to quick extinction; they will be absorbed by roots that ‘bring dark foliage on’. Here as elsewhere the word, ‘dark’ is particularly significant. In nature’s processes the pods are transformed into leaves, but Frost makes it clear that he thinks this is a poor exchange. The buds on the trees will, in time, ‘darken nature and be summer woods’, but this is a distinct loss, to trade these beautiful pools for darkness. Nature’s process is one that destroys and the trees are its agents, their function merely ‘To blot out and drink up and sweep away’ the exquisite loveliness of the pods.

With springtime’s momentary beauty gone, the rest of the year appears as a time of deficiency: ‘a diminished thing’, as ‘The Oven Bird’ tells us. In this poem, the bird of the title is left to contemplate the ruin that is summer, a time when other birds have ceased to sing, when most flowers have disappeared, when pear and cherry blossoms have fallen to earth, when ‘the highway dust is over all’. There is not much left that is attractive, and the oven bird knows it. The oven bird knows how to adapt to circumstances, he is a survivor. He knows a lesser world when he sees one, and he shows us what to do.

When in the final line Frost is able to assert that ‘we love the things we love for what they are’ his imaginative accomplishment is doubly or triply understated. In fact, the brook is dried up and gone, yet the poet loves it because, in what he imagines it to be now, he sees explicitly what it was and implicitly what it will again become in the following winter and spring.
‘Hyla Brook’ is especially important as an answer to ‘The Oven Bird’ if we consider the basic emblems of the two poems: if the modern singer wants to know ‘what to make of a diminished thing’, the answer lies in an examination of that dried-up reality which, if he can see it not only in its present form (or nonform) but in its past and future forms, too, he may succeed in finding a genuine brook, a true source of imaginative vitality. And of course it is true that we love the things-and the people-we love in just this way-because we give them a breadth of vision which enables them to exist not just in their present selves, but in their past selves (child, young woman, youthful friend) and in their future selves as well. The poem offers some central insights into both imagination and love—the workings of both and the central relationship (for Frost) between them.

Nearly forty years after ‘Hyla Brook’ and ‘The Oven Bird’ Frost returns to the question of mid-summer loss, and deals within it broadly similar terms, in ‘Pod of the Milkweed’. Even in the opening lines of the detailed description—a scene of countless ‘butterflies of every race’ flocking almost manically to the milkweed blossom—the meaning of the emblem begins to seep in: precisely as in ‘November’, ‘the theme of wanton waste in peace and war’. Just as the oven bird attracts the poet’s attention because its song is uniquely unmusical, so the milkweed of all summer flowers catches his eye by its colorlessness; ‘drab it is its fondest must admit.’ In both cases, of course, the dullness of the natural emblem is appropriate to the drained vitality which Frost senses in these midsummer moments. Again, such drabness begins to take on intimations of a fallen world; the milkweed, Frost notes, is scarcely the flower of the promised land;
although it is a flower that flows
With mild and honey, it is bitter milk,
As anyone who ever broke its stem
And dared to taste the wound a little knows.

The other assorted characters of this drama are the numerous butterflies, suggestively personified as ‘intemperate’, assaulting the milkweed blossom with thirst on hunger to the point of lust’. More precisely, the butterflies remind the poet of men at war; they make a ‘tumult over the flower and raise an almost epic ‘cloud / of mingled butterfly and flower dust. That hangs perceptively above the scene.’ ‘Many shall come away.......... struggle-worn/ and spent and dusted off of their regalia.’

The birds, for all their ‘apathy of wing’, do in their very scurrying teach the poet something about the indestructibility of life:

Well, something for a snowstorm to have shown
The country’s singing strength thus brought together,
That though repressed and moody with the weather
Was nonetheless there ready to be freed
And sing the wild flowers up from root and seed.

Again Frost’s language has double reference: both to the vehicle of the scene the resilience of the birds, and to the unstated tenor, the indomitability of the imagination. That lesson too has been hinted at in the very description of the scene, the one part of it which has successfully resisted the snow’s assault is the one distinctly human element, the road.
The road, alone maintained itself in mud,
Whatever its secret was of greater heat
From inward fires or brush of passing feet.

The poem, in sum, is a winter landscape that celebrates the human spirit’s power to ‘maintain itself in mud’ even amid that snowy setting—whatever its secret may be ‘of greater heat / from inward fires’ or human contact.

One of the defining impulses of American nature poetry, at least as far back as Bryant’s ‘The Yellow Violet’ has been to accept and value the commonplace, that which might appear to an uncaring eye to be a diminished thing. This is also one of the important efforts of these prototypical emblem poems, as we have seen in their affection for a dried-up brook, for steeplebush, or for fallen apples. Moving beyond a vision of natural hostility or emptiness, Frost in a number of these poems rediscovers ‘the almost incredible freedom of the soul enslaved to the hard facts of experience’ an enslavement that is the perfect freedom of ‘Love’, which has earth to which she clings.

That willing bondage sometimes takes the apparently hardheaded, matter-of-fact form which we see, for instance, in ‘Mowing’. Just as the explicitly cast aside traditional poetic view of brooks in ‘Hyla Brook’, so in ‘Mowing’ Frost rejects any transcendent perception of fact, any conventional ‘dream’ of ‘idle hours / Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf.’ He refuses, either as mower or as poet, to be chiefly concerned with the obviously attractive—‘Pale Orchises’ or ‘a bright green snake’. His scythe will whisper to
the ground only about matters of fact—‘the heat of the sun’, ‘perhaps, the lack of sound’—and the poet will make a poem based ostensibly on nothing ‘more then the truth’. The ‘dream’ he seeks in ‘The fact’, he leaves the hay to make— not just to become hay, but to make, in its own unadorned reality his poem.

If that matter-of-fact, utilitarian side is the best-known side of Frost’s affection for the commonplace, however, it is certainly not the only one. ‘A Young Birch’, for example, celebrates a delicate kind of natural beauty far removed from the unadorned matter-of-factness of grass or hay. We have seen how, in ‘Pod of the Milkweed’ or ‘Something for Hope’, what might in isolation appear to be waste can be shown to be fruitful in a larger context. In ‘A Young Birch’ what might otherwise be considered waste in turned into a positive virtue, a freedom from the narrow, materialistic demands of utility. Here the business like attitude of the speaker of ‘Mowing’ is brought up short and made almost deferential by the sheer grace and beauty of a young tree: ‘The most efficient help you ever hired / Would know that it was there to be admired.’ The opening description of the growing birch stresses not only its beauty but its delicacy and its ‘trust’:

The only native tree that dares to lean,
Relying on its beauty, to the air.
(Less brave perhaps than trusting are the faith)

But at least in this poem that trust—in the natural order including human beings—is not misplaced. Like another mower in ‘The Tuft of Flowers’, any worker will inevitably be moved to spare such natural beauty, recognizing that the young birch is ‘a thing of beauty and was sent’—it was not grown
here by accident- ‘To life its life out as an ornament’. Such natural beauty has a higher use than matter-of-fact might recognize, as Emerson puts it in ‘The Rodora’, a partial source for this poem: ‘Beauty is its own excuse for being. This birch purposefully grows ‘entirely white / To double day and cut in half the dark’—a far cry from the white of ‘Design’.

Frost’s illumination of the present moment reveals his hold on the object he describes. He describes a variety of objects of nature from a speck to a mountain. In a Considerable Speck—he describes the microscopic speck and its efforts to evade death:

- It seemed too tiny to have room for feet,
- Yet must have had a set of them complete
- To express how much it didn’t want to die,
- It ran with terror and with cunning crept.

In Departmental he describes the curious race of ants in a cavalier fashion. In Design he describes a spider and a moth on a flower:

- I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
- On a white heal-all, holding up a moth,
- Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth.

However, this description is merely a starting point and the poem reflects on the universal design as not being necessarily benevolent. Frost writes about birds also. In Come In the persona hears thrush music as he comes to the edge of the wood ‘Almost like a call to come in / To the dark and lament’. However, the persona does not accept the invitation, for he is
‘out for stars’ and is in no case prepared to succumb to darkness and lament.

In Two Tramps in Mud Times Frost describes a bluebird unruffing a plume, singing in a peculiar manner and being deceived by the vagaries of weather:

It is snowing a flake: and he halp knew

Winter was only playing possum.

Except in colour he isn’t blue,

But he wouldn’t advise a thing to blossom.

Frost gives a description of the animals also. He describes a colt in fear of the snow in The Runway:

‘And we saw him, or thought we saw him, dim and grey-
Like a shadow against the curtain of falling flakes.’

In Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening the traveller rides a horse, the horse thinks it queer to stop between the woods and the frozen lake, and not near a farmhouse, and therefore shakes his harness bells to check up if there is some mistake. Here the horse represents the inner self of man questioning him and thus the horse became an instrument of self analysis. Frost writes of trees and leaves in such poems as Birches, Tree At My Window, The Sound of Trees, On a Tree Fallen Across the Road, and the Leaf Trader. Birches describes the trees bent to left and right and this becomes an occasion for contemplation for the person:

When I see birches bend to left and right

Across the lines of straighter darker trees,

I like to think some boy’s been swinging them.
This contemplation gradually involves the significant theme of the charm of escapism and the needed return to earth and hence the conclusion.

‘One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.’

Besides birds and animals, Frost uses the cycle of seasons to express different moods in man. In ‘The Onset’, an expanded perspective enables Frost to accept the loss and overcome the fears which are so often associated with the coming of night and winter. The particular onset of winter here is seen, as in many of the fable like poems, as typical or habitual – ‘Always the same.’ The tone of the description of that onset is, as in other such moments of natural threat, melodramatic: the night is ‘fated’, the woods are ‘dark’, the snow is ‘gathered’ in a kind of conspiracy, and falls with a demonic ‘hissing’. Synecdochic expansion seeps into the description of the arrival of winter, which soon becomes emblematic not only of death but of a failure of moral will (always a deep fear in Frost), and so a waste of life itself:

I Almost stumble looking up and round.
As one who overtaken by the end
Gives up his errand, and lets death descend
Upon him where he is, with nothing done
To evil, no important triumph won,
More than if life had never been begun.

In the second section of the poem, however, giving an explicit translation of the emblem’s full meaning, Frost expands his perspective to see the coming of winter in the larger context of the seasonal cycle of death and renewal: ‘all the precedent is on my side: / I know that winter death has
never tried / The earth but it has failed: If the echoes of legal language
(‘Tried’, especially ‘precedent’) suggest a kind of abstract faith in the ultimate
triumph of spring over winter, rather like the statistician’s faith in ‘Our Hold
on the Planet’, the poem’s final assertion has the power of specific
descriptive detail, returning to the landscape in its imagined spring time state:

I shall see the snow all go downhill
In water of a slender April rill
That flashes tail through last year’s withered brake
And dead weeds, like a disappearing snake.
Nothing will be left white but here a birch,
And there a clump of houses with a church.

The details, and the tone, of this closing description are a far cry from
those of the first five lines. The only white left in the vernal landscape will be
not the formless white of the snow storm but the heartening shaped white of
a birch tree (always associated with aspiration in Frost), a church, and ‘a
clump of houses’ – the human domestic center as natural a part of the scene
as a clump of trees. And though the metaphorical snake that flashes its tail
through the dead vegetation inevitably recalls both the ‘hissing’ of the fifth
line and the serpent of Genesis, it is surely a transformed serpent-both
‘disappearing’ and doing so in the form of a springtime rill, a quintessential
Frostian source of life.

In the fable like poems, and in some of the prototypical emblem
poems, no season of the year is free of peril: spring represents a lapse from
potential vitality, summer a further diminishment and waste, autumn a threat
of destruction, and winter an appalling emptiness. But the imagination, adopting a broader perspective and invoking the whole seasonal cycle, can redeem the apparent waste of both midsummer (in ‘Hyla Brook’ and ‘Pod of the Milkweed’) and late summer of early autumn (in ‘Unharvested’). Two important prototypical emblem poems, using that implied broader view, find even in late autumn a promise of renewal to come and in spring a triumph of vitality over deathliness.

‘The Cocoon’ is a remarkable little poem in which Frost once again turns to a seemingly bleak natural emblem. As in many of his darkest lyrics, the time of year is autumn, with winter clearly approaching; the time of day is twilight. In this most ominous moment of the natural and imaginative cycle, the poet beholds a lonely and barren dwelling, ‘one poor house alone / with but one chimney it can call its own. To complete the bleakness of the scene, the dwelling is seen as a retreat into isolation for its inhabitants (precisely as characters are isolated in fable like poems such as ‘The Strong Are Saying Nothing’ and ‘Beech’); the house is

So close it will not light an early light,
keeping its life so close and out of sight
No one for hours has set a foot outdoors
So much as to take care of evening chores.

Were the natural and human scene here composed solely of these sterile details, the lesson to be learned from it would almost inevitably be the disheartening autumnal kind which Frost learns in ‘November’ or ‘Bereft’. The central fact of the scene here, however, is a connecting and
transforming presence, an ‘autumn haze / That spreading in the evening air
both ways / .......... Pours the elm – tree meadow full of blue.’ – not only
does the ‘haze’ – actually the smoke from the house – in fuse the other wise
barren meadow with heavenly blue; it also links the otherwise lonely cabin
with the surrounding country side. As an unmistakable sign of human activity.
It is the positive equivalent of the nonsmoke which issues from the wood-pile
in the poem of that name, also a sign of human activity and creativity which
‘Warms the frozen swamp .......... / with the slow smokeless burning of
decay.’ (The smoke or haze here has additional implication as well; see the
discussion of ‘on the Heart’s Beginning to cloud the Mind’ in the following
chapter.) As a result of the smoke, this central living presence in the
landscape, the lesson which Frost reads from the scene is not at all the
bleak, atomistic lesson that we might otherwise expect. The lesson is not
read explicitly, but implied in the vehicle of the poem’s central metaphor the
cocoon to which the poet compares the massing smoke:

I want to tell them that with all this smoke
They prudently are spinning their cocoon
And anchoring it to an earth and moon
From which no winter gale can hope to blow it
Spinning their own cocoon did they but know it.

Yet these descriptive passages, examined more closely, reveal hints
of the positive lesson which the poet will draw from the scene. Not only does
the earth itself resist the snow’s assault in the first stanza; but the birds’
retreat before the poet in the second stanza, though panicked and
disorganized, is seen in terms not of frozen death but of a life-giving brook:
‘The road became a channel running flocks / of glossy birds like ripples over
rocks.' Nature in the rural area of New England had a beauty and vitality of its own that suffuses. Many of the poems written by Frost. Either they are filled with descriptions of Nature’s hounty or Nature forms the backdrop to the human says being enfolded before it.

**VISUAL AND VERBAL IMAGES**

While talking about nature poetry of Frost, one is really overwhelmed by the visual and verbal art that he displays. As seen in Wordsworth too, the senses of sight and sound are the ones that are most prominently employed by any poet who claims to show nature’s bounty in his poems. In Frost's case, it was the local scenery that enraptured him, the sights and sounds registered in his mind while living on the Derry farm, in Franconia or while traveling around the countryside. It was these that found expression in poems that brought alive pictures to the readers of the New-England rural countryside. Whether it was a swinger of birches, or the traveler Stopping by Woods or the apple picker, the poet's art brought them vividly to the mind of the reader and therein lies the expertise of Robert Frost the poet. In his poems, the eye and ear combine to create beauty that fascinates his readers. As pointed out by Philip L. Gerber—

"In Robert Frost's poems close ocular investigation is joined by a superior ear for language. Ear not eye for frost aims at the spoken word, not the printed page. Life is his dictionary, and it provides him with the elemental American mode of expression. From the beginning of his career, but particularly after the appearance of North of Boston, he was acclaimed for his uncanny knack of catching the authentic native accents"43

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It is a truism that both by temperament and tradition, poets tend to cast nature in the image of their preferences by reading their own feelings into external phenomenon. This element of projection is much less pronounced in Frost than in the Romantics. Like all human responses to outer stimuli, the poet’s reaction to nature is partly individual and partly communal. Without any roots in collective experience, a poet’s emotions can hardly affect his readers. Like his American predecessors, Frost perceives the two faces of nature, its beauty and terror. But whereas the earlier poets of nature often display an exuberance of emotion in moods ranging between exultation and despair, Frost keeps to the middle path of circumspection. He neither idealizes nor denigrates nature. What stands out in Frost’s poetry are the complementary roles of man and nature.

One can broadly classify Frost’s nature poems into several moodgroups in accordance with nature’s varying images in the poet’s mind, as benign, impassive, malevolent, and a compound of good and evil. In portraying the benign and malevolent and aspects of nature, Frost reacts with a modicum of emotion. In his presentation of the neutral character of nature he is cool and unruffled. In depicting nature as beneficial on balance, Frost is judicious and philosophical. These diverse moods do not have any clear chronological pattern nor are they always mutually exclusive.

Where nature is benevolent in Frost, it is inconspicuously so. Frost does not invest nature with sentience in the Wordsworthian sense of a plastic power. In Frost’s perception of nature as benign, action performs the key role, stimulating body as well as mind. Frost absorbs nature’s kindly influences while working outdoors. His mind is not just a receptacle for
nature’s pouring balm, but something that keeps the same rhythm through total physical involvement by showing particular scenes and sounds of the natural surroundings. Mowing records the rapport that arises between the mower and his surroundings. The moving scythe is an instrument for creating a sense of togetherness with nature. The language of action underlies man-nature relationship:

> It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,
> Or easy gold at the hand of joy or elf;
> Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak
> To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows.
> Not without feeble-painted spikes of flowers
> (Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.

As the long scythe mows the grass, it seems to whisper something to the ground, gently, almost ‘inaudibly, in tune with silence of the scene. From his vigorous action, the mower derives a keen, vibrant joy. ‘The heat of the sun’, ‘the lack of sound’, ‘a bright green snake’ and ‘pale-archises’- the images orchestrate an atmosphere of pleasure, harmony and peace and stimulate human activity. They create the Frostian equivalent of the Garden of Eden.

The Tuft of Flowers centres on the unconscious sharing of love for flowers between two complete strangers. The narrator in the poem who comes to turn the grass after the mower has left reflects that man must remain at heart alone ‘whether they work together or apart’. He suddenly
sees a roving butterfly settle upon a tuft of flowers, ‘a leaping tongue of bloom’ spared by the mower’s scythe. This sets him thinking on a new line:

But he turned first, and led my eye to look
At a tall tuft of flowers besides a brook,
A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared
Besides a reedy brook the scythe had bared.

In Putting in the Seed the action is unfolded vividly before our eyes. Beginning with a casual remark the poem seems to grow organically till it reaches a pulsating crescendo at the end. The planting of seeds turns out to be a quest for fulfillment aided by nature’s fecundity. Nature is like a woman to man. Man appreciated her beauty, but the beauty is not its own end. To possess her and be possessed in love, man must impregnate nature creatively. Putting in the seed, which the speaker regards as an act of love between man and nature, culminates in the emergence of new life. To watch the process of birth with its travails and glory is to grasp the essence of existence:

How love burns through the Putting in the Seed
On through the watching for that early birth
When just as the soil tornished with weed,
   The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

Two Tramps in Mud Time brings out the poet’s feeling of exhilaration in chopping wood. Natural sensuousness and manual exertion flow into each
other, creating almost a sensual upsurge. Work and play, love and need become indistinguishable:

You'd think I never had felt before
The weight of an ax-head poised aloft
The grip on earth of outspread feet,
The life of muscles rocking soft
And smooth and moist in vernal heat.

In this state of arousal, sometimes the sensation of pleasure is its own immediate reward. At others, the concrete action reshaped by the mind, serves as a prelude to an intenser experience. In After Apple Picking, for example, the ideal is a heightened but still recognizable form of the actual. poems like Birches, Earthwards Bound and Free illustrate Frost's attachment to the concept of a benign loving nature.

In Birches and After Apple Picking, action and contemplation go hand in hand creating a new poetic perspective. Both are poems of aspiration and reality. They reveal a bond of harmony between man and nature in terms of action. Nature is viewed not as a disjunctive entity, but as one intermingled with human personality. In Birches, reality and imagination exert contrary pulls on the poet would fain like to weave a gauze of fantasy around the bent-birches:

I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
Truth, however, is stranger than fiction and tells him, ‘ice storms do that’. In describing how the trees are bent Frost passes beyond mere factual reporting into the magic of visual iridescence:

They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.

The simile in which the poet compares the stooping trees to girls letting loose their cascading hair to dry in the sun presents a human image shot with ravishing beauty. The girl simile brings him to the thought of a boy subduing the birches in playful excitement as a test of budding manhood.

The imaginary boy is none else than Frost himself who, like Wordsworth, recaptures the intoxicating pleasure of close physical contact with nature. Whereas Wordsworth recreates the overwhelming feeling of escape from and return to the earth. The boyish act of bending birches is an instance of physical process and skill, but in the grown-up's retrospect it appears as a feat of imaginative daring and also as a necessity for personal salvation. It is this symbolic meaning which gains in importance to the adult speaker:

So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
He is gripped by a desire to relive the old experience when the world baffles and frustrates him. It can however no longer be a free play of energy for him but only an imaginative journey bound upwards. In imagery that recalls Keats in its sensuous ache, Frost confesses the compulsions behind his striving—

It's when I'm weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with Cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.

In After Apple Picking, the act of labour itself does not constitute the sweetest dream. Whereas in Mowing the farmer celebrates the very moment of activity, In After Apple Picking, he tries hard to concentrate on what occurs in the wake of the brisk harvesting operation / Physical exertion in Frost's poetry generally penetrates both the body and the mind, but here an excess of it induces utmost fatigue. The farmer is too exhausted to think about the prospects of material gain. The farmer cannot take his eyes off the haunting beauty of the apples. The pleasure however is weakened by the weariness of forced attention. He also carries over into the dream the strenuous exercise of plucking apples, the physical pain as the mental tension:

My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of the ladder-round
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
The farmer’s senses are continually bombarded with sensation of apple-picking, expressed in synaesthetic images. The jarring reverberation of loads of apples poured into the cellar bin tell upon his nerves:

And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.

The dream therefore is a curious compound of pleasant and painful sensations. It is neither a nightmare of horror nor a vision of beatitude. It would be wrong to ignore the plaintive tone that permeates the poem. The dream does not end on a happy note. The connective ‘for’, linking the following remark with the foregoing dream, makes this amply clear:

For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.

Here the shadow does not fall between the desire and the performance, it falls afterwards. In that sense, it is not romantic; it is anti-romantic or realistic.

Poems like Birches and After Apple Picking show nature as an integral part of man’s workaday environment and yet they offer glimpses of a higher level of ideals and values. In another category of his nature poems, Frost aims at being objective and down-to-earth by depicting particular natural forms and processes. Close contact with nature not only begets trust and attachment, it also helps remove the scales from man’s eyes. Frost
rejects the hyperboles and cliches of derivative romantic poetry. In an interview with a reporter in 1916, Frost said: ‘If American poets will only try to use all the tones of life and will drop the eternal sublime and see that all life is a fit subject for poetic treatment, they will do better.’

Hyla Brook describes a stream which the heat of summer has reduce and music are gone-riparian qualities that instantly appeal to man:

By June our brook’s runout of song and speed
Sought for much after that, it will be found
Either to have gone groping underground
(And taken with it all the Hyla breed
That shouted in the mist a month ago
Like ghost of sleigh-bells in a ghost of snow)
Or flourished and come up in jewel-weed,
Weak foliage that is blown upon and bent
Even against the way its water went,
It’s bed is left a faded paper sheet
Of dead stuck together by the heat
A brook to none but who remember long.
This is it will be seen is other for
Than with brooks taken other where in song.
We love the things we love for what they are.

In the image ‘ghost of sleigh bells in a ghost of snow’ he fuses synaesthetically visual and auditory elements. Frost uses a romantic image

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like ‘bent jewelweed’ and an unromantic one like ‘faded paper sheet’ with equal deftness to create a true-to-life effect.

In several poems Frost takes up an expressly anti-romantic attitude toward life. He tries to remove the cobwebs of illusions in order to get at the essence of things. The tantalizing glimpse of something fades away before it can be properly comprehended in the poem, so many times the reader wonders what it could have been that caught the eye. In For Once, Then, Something the poet describes:

    Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
    One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
    Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
    Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
    Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something

The dialectical tension between the apparent narcissism and the ephemeral vision is exquisitely built up. Frost seems to set a world view that revolves round the self beside a chance vision that leaves the visionary none the wiser. The bathetic juxtaposition of ‘Truth’ and ‘a pebble of quartz’ and the seeming consolation of the last four words underline the futility of looking far ‘the truth’. In the title, which is identical with these last words, Frost seems to be asking whether one can really look beyond one’s image, and if one can, whether it is possible to grasp the truth.

Frost’s Going For Water glows with human love consummated by nature’s beauty and solitude. When the couple hears the brook they have
been looking for, their joy mingles with a sense of awe and wonder. Through images of both sound and colour, the lover recounts the magic moment:

A note as from a single place,
A slender tinkling fall that made
Now drops that floated on the pool
Like pearls, and now a silver blade.

In *Birches* poet describes the birches are bowed down to the dry fern growing on the earth, because of the load of snow on them but they are not broken. However, they are bowed down so much for such a long time that they cannot straighten themselves. Their trunks lie arched or bent down in the woods even several years later, and keep their leaves trailing on the ground, like the girls who sit on their hands and knees, spreading their hair over their heads to dry in the sun:

You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground.
Like girls on hands and knees that ground throw their hair
Before than over their heads to dry in the sun.

‘Birches’ contains several beautiful images, especially those drawn from nature. The most charming image is that in which birches are shown as girls drying their hair.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening is a description of a traveller who stops by the lovely woods to watch the snow filling them, and to enjoy the beautiful scene the master shown stopping at such a lonely and
deserted place. So the horse shakes his neck so as to make his harness-bells ring and produced a sound to attract the attention of the master. He seems to ask his master thereby if the latter has stopped at that place by mistake. In the calm and quiet atmosphere of the woods, there is no other sound except that made by the softly-blowing wind and that made by the falling of the soft snow flakes all around:

He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy mind and downy flake.

Though Frost is a great nature-poet, he is still greater as a poet of man. He has illuminated things as common as a wood pile and as mechanistic as the revolt of a factory worker. But his central subject is humanity. His poetry lives with a particular aliveness because it expresses living people. People in Frost’s books are all rural New Englanders. He knew them intimately and his portrayal of them is realistic and vivid.

Frost resembles Emerson is several respects. From Emerson, Frost inherited a strong distrust of conventions as well as the conviction that personal experience ought to be the only basis for literature. Both agree in placing nature at the centre of human experience, discerning, lasting truths through encounters with it. Like Emerson says in Nature: ‘To the wish, therefore, a fact is true poetry and the most beautiful of fables.’

\[45\] To Frost fait is the stuff that dreams are made of. In Emersonian manner again, Frost

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sees in nature the duality of a benign power and a destructive force. Like him, Frost contends with nature’s malignity by marshalling human will. In discussing the role of poetry, Frost carries distinct Emersonian echoes as when he says in *Education by Poetry*: ‘It is the height of poetry, the height of all poetic thinking to say matter in terms of spirit and spirit in terms of matter.’

There is considerable evidence that ‘The Tuft of Flowers’ is an Emersonian poem. In the essay ‘Circles’, Emerson democratizes the idea of the Christian Pentecost by the identifying it with inspired human conversation and friendship. That he would compare ordinary conversation with Holy Ghost’s visit to the disciples gives us some identification of the significance that Emerson found in speech. But there is almost immediately a rueful qualification. ‘The parties are not to be judged by the spirit they partake and even express under this Pentecost’, warns Emerson. ‘To-morrow they will have receded from this high-water mark. To-morrow you shall find them stooping under the old packsaddles.’ And yet, he decided, let us enjoy the cloven flame whilst it glows on our walls’. The image of ‘cloven flame echoes Acts 2:3- cloven tongues like as a fire’, and as such, it offers a link between the New Testament and Frost’s poem, particularly in the image of the tuft of flowers—‘a leaping tongue of bloom.’ Frost’s image is visual, of course, but it is also allusive. In speaking to the poet, this tongue, vaulting time, communicates just as Jesus’ disciple did when they ‘began the speak with other tongues, as the spirit gave them utterance’. In sparing the flowers, the

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now absent mower has left his fellow worker a spiritual, Dionysian 'message from the dawn'. Curiously enough, for Frost 'brotherly speech' has not involved 'speech' at all. The mower's emblematic gesture has conveyed Emersonian revelation symbolically.

Thus Frost's theory of sentence sounds, whether put forward by himself or by others speaking for him, had become his weapon in arguing a special claim to being new. He certainly had the rudiments of the theory when he went to England. It was a means of explaining the kind of poetry he was already writing. But his association with the Imagists, and their attempt to describe him in their own terms, stimulated him to develop and even exaggerate his idea—to claim, far example, that sentence tones were as definite things as any images of sight. Frost lived through some exciting times for poetry, and he enjoyed sharing in the triumphs of the new movement. 'The great thing', he wrote to Amy Lowell in 1915, is that you and some of the rest of us have landed with both feet on all the little chipping poetry of awhile ago. We have busted'em up as with caverly. We have, we have, we have. But he resisted being carried away by the militancy of Pound and Lowell. That process of resistance helped him discover and defend what he valued most in his own work. Frost's love of nature is accepted universally which is visible in his descriptive power and evocative knack.

As Isidar Schneider says, 'the description power of Mr. Frost is to me the most wonderful thing in his poetry. A snowfall, a spring thaw, a bending tree, a valley mist, a brook, these are brought not to, but into, the experience of the reader.' The method is simple and can be

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analysed. What he describes is never a spectacle only, but an entire adventure. In *Our Singing Strength* we follow him disputing with birds on a bit of roadway; in *A Hillside Thaw* we almost see him on his knee trying to feel with his hands the process of snow turning into water. Numerous poems of Frost, written at different periods of his life, are devoted to the description of the various objects of nature, and his description always reveal minuteness of observation and fidelity of descriptions.

Nature in New England has a unique spell of its own and living in the North of Boston area, the local scenes of nature were highly appreciated by the poet who gave due place to them in his poetry. It is this local feel that imparts a special touch to his poetry. All that he saw in Derry, in Franconia, Vermont, Amherst or other places comes to us vividly through his poems. It is this quality that puts him on a pedestal high above his contemporaries. And like Wordsworth or Emerson or Thoreau before him, it is the rural the rustic folk, the ambience of that area that is brought out in its true colours in his poetry.