

# The Study of the Theme of Nature in Robert Frost's Pastoral Poems

Shuang Qu <sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Northeast Petroleum University, Department of English, 163318 Daqing, Heilongjiang Province, China

**Abstract.** As one of the most celebrated and popular American poets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Robert Frost created a lot of poems that are frequently quoted and widely loved. In his poetry, Frost's pastoral poems are the most distinctive, therefore winning him the reputation of "the pastoral poet in the industrialized society". His pastoral poems primarily explored that the beauty of nature was the real beauty, and this beauty could purify men's souls and bring sublimation to men's spirits.

## 1 Introduction

Robert Frost (1874. 03. 06—1963. 01. 29) is one of the most celebrated and popular American poets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His creativity and productivity is astonishing, leaving us numerous admirable poems, and his masterpieces include *A Boy's Will*, *Mountain Interval*, *New Hampshire*, etc. Robert Frost received 4 Pulitzer Prizes, and he was invited to recite his poem "The Gift Outright" at the inauguration ceremony of President Kennedy in 1961, and he was the only poet who received such honour till now. Undoubtedly, All these honours made him the poet laureate in American literature.

## 2 Features of Robert Frost's pastoral poetry

At the age of 11, Frost lost his father, and then he moved to New England with his mother. Thereafter, he had an intimate relation with this land. To earn a living, he once worked as a shoemaker, a teacher and a farmer, and the life in the countryside during these periods led him to have a deep affection for the land that he lived on, and provided him with rich sources for his creation of pastoral poems. In the techniques of his poetry creation, "Frost's poetry differed from that of the modernists in several respects: in its adherence to a traditional formalism (as opposed to the formal dislocations and direct challenges to conventional forms found in much modernist writing); in the ordinariness and rustic simplicity of its subject matter; in its resolutely narrative quality; and in its lack of what modernists like Eliot, Stevens or Crane might consider the transformative power of the poetic imagination." [1] Frost inherited the verse tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that he did not try to make transformation and innovation to the form of poems,

instead he focused on expressing new content and ideas with the old form, and this was a completely different deed from that of many contemporary poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because of his singing idyllic verse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century's society in which industrial civilization prevailed, Frost's poetry got a reputation for plain and unadorned natural beauty. Robert Frost usually got his inspiration of creation from daily life. "We can see that Frost is not a naive recorder of country life." [2] Through describing and depicting ordinary people's happiness and sadness, he explored profound and recondite philosophy of life and conveyed infinite and inexhaustible wisdom of life by using simple words and sentences, harmonious rhyme and vivid images. Nie Zhaozhen commented Frost's poems by stating that Frost's creation tended to be traditional. From his beautiful verse which is full of imagination and fantasy and which depicts nature and rural life, the influence of the European Romantic poems on him was evident. With the natural landscape of New England and northern villages as the setting, Frost's verse eulogized the beauty and mystique of the nature, described the simple and plain life of farmers, and from these the verse style of William Wordsworth was showed. But, when depicting the simple village life, Frost combined the rural life and pastoral tone with philosophical implication, and from this, the attributes of modern society in his poems were revealed.[3]

## 3 The nature theme in Robert Frost's pastoral poetry

From 1913 to 1916, Frost published three verse collections *A Boy's Will*, *North of Boston*, *Mountain Interval*, and the common thing of the three works was the spiritual communication between him and the nature, which indicated the style maturity of Frost's pastoral poetry. Why was the nature the target that human souls needed to communicate with? The reason lied in that after stepping into industrialized society, human beings

\*Shirley5366@163.com

separated themselves from nature with cold and detached iron, steel, cement, and so on, these modern building materials. While isolating the bodies, there was nowhere for human souls to rest in, which led to the dysphoria, apathy and indifference of people who lived in urban cities. Frost sensed with his acuteness and sharpness the void and empty state of the spirits and souls, and therefore he communicated his soul and spirit with the nature, expecting to find again the orientation of the spiritual world, which earned Frost the name of “the pastoral poet in the industrialized society.”

### 3.1 Nature could help people find their true self

When the scholars studied Frost’s early poetry, they found that his pastoral style had already been established, and one remarkable characteristic was that he consciously communicated his spirit and soul with nature. One could not be isolated from the world he is in and should acquire inspiration and power from the world through the conversation with it. “The relationship of man and world is so profound, that it is an error to separate them. If we do, then man ceases to be man and world to be world.” [4] The land of New England and the nature supplied Frost with the inspiration and power in creating his pastoral poetry. *A Boy’s Will* is Robert Frost’s first collection of poems, and as the first poem in it, “Into My Own”, a little sonnet set the tone of the collection that only in nature, could human find his true self, the right values, beauty and harmony. Industrialized society was only a hostile world in which human could not gain any spiritual nutrition and power, therefore getting lost and losing his true self.

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,  
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,  
Were not, as ’twere, the merest mask of gloom,  
But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

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

When *A Boy’s Will* was published, Frost was already in his middle age, he had experienced a mass of hardships and in no respect could we say he was a happy man, but “the boy” in his inner part never disappeared, and that was the reason of the title of his first collection of poems. *A Boy’s Will* showed us what Frost desired to do and what he wanted human to do, and then “Into My Own” showed us how he found his true self. “It is a rebellious poem from a rebellious poet.”[6] One of the poet’s wishes was that those dark trees which were old and firm stretched away unto the edge of doom and the poet himself should not be withheld but steal away into their vastness some day. This was the poet’s declaration that he wanted to be integrated into nature, and then his spiritual part would absorb enough nourishment, therefore a true and better self of innocence, honesty and purity would appear again. With the true and better self, the poet would be fearless of anything, no matter whether it was the “open land” which made human lonely or the

noisy “highway” which made human lost.

### 3.2 The nature can purify human souls and spirits

The poem “In a Vale” described the beautiful and happy life scenes of the poet in the mountain valley.

When I was young, we dwelt in a vale  
By a misty fen that rang all night,  
And thus it was the maidens pale  
I knew so well, whose garments trail  
Across the reeds to a window light.  
Then the fen had every kind of bloom,  
And for every kind there was a face,  
And a voice that has sounded in my room  
Across the sill from the outer gloom.  
Each came singly unto her place,

But all came every night with the mist;  
And often they brought so much to say [5]

There was the fen covered with mist in the vale in which the poet dwelt. In the fen, tender and beautiful flowers were in full bloom, and the flowers had sweet and delicate faces, so the whole picture left an impression of serenity and grace. It was not only the dreamlike picture that the poem presented, but also the sweet voice that made people enchanted, for every night, the flowers would become pretty maidens and they would come to the poet’s room to tell the fascinating stories. What were the stories about? “And thus it is I know so well/ Why the flower has odor, the bird has song.” [5] The poet has already answered the question very clearly, the reason why blooms emanate perfume and why the birds sing is undoubtedly the mystery of the nature. Just like what the poet has said “No, not vainly there did I dwell, / Nor vainly listen all the night long.” [5] The poet did not live in the vale vainly, for the reason he has written such a beautiful poem was just that the poet has spent a lot of busy time there and he has absorbed enough spiritual nutrition from the quiet and graceful valley. Smelling the sweet odor of the flowers and listening to the whisper of the flowers every night, the poet was fully immersed in the beauty of the nature. He was not receiving the information from the outside in an empty and passive way, but was having a spiritual conversation and communication with nature. And in that process, the poet’s thoughts were active and energetic, and his spirit and soul were purified and sublimated. With the line “Where bird and flower were one and the same.” [5] the poet indicated that the bird and the flower were actually integrated into one, and not only that, the poet himself and the bird and the flower were also “one and the same”, all becoming the indispensable part of the nature.

The long-term life in the vale which was full of dream and sweetness shaped Frost’s soul of appreciating beauty. His spirit and soul were integrated into all the aspects of beauty which inspired Frost to express himself with genuine feelings, therefore he created his own poetic style which was unique and elegant and natural. Frost’s many poems praise the elegance and beauty of the nature, and admire the essence and charm of the nature.

Frost's affection for the nature was so deep and profound, so one theme that his pastoral poems express was that human beings were an organic and essential part of the nature, and the harmony with the nature was more than the prerequisite of humans's needs to survive and to develop. Human must be integrated into nature, for the natural environment could nourish the characters and temperament of a person and purify the mind and soul, therefore himself being sublimated.

### 3.3 The nature can elevate human's aesthetic standards

Frost's poem "My November Guest" fully provoked most people's aesthetic, bringing severe shocks to human souls, but at the same time, it also gave us a meaningful inspiration: everything in the nature was beautiful, and only in the parochial aesthetic standards could there be beauty and ugliness. The exuberant spring was beautiful, the bright summer was beautiful, the silver-coated winter was beautiful and the bleak and desolate late autumn was also beautiful. In this poem, the autumn days were described as a beautiful and joyful lady.

My Sorrow, when she's here with me,  
Thinks these dark days of autumn rain  
Are beautiful as days can be;  
She loves the bare, the withered tree;  
She walks the sodden pasture lane.

Her pleasure will not let me stay.  
She talks and I am fain to list:  
She's glad the birds are gone away,  
She's glad her simple worsted grey  
Is silver now with clinging mist.

The desolate, deserted trees,  
The faded earth, the heavy sky,  
The beauties she so truly sees, [5]

The bare and withered trees, the faded earth, the heavy sky, all these unique bleak scenery of late autumn was reflected in her eyes and deeply loved by her heart. She had such a profound affection for "The beauties she so truly sees,"[5] therefore she took it for granted that "I have no eye for these, / And vexes me for reason why." [5] But actually, the poet totally understood her thoughts and completely identify with her aesthetic, for "Not yesterday I learned to know/ The love of bare November days"[5] so the poet also believed that the bare and bleak scene had its own beauty. But all these could not be understood and accepted, for they could only appreciate beauty from a narrow and limited perspective, thinking beauty was only gorgeous and colourful, and it had no connection with being bleak and desolate and gloomy. The "She" in this poem loved late autumn, because she herself was part of the nature, and she certainly should enjoy every respect in nature, but how did the poet, a human, have the same feelings with "She"? The answer lied in that the poet had already been immersed and integrated into the nature, becoming part of it, so the autumn scenery of any colour and any style was beautiful and pleasing, just like his friends, sweetheart and family,

which attested that the poet's own self was the self that had been integrated into nature.

To become part of nature and elevate aesthetic standards were not to get away from the noise of the human society, but to awaken the purity and innocence from the bottom of one's heart, and to encourage him to be bursting with love and affection for living, other people and life. After being integrated into the nature, Frost's understanding of and reflection on beauty exhibited the eternal true essence. In Frost's pastoral poetry, the flowers, the trees, the seasons, the stars, etc. all presented the elegant and refined beauty, and the beauty could even touch human's spirit and soul. One important cause of this was that the poet utilized the nature's way of appreciating beauty that was integrating one's spiritual part into nature to feel beauty. Human came from nature, so he should not be separated from it because of advancement and development of industry, science and technology, but he should get close to nature and establish intimate terms with it, should learn to discover and admire the beauty in nature. The nature's beauty was the root and source of the power of life and spirit. In his poems, Frost devoted himself to discovering, depicting and recording the beauty of nature, communicated his spirit and soul with nature which in turn made his inner self become better and also purified and then even sublimated the spiritual part of his readers.

## 4. Conclusion

Frost's early poems exhibited rich pastoral style, however, the ultimate aim of the poet was not to show the pieces and details of the country life to the readers, but to inspire them to have spiritual conversation with the idyllic environment and the nature. The poet's feelings towards the pastoral scene and nature were actually the reflection and representation of his inner world. The nature was extensive, profound, pure and splendid and it cleansed the poet's spirit and soul, taking the essence and discarding the dregs, and then the aesthetic standards of the poet were elevated, therefore causing the poet to complete plenty of wonderful and fantastic poems.

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