

Evaluating the Concept of Nature in the Poetry of William Wordsworth and Robert Frost : A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This research aims to investigate the different meanings of the term - nature. It also seeks to identify the major similarities and differences in the use of nature in the poetry of William Wordsworth and Robert Frost. Since this research is mainly theoretical in nature, it depends primarily on the review of already published works on the topic. The research concludes that the term - nature has not always had the same meaning or carries the same level of significance, but has been in a constant flux.

Introduction

Poets have long been inspired to adjust their lyrics to the variations in landscape, the changes in season, and the natural phenomena around them. Theocritus began writing idylls in the third century B.C.E. to glorify the simplicity of nature-creating such well known characters as Lycidas, who has inspired dozens of poems as the archetypal shepherd, including the famous poem “Lycidas” by John Milton. An idyll was originally a short and peaceful pastoral lyric, but has come to include poems of epic adventure set in an idealized past, including Lord Alfred Tennyson’s take on Arthurian legend, *The Idylls of the King*. The Biblical Song of Songs is also considered an idyll, as it tells its story of love and passion by evoking imagery from the

natural world. The first ever eclogue was written by Virgil in 37 B.C.E. This form of poetry also flourished in the Italian Renaissance, its most notable authors being Dante and Petrarch. In “January” Edmund Spenser compares the shepherd’s unreturned affection with “the frosty ground,” “the frozen trees” and “his own winter beaten flocks”. In “April”, he writes “Like april showers, so streams the trickling tears.” It was the tradition of natural poetry that Wordsworth had in mind when he proposed that poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity”. “This tranquil state might be most easily inspired if the poet would go out into nature, observe the world around him, and translate those emotions and observations into verse.

Methodology

Being theoretical in nature, this paper depends primarily on reviewing already published works on the topic of research. The researchers consulted a significant number of published references on the subject. Other informational sources including the internet were consulted. Moreover, specialized literary dictionaries and encyclopaedias were used to obtain relevant information regarding this topic. Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" and Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy evening" were used as examples of explanation. Information related to the topic of nature was collected from major websites that specialize in literature. This information was carefully reviewed by the researchers in terms of its significance to the topic of research. The data collected from certain websites was compared to data available on other literary websites. Information was then categorised and by the researchers. The concept of nature was carefully examined in terms of its application by Wordsworth taking "I wandered Lonely as a Cloud" as an illustrative example. On the other hand, the concept of nature was also explored thoroughly as it was used by Robert Frost in the USA. Frost's use of the term - nature was carefully examined in terms of how nature was used by American poets during his time and by American poets who preceded him. Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a snowy Evening" was used as an illustrative example. Frost's use of nature was then compared carefully to William Wordsworth's use of the same concept.

Explication

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

The Daffodils, in the first line, the daffodils seem to be like little yellow people who keep the speaker company when he is feeling lonely. The happiness of daffodils can always cheer him up, and he can tell that they are happy because they dance. Some variations of the word "dance" occur in each of the four stanzas. Also, the speaker is taken backwards by how many daffodils there are. We often think of daffodils as flowers that people plant in their gardens in the springtime, so it would be surprising to come upon thousands of them by an isolated lake.

Lines 3-4: The daffodils in the poem are personified as a crowd of people. This personification continues throughout the poem.

Line 6: Daffodils cannot actually "dance," so Wordsworth is ascribing to them an action that is associated with people.

Line 9: The speaker says that the array of daffodils is "never-ending," but we know this cannot be strictly true because, all good things come to an end. This is a good example of hyperbole, or exaggeration.

Line 12: The personification of the daffodils in this line becomes more specific. "Tossing their heads in sprightly dance". The word head in this line refers to the top flower part of the plant. Sprightly dance means lively and jubilant dance. The daffodils were thus moving their heads in a rhythm which looked quite amazing and seemed to the poet as they were dancing.

Lines 13-14: The waves also get in on some of the dancing (and personification) movements, but the

daffodils are not out-done. They are happier than the waves.

Lines 21-24: Wordsworth imagines the daffodils through his spiritual vision, for which he uses the metaphor of an "inward eye." His heart dances like a person also.

Clouds, Sky, and Heavens: "I wandered lonely as a Cloud" has a remote, otherworldly atmosphere that is suggested by the title. The speaker feels like a cloud, very distant and separated from the world below. But this distance becomes a good thing for him when he comes upon the daffodils, which are like little stars. It's as if the problem at the beginning is that he hasn't flied high enough.

Lines 1-2: The beginning of the poem marks a simile between the speaker's wandering and the "lonely" distant movements of a single cloud. Clouds can't be alone, this is another example of personification.

Lines 7-8: The second stanza begins with a simile comparing the number and shape of the daffodils to the band of stars that we call the Milky Way galaxy. Angels and Spirits: You have to read into the poem a bit, but we think that Wordsworth is definitely trying to associate the flowers with angelic or heavenly and supernatural beings. He was probably thinking of Dante's Paradiso from The Divine Comedy, in which all the angels and blessed souls of heaven form a big flower. However, Wordsworth is a more naturalistic poet than Dante.

Line 4: "heavenly host" in reference to angels or spirits is a well known phrase. Wordsworth adds the word "host" in order to suggest this divine connection. Also, the colour of flowers is golden like a halo.

Line 10: Stars are compared to angels, also, so the simile comparing the flowers to "twinkling" stars reinforces the connection.

William Wordsworth is a worshipper of Nature, devotee of nature or high-priest. His love of nature was most probably true, and tender than that of any other English poet, before or since. Nature occupies in his poems an independent status and is not treated in a casual or passing manner as by poets before him.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Woods: The woods in this poem are something to contemplate over. The speaker of the poem cannot get enough of them, telling us that "the woods are lovely, dark and deep", as though he was hypnotized. The woods must be so compelling and attractive, because the speaker is compelled to stop and stare at them in the freezing, dark winter evening. There is a mysterious element to these woods as well, and we come to know that the speaker is not alone, even though he is very much by himself. Whenever we see woods in literature, we automatically see them in contrast to civilization. Having read The Scarlet Letter, think about the Woods Hester Prynne frequents. People also think of woods as being full of hidden obstacles, like the Fire Swamp in The Princess Bride. These are some pretty intense woods, the reader can feel free to interpret them how he or she desires. A few ideas are offered below.

Line 4: Woods can be seen as a clear and crisp image as our speaker describes them filling up with snow. The Natural World: The speaker is digging the natural world. Portray him hanging out with his horse, between a frozen lake and the edge of the woods, while the snows falls gently all around him. The ideas of the village, a farmhouse, or of the

promises he must keep are not nearly as appetizing to our speaker as the cold beauty of the world around him. There's something lulling about the "easy wind and downy flake", and we get the sense that the natural world is pretty compelling and attractive at convincing our speaker to forget about civilization. Nature is very powerful in this poem.

Lines 6-8: With these lines, reader gets a crystal clear image of the snowy woods and frozen lake at night.

Line 11: We can hear the sound of the wind in the alliteration of "sound's the sweep."

Line 13: Although the fact that the woods are "lovely, dark and deep" might not seem visually helpful, this description actually helps us visualize the virtual image of the woods even more clearly. Others: Alone as alone can be. That's the speaker on this snowy evening. Why then do the reader feels like he's not alone? Is it his little horse that seems to have a mind of its own; is it the landowner who is snug in his cozy house in the village, or is it the presence of something else entirely?

Line 2: The "village" can be interpreted as a symbol for society and civilized group.

Line 5: Horses have thoughts? We know it. The horse is personified here.

Line 6: Farmhouses may not be the most hoppin' places in the world, but they do involve people. Because of this, the farmhouse that the speaker mentions seems like a symbol for society and civilization.

Line 10: Giving his harness bells a shake, the horse is personified once again as he asks "if there is some mistake."

Lines 15-16: "Sleep" is a solitary activity, no? In these lines, "sleep" can be interpreted as a metaphor for death. Although Frost spent much of his time in cities, his poetry, like Wordsworth's reflected his use of pastoral settings to get his ideas over in what appears to be very simple verse.

Results and Discussion

Since William Wordsworth is known as the father of English romantic poetry, his attitude towards nature is extremely important. The concept of nature is important not only for William Wordsworth, but also for other English romantic poets who lived during his time and those who lived after him. Nature in itself is a very crucial component of English Romanticism making it one of the most significant characteristics of English romantic poetry. This emphasis on nature becomes very obvious when looking at lyrical ballads, the very first volume of poetry composed by William Wordsworth and co-authored by his Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and published for the first time in 1798. The second edition of the same volume was published in 1800, while the third and final edition was published in 1802. As mentioned earlier, the understanding of nature and the meanings associated with it depends primarily on the subject and age in which the natural work appears. This is also true for Lyrical ballads in which the poems celebrate nature and put it before any other consideration. The poems were simple and lyrical meant to be sung by shepherds who are naturally associated with nature and have a strong bond with it since they spend most of their time with their flocks in the open natural space in the country side of England. The language in the volume is very simple to reflect the simplicity of nature itself. In brief, for Wordsworth, nature is something holy and viewed as a teacher since he

states specifically “let nature be your teacher”. On the other hand, other English romantic poets looked at nature as something enjoyable attempting to imitate Wordsworth’s attitude towards it and considering it as primary source of inspiration for their poetry.

Frost’s View of Nature in Comparison to Wordsworth’s View

William Wordsworth, considered nature as a source of beauty and joy that can be enjoyed. This view and attitude is evident in his poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud”, used as an example of illustration for purposes of this paper. Furthermore, and just like it was for other English romantic poets, Wordsworth viewed nature as a clear primary source of inspiration in the composition of his works. It was also used by Wordsworth as a means through which he can use his thoughts and imagination that helps him in the creation of his verse. Finally, Wordsworth looked at nature also as a source of knowledge and a treasure of information. Nature for him becomes an effective teacher. Wordsworth says “let nature be your teacher”. Robert Frost, on the other hand, viewed nature in a relatively different manner. Although he seems to enjoy nature which becomes a spiritual vehicle through which he can reach a higher and more elevated level of religion and spirituality, Frost seems to have used it as a means for meditation to arrive at certain conclusions that have to do with the creation of the universe and the life here after. Frost’s view of nature seems to be influenced by the Biblical teachings.

Conclusion

The term “nature” has not always had the same meaning and definition or carries the same level of significance. The meaning of nature has been in a

constant flux. This paper outlined such semantic changes in meaning starting with the Greek and Roman empires leading to the meaning that nature carries and signifies at the present era. The paper also specified how nature was used by English romantic poets with special reference to William Wordsworth compared to its use in America with special reference to Robert Frost.

Wordsworth’s attitude towards nature can be described as that of a source of inspiration for the composition of verse as well as a source of beauty and joy to be enjoyed. Nature to Wordsworth was something to establish a bond with and with which a very affectionate and passionate relationship can be created. In other words, it is something that an intimate relationship can be created with. To Wordsworth, nature can certainly be a source of knowledge and an inventory of instruction. We can learn a lot from our surrounding environment and the natural things that live with us in our world. The views of other English romantic poets such as Blake, Shelley and Keats were very similar to that of Wordsworth’s since he was the pioneer of English Romantic poetry and the father of English romantic verse.

Frost’s attitude towards nature in comparison with Wordsworth’s can be understood in terms of the impact that Transcendentalism had on his views. Nature was a means of meditation and religious inspiration for Frost to reach a higher level of spirituality and philosophy towards the life here after including what happens after death. In contrast, English romantic poets looked at nature only as a source of inspiration to write poetry and a comfortable place in which a bond can be created and enjoyed with nature.

Finally, it may be concluded that although both Wordsworth and Frost had placed nature in a very high place on their list of priorities, each of them viewed it in a relatively different way. Wordsworth viewed nature as a source of inspiration in the composition process of his verse, he viewed it as something to be loved and enjoyed. It was also a means of inspiration and a source that triggers the use of imagination, which was very crucial for the process of composing poetic works. In comparison, Frost was obviously influenced by the principles and beliefs of the Transcendentalist movement pioneered by Ralf Waldo Emerson and became popular during the first half of the 19th century in the United States. Frost looked at nature was a means of meditation to take him to a higher level of spirituality. Therefore, Frost viewed nature as something that is related to the divine, while Wordsworth and other English romantic poets simply enjoyed nature and viewed it as a source of inspiration to compose poetry coupled with its power to be a teacher and to serve as a rich source of human knowledge.

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