

Analysis of Robert Frost's View of Nature

-Taking the Imagery of "Woods" in The Road Not Taken and Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening as an Example

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Abstract: Robert Frost was a renowned poet from America during the 20th century. Nature imagery is a prominent feature of Robert Frost's poetry. Numerous academics have investigated the themes and writing techniques of Frost's poetry since its inception. However, Frost's perspective on nature is also vital for people to acquire since it will not only help people study Frost's poetry better but will also help them appreciate the philosophy of life contained in nature. Therefore, this paper will take the imagery of "woods" in *The Road Not Taken* and *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening* as the research object, analyze the dualistic characteristics of the imagery, argue Frost's view that "nature is dialectical" and "nature is wise", and explore the subjective and objective reasons for the formation of Frost's view of nature. It aims to enhance people's understanding of Frost's poetic imagery and Frost's view of nature, encouraging them to care for the natural world better.

Keywords: Robert Frost, view of nature, woods, *The Road Not Taken*, *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening*

1. Introduction

Robert Frost (1874-1963), a four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, was one of the most distinguished American poets of the 20th century. Since Frost's poetry has a very broad connection to nature, he is also known as the New England Farmer's Poet. He spends most of his life on farms in New England. As a result, most of his works are set in New England, often featuring local natural scenery, labor scenes, and common sights of life. Apart from that, his poems are simple in language, yet profound in meaning. His reflections and explorations of the universal themes of life and nature abound in many verses depicting the customs and simplicity of life in New England.

Due to the profound philosophies in the poems, Frost's poems have been welcomed by readers and paid attention by literary critics since their publication. In the past ten years, many scholars at home and abroad have extensively analyzed the rich imagery in his poetry from a metaphorical perspective. At the same time, many academics have discussed the philosophy of life and the theme of nature in Frost's poems. Moreover, many other scholars have discussed poetry from various perspectives, such as feminism, modernist literature, symbolism, and so forth. Given the above, it is obvious that when analyzing the imagery in Frost's poems, most of the articles concentrate solely on

the positive side or the negative side, i.e., two opposing perspectives on nature: one in which “man and nature live in harmony” and the other in which “man and nature are separated from each other”. However, under the influence of his own experience and various thoughts, Frost’s view of nature is complex and contradictory, rather than monolithic. Therefore, there is still room and value for in-depth exploration in analyzing the outlook on nature embodied in the imagery of Frost’s poems from a dialectical perspective.

Frost has a fondness for portraying natural landscapes in his poetry. Facing the dilemma of fantasy and reality, as well as the dilemma of the flat road and the rough road, Frost applies the imagery of “woods” as a “witness” to accompany him to make the choices in *The Road Not Taken* and *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening* coincidentally. This paper will start with the imagery of “woods” in the two poems, analyze Frost’s view of nature more objectively, and investigate the reasons for the formation of his views, so as to provide different perspectives to understand Frost’s imagery and enrich the analysis of his natural concepts.

2. The Imagery of “Woods” in Robert Frost’s Two Poems: Duality

In poetry, imagery means that the poet expresses his thoughts and feelings through specific things [1]. Frost’s poems contain a significant amount of nature-related imagery. However, from Frost’s perspective, he is “not a nature poet”, and he has claimed that “there is always a person in my poem” [2]. In other words, Frost’s poems are not only about nature but more importantly, they are about seeing the “person” behind the nature imagery. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the representative image of “woods” and analyze two famous poems with similar scenes to find out the meaning and philosophy behind the image.

In many works of the past, the “woods” have often played a supportive role in the composition of the “collective unconscious” [3]. In comedy, it is lush, tall, and reliable, symbolizing resilience. In tragedy, it would symbolize the mysterious and deep lair that breeds evil. However, Frost’s poems portray a more ambivalent and complex imagery of “woods”. In other words, the imagery of “woods” is characterized by the duality of positive and negative rather than a single feature.

2.1. The Duality of “Woods” in *The Road Not Taken*

The Road Not Taken is a philosophical lyric poem written by Robert Frost in 1915. Frost selects a specific and common scenario of “a fork in the woods” to illustrate the poet’s thoughts on the choice of life’s paths. In this poem, the “woods” are first displayed as a backdrop. Frost writes, “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, /And sorry I could not travel both” [4]. In the beginning, the poet applies the word “yellow” to characterize the “woods”. In the color imagery, the red, orange, and yellow colors, like sunrise and flames, create a sense of warmth [5]. The “woods” in warm colors bring the reader a feeling of hope and serenity as if seeing sunlight. Hence, the “woods” produce a relaxing atmosphere and leave a positive impression.

However, the “woods” plays a negative role as a background. At first, the “woods” are an obstructionist. It blocks the poet’s smooth path, presents him with a problem, and forces him into a dilemma. Moreover, the “woods” symbolize the uncertainty of the future, making it more difficult for the poet to make choices. This is because the leaves and branches of the woods are messy and generate a secondary blockage to the poet’s vision. It obstructs the poet’s gaze to the extent that the poet cannot see where the two alternative paths lead even if he looks down one “as far as” he can. In the third stanza, the poet describes the two alternative paths in this way, “both that morning equally lay /in leaves no step had told them black” [6]. The fallen leaves of the woods cover the tracks of the two paths, making it impossible to make a judgment on the basis of previous experience. Therefore, the “woods” here are a presence that gives poor sight and blurs judgment.

The Road Not Taken demonstrates the complexity of people at a crossroads in real life when they have difficulty making a choice. The poet chooses a sparsely traveled road, full of thorns, just as the poet chooses a life of writing poems that do not bring material wealth. At the same time, after making the choice, the poet expresses the regret that “one cannot have a cake and eat it too”. The meaning of the “woods” in the poem also changes with the poet’s mood. It transforms from the positive side of hopefulness initially to the negative side of bringing problems and creating difficulties. This ambivalence in the meaning of the imagery demonstrates the duality of the “woods”.

2.2. The Duality of “Woods” in *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening*

In another poem Robert Frost’s *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening*, the poet’s consideration of “woods” also seems to be complicated.

At the beginning, the poet is prevented by “woods” again, as in the previous poem, but here it is more of a positive halt in the poet’s bustling journey. Frost writes “He will not see me stopping here/ To watch his woods fill up with snow” [4]. The poet is attracted to the silver-covered woods and is mesmerized by the mystical atmosphere. Generally, the poet should feel frightened to come across such tall and deep woods on a silent snowy night at an uninhabited place, but instead, the poet employs the word “lovely” to describe the “woods”. The final stanza might suggest the answer, as evidenced by the phrase “I have promises to keep, /And miles to go before I sleep” [4]. The poet’s journey is that of life. He is burdened with heavy duties and responsibilities, which makes him have to plunge into the messy and busy real world inevitably. The poet mentions that there are still miles to go before he sleeps, which implies that there are still plenty of things to be accomplished before he dies. Thus, the “dark and deep” woods here seem to be more like the ideal world from the poet’s fantasy of a carefree life. Since the “woods” give the poet a chance to catch his breath and an opportunity to escape from reality, the “stop” in this poem seems to be a kind of positive “pause” for the poet, and the mystery of the “woods” becomes gentle and lovely. That is a positive impression.

Therefore, although the “woods” begin as an image of oppressive silence, symbolizing death, in terms of its effect, the imagery of “woods” brings spiritual comfort to the poet and serves a positive purpose. The paradoxical meaning of the imagery is a concrete manifestation of the dualistic character of “woods”.

3. Robert Frost’s View of Nature

The reason why “woods” manifest dual features is that Frost’s view of nature is contradictory and complicated. Frost’s natural view is mainly reflected in two aspects: firstly, nature is dialectical, which requires people to treat it objectively; secondly, nature is the source of human wisdom, which deserves to be respected by people.

3.1. The Dialectical View of Nature

In Robert’s eyes, nature has a dialectical character. On the one hand, nature is a friend to mankind, providing joy and solace. On the other hand, nature is an enemy, causing harm and death to the human. However, nature is usually a complicated being that hides its hostility under a kind face, but it is also generous in providing comfort in the most difficult moments.

3.1.1. The Positive Side of Nature

Frost appreciates the beauty and benevolence of nature. In Frost’s nature poems, he is shocked by the nature scenery and is immersed in the companionship and stillness of nature. The positive side of nature has been manifested in two aspects in these two poems.

Firstly, the appearance of nature is beautiful. In *The Road Not Taken*, the “woods” are depicted as golden yellow, like the brilliant sunlight that falls in the early morning. Undoubtedly, the impression left by this description is full of hope, which demonstrates the positive appearance of nature. Moreover, nature can bring comfort to the soul. In *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening*, the silver-covered woods are “lovely”, implying a positive emotional meaning. The nightly wind and snow drift form a perfect picture of tranquility and pleasure for both the poet and the reader [6]. Amidst the distractions of the world, the poet finds solace in encountering a grove of trees that brings him a moment of relaxation. All the sense of joy and solace brought by the natural scenery embodies Frost’s positive view of nature.

3.1.2. The Negative Side of Nature

Frost might well be a lover of nature but never a thorough-going lover. In 1959, Lionel Trilling, a famous American social and cultural critic and literary figure in the 20th century, defined Frost as a “terrifying poet” who depicted a “terrifying universe” on Frost’s eighty-fifth birthday [7]. This completely reverses the previous impression of nature-loving Frost. Subsequently, after rereading and analyzing Frost’s poems, many scholars have also discovered the dark side of nature implied in the poems. As Roberts French has mentioned before, Robert Frost “is far from being a lover of nature”, because he often demonstrates his “feelings of profound uneasiness, even of fear” towards nature, and he “is far from comfortable” in the landscape [8].

Firstly, nature is oppressive and frightening. In *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening*, the entire woods are covered in snow, further emphasizing the silence of a snowy night. On the way with few people, the blackened woods are unfathomable and full of ominous portents. Such a depressing image of nature makes the reader feel uneasy and fearful. Besides, nature is indifferent and even hostile to human beings. *The Road Not Taken* is a good example. The “woods” in the poem hinder the poet’s way. It becomes a questioner, observing the poet’s indecision and struggle with anxiety and regret over the choices it offers him, aloofly from above. Meanwhile, the “woods” blur the options and offer no help or direction to the person making the choices. It manifests a sense of alienation between humans and nature, lacking in sympathy and care. This sense of indifference and oppression from nature embodies Frost’s negative view of nature.

3.2. Nature as the Source of Human Wisdom

As Frost says, “nature is always hinting at us” [9]. Nature keeps hinting until the people find the answer. Taking the imagery of the “woods” as an example, in terms of cause, the “woods” in both poems play the role of a questioner. One stands at the fork in the road of life, leaving the poet with two paths, a comfortable and ordinary one chosen by many and a bumpy and interesting one less traveled. The other is standing between fantasy and reality, leaving two choices: either to end here and give up the ideal world to seek inner comfort or to continue to climb up to the challenge and shoulder his responsibility and mission. The questions are difficult to answer and may even be something that the poet has already thought about many times in his heart. That is precisely why they are so valuable because they are the questions that must be asked in life. This questioner from nature lays out the questions and urges the poet or the millions of readers facing a dilemma to choose and not to run away from it.

Secondly, in terms of the result, the “woods” are also the inspirer who helps humans gain wisdom by recognizing their true mind. The “woods” start as the questioner, placing the question in front of people. In the process of making choices, it does not intervene explicitly, but in fact, it also makes hints. In *The Road Not Taken*, the leaves of the woods cover up the tracks of both roads, which may imply that it does not matter whether the road has been traveled before or whether the road is rough

or smooth. No matter how one chooses, one may regret it, so it is better to select a path bravely and continue to walk firmly. In *Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening*, the “woods” provide the poet with the comfortable world he once fantasized about. The world of fantasy is beautiful, where there are no people, no mundane things, and no worries and misfortunes. At the same time, the poet has to pay a price - perhaps a long sleep in this deep and dark place. This makes the poet realize that the world of fantasy might be wonderful, but it is not real, and sooner or later, he will return to reality, and only death will permanently free him from his responsibilities or duties. It is better to face up to one’s mission and move on. The poet was inspired by nature to write these truths.

4. The Major Reasons Contributing to Robert Frost’s View of Nature

4.1. The Living Environment and Personal Experiences of Robert Frost

One’s living environment and life experiences usually have a significant correlation with one’s worldview. Whereas Robert Frost’s outlook on nature is an essential part of his worldview, it is inevitably influenced by both these factors.

First and foremost, Frost lives in the New England region of the United States, which makes him deeply influenced by the local scenery. New England is a region of great natural beauty, especially with its abundant forestry resources. Hence, the “woods” represent his hometown and are the popular source of inspiration in Frost’s poems, which holds an attraction for him naturally. For this reason, Frost often employs “woods” as imagery to seek comfort or guidance when he makes difficult choices or when he is vulnerable inside.

Furthermore, Frost’s fortunate and unfortunate personal experiences are highly related to his dialectical attitude towards nature. A person who has encountered few difficulties in life will find it difficult to see the darkness of the world. Conversely, a person who suffers a lot of pain in life also finds it difficult to look at the world positively. As a poet, Frost was fortunate. Throughout his career, he received numerous awards and honors. His poetry was beloved and admired by a variety of readers, making him the most successful American poet of the 20th century. As a child, he was also fortunate. His kind mother kept giving him deep love and supported his studies. At the same time, his grandfather left him a generous estate which gave him very substantial financial assistance. His good fortune was enough to make him naturally think that the world was beautiful and benevolent. However, his good fortune did not last long, for he was an unfortunate father. He and his wife had six children, but he could only witness their death or insanity one after the other. Two of his daughters died young, and his favorite child died in 1934 after giving birth. Four years later, his wife died of a heart attack. As Frost began to pull himself together, his only son committed suicide. All these tragic events left scars on Frost’s soul and darkened his worldview in some ways. Hence, the cruelty and bleakness of nature can easily be found in Frost’s poetry.

Therefore, Frost’s outlook on nature is always complicated and ambivalent. He could appreciate the beauty and elegance of nature like a romantic, but he also invariably depicted nature as cruel and hostile. In other words, he loves nature, always tries to bring himself a sense of security, and seeks revelation by observing and depicting nature on his hands and knees. Meanwhile, due to the misfortunes of his personal life, the nature he presents still has a dark quality that is disturbing and frightening.

4.2. The Inspiration of Ideas from Previous Generations

When it comes to Frost’s view of nature, three great figures must be mentioned: Wordsworth, Emerson, and Darwin. They are all known for their distinctive ideas about nature and have had a profound impact on the field of literature. Robert Frost, as a descendant, is inevitably affected by these thoughts and expresses them in a more sophisticated way.

Firstly, the Romantic tradition of treating nature since Wordsworth has laid the foundation for Frost to form his natural view. William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was one of the major poets of Romantic literature in the 19th century. Wordsworth is known for his lyric natural poetry and his natural view. Wordsworth is a pantheist who asserts that God exists anywhere in nature. He argues that nature is in harmony with mankind; every flower enjoys its breath, birds leap in excited rapture, and man is overwhelmed by the power of beauty and joy to become a living soul in nature. This romantic approach to nature had a strong appeal to 19th-century scholars and readers. They could hear in Wordsworth's poetry a voice calling them back to nature and the simple pleasures of life. The same is true of Robert Frost, who inherited Wordsworth's interest in nature. He has spent a lot of time communing with nature and enjoyed finding material from the natural world. The natural world's flowers, trees, birds, and stars are his favorite subjects for poetry.

Secondly, Emerson's transcendentalist view of nature also strongly contributed to the development of Frost's view of nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), an American poet and prose writer, was the father of New England Transcendentalism. The publication of his first book, *Nature*, in 1836 started the trend of transcendentalism in American literature. Emerson also asserts that God exists in nature [10]. With the presence of God or a divine spirit, nature can have a beneficial effect on humans. Furthermore, he argues that nature is a symbol of the spirit, and that particular natural facts are symbols of specific spiritual facts [10]. In other words, nature is symbolic, and every flow of river and change of season in nature corresponds to the course of human life. These transcendentalist views of nature helped Frost to experience the benevolence of nature more deeply and contributed to Frost's recognition of the symbolism of nature. Every natural object, scene, and event could be a symbol of a certain concept. This is similar to Frost's outlook on nature, that nature is always hinting at people, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, this one-to-one correspondence of symbolism also leads Frost to form a pattern that "begins in delight and ends in wisdom" [11]. Thus, Frost's poetry and his attitude towards nature are largely influenced by Emerson.

Finally, Darwin's theory of evolution enriched Frost's view of nature and helped him to become more objective. In 1859, Charles Darwin (1808-1882), a British naturalist, published the epoch-making work *On the Origin of Species* and put forward the theory of evolution and natural selection for the survival of the fittest. According to Darwin, human beings originate from the animal world. To survive, human beings, like all living creatures in the world, had to struggle a lot, and only the species with strong adaptive ability could be left behind, and those who failed to adapt would be eliminated. This viewpoint largely touched those who believed in God's creation of mankind. Also, it influenced Frost. Faggen mentioned that Frost began reading Darwin's writings as a teenager [12]. These works revealed to Frost the dark side of nature and its hostility. It also made Frost understand that the cruelty of nature is inevitable and that everything has to struggle for survival anyway.

Under the profound influence of these predecessors, Frost's complicated view of nature has gradually taken shape. It is skillfully demonstrated in his nature poetry, either as a backdrop or as a metaphor, and gives revelation and a reminder of the need to continually learn from nature reflectively.

5. Conclusion

Robert Frost is undoubtedly an exceptional poet in the history of American literature. He is distinguished both for his flexible application of nature and for his elaboration of a simple and profound philosophy. Nature is often used for different purposes, sometimes as a background, sometimes as a metaphor for some human condition.

Moreover, Frost's view of nature behind his poems is also a valuable treasure for people. Through the analysis of the imagery of "woods" in the two poems, the paper demonstrates that Frost's natural imagery has a dual character. Sometimes, nature's hostility is hidden under his amiable appearance, and sometimes, shallow goodwill is implied under its cruel and hard mask. This ambivalent imagery

features the outward expression of Frost's dialectical view of nature. Influenced by Wordsworth's romantic and Emerson's transcendentalist views of nature and his beautiful living environment, he inevitably enjoys the beauty and benevolence of nature. Meanwhile, influenced by Darwinian evolution and the tragic fate of his personal life, its view of nature is laced with many dark ideas. Whether the imagery manifests positive or negative emotions, the poems have one thing in common: nature is wise. Readers can always find philosophy in Frost's poems, which is an important reflection of his idea of creating poems "from delight to wisdom". All of this contributes to the formation of his complicated and contradictory view of nature.

Admittedly, this paper has some limitations in terms of sample scope because only one image from two of Frost's poems is chosen as the object of analysis. It is hoped that in future research, more scholars will select a richer sample of poems to improve the analysis of Frost's natural imagery and his view of nature. In addition, hopefully, the discussion on the view of nature in this paper can enlighten people to treat nature correctly. Given the duality of nature, people should treat it with a dialectical attitude. At the same time, given that nature contains a wealth of philosophy and wisdom, people should respect nature, learn and experience from it, and seek long-term development in harmony with nature.

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