

AN ECOCRITICAL PARALLEL OF THE WORKS OF TWO AMERICAN POETS - ROBERT FROST AND CARL SANDBURG

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Abstract: Although Robert Frost is generally considered "the farmer poet" and Sandburg is seen as a poet of cities and industrialization, an ecocritical analysis finds out many common points between them : an ecophilic attitude towards nature, philosophical ideas that are related to the extent of using similar symbols and dealing with related topics: sleep, death, the beauty of nature, humans' powerlessness in front of it, certain rhizomatic elements or hyperobjects, monologues of personified natural elements, storied matter as nature told and nature telling stories.

Both poets observe many of Greg Garrard's "Ecocriticism" tropes, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's "storied matter", Timothy Morton "hyperobjects", Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizomes", alongside other ecocritical concepts.

Keywords: ecocriticism, ecocritical tropes, storied matter, hyperobject, rhizome

Ever since Ralph Eduard Emerson's *Nature* (1836) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), American literature has traditionally been a romantic glorification of nature, environmentalistic avant-la-lettre. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that a considerable number of American poets let us discover such features in their works on nature.

If one applies the ecocritical standards to their poetry, it perfectly corresponds to the green lens pattern of current literary thought and style.

This article is going to select a few of such instances and submit them to a brief literary analysis.

One of the best-known examples of ecocritical poet is Robert Frost. The topic of country life and communion with nature is very frequent with him.

Robert Frost has often been called "the farmer poet". However, what caused him to deal with farming for a decade, alongside with writing poetry, was the fact that his grandfather bought a farm for him, but in his will he conditioned the inheritance on the grandson's living on the farm and working the land there for ten years, which the heir actually did: he worked on the farm during the day and wrote poetry at night.

Carl Sandburg was born in America of Swedish parents. At 13 he gave up learning and went to earn his living, working as a migratory labourer. The amount of different jobs he held equipped him with life experience supplying for the school he did not do. He volunteered for the Civil War in Spain. Later, he graduated from college and became a journalist. He wrote in free-unrhymed verse. His volumes *Chicago* and *Smoke and Steel* confirmed his position of the common man confronted with the new industrial civilization. When he died in 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson observed that "Carl Sandburg was more than the voice of America, more than the poet of its strength and genius. He was America."

When reading Frost's poetry through the ecocritical lens, many of Greg Garrard's tropes one has studied in *Ecocriticism* (2004) can clearly be found there: "The Pastoral," "Wilderness," "Apocalypse," "The Animal," "The Earth."

In addition, Frost shows traits of ecocentrism, which can be demonstrated by analysing a number of his poems. To Frost, the human is porous to nature's transcorporeality, as it is described in Serenella Iovino's "The Bodies of Naples" (2014), Jane Bennett's 'vibrant matter' (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, 2010), 'vital materialism' in Stacy

Alaimo's transcorporeality (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self*, 2010). Viewed through Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's 'material ecocriticism', nature is sentient, and agentive (Iovino, Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism*, 2014). All these ecocritical concepts can be found in Frost's poetry.

On reading Frost's scenes and monologues, one finds out that they are short parables on dying and rebirth. Ecocritically, rebirth is to him Buddhist reincarnation. "Nothing Gold Can Stay," expresses the sad wisdom that hopes of beginnings never lead to enduring accomplishment, in either animal or vegetal kingdom or in human existence. Through this tragic condition of limited perfection in any kingdom is a feature that unifies the universe presents itself with a unifying feature, perishability as death announces apocalypse.

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 to day.
Nothing gold can stay. (Frost 228)

There is a certain communication between kingdoms leading to their identification with one another, exemplified by the wordless conversation between a crow and a human. When the crow shakes on the human some "dust of snow", it changes his mood and "saves some part /of the day [he] had rued." (Frost "Dust of Snow" 227). It looks like a benediction or some knightly ennoblement performed on man by the animal with the snow, conferring to a geological element a mythical role and to a modest bird a clerical role, a transcorporeality between the two species, the crow and the man, through the instrument of the dust of snow.

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 rued. (Frost 227)

The "Apocalypse" trope appears in Frost's "Fire or Ice." Uncertainty about the earth's ending in either fire or ice leads the poet to state that the human limited resistance to evil does not let him choose either alternative. Thus, both extreme notions, either too much painful fire of passion or too much icy hate, can bring about a human's mind and the destruction of the human world.

Some say the world will end in fire
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if I had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice

Is also great
And would suffice. (Frost 227)

Sandburg's "Apocalypse" is more modest and intimate. It does not take the whole world in the universal collapse, but only individual destinies, unified by the similarity of their tragedy. Death is a hyperobject, leaving its imprint on each and every story. In "Bundles", Sandburg sees universal destruction of both human and animal lives and cosmic destinies of stars:

I have thought of beaches, fields,
Tears, laughter.

I have thought of homes put up-
And blown away.

I have thought of meetings
And for every meeting a good-by.

I have thought of stars going alone,
Orioles in pairs, sunsets in blundering
Wistful deaths.

I have wanted to let go and cross over
To a next star, a last star.

I have asked to be left a few tears
And some laughter. (Sandburg 83)

Snow / ice has with Frost dual meanings, it is both perfect beauty and evil / death. In its former view, the snowed scenery of the woods makes the horse's master stop to admire it too long, so the horse reminds him of "promises to keep/and miles to go before [he] sleep[s]". Maybe sleep can be read as the end of the journey, or maybe as death and the traveller has duties to fulfil and cannot linger too long contemplating nature. The wordless communication with the horse shows the animal's comprehension of his master's mind. Frost is an aesthete and a nature lover, but also a strict spirit of duty to his peers.

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. (Frost 228)

Sandburg's "Fog" is as fascinating as Frost's snow. Only Sandburg's fog is personified as a little cat, mixing, confounding the animal kingdom and the weather concept.

The fog comes
On little cat feet,
It sits looking
Over harbour and city
On silent haunches
And then moves on. (Sandburg 80)

On the other hand, fog can express man's despair and solitude in Sandburg's "Lost", it becomes Serenella Iovino's storied matter echoing human sufferance.

Desolate and lone
All night long the lake
Where fog trails and mist creeps,
The whistle of a boat
Calls and cries unendingly,
Like some lost child
In tears and trouble
Hunting the harbor's breast
And the harbor's eyes. (Sandburg 78)

Sandburg's "Sunsets" are as mesmerizing as Frost's "Snowy Night". They reveal an aesthete and ecophilic poet, in love with nature's dimming light and approaching dark, announcing universal sleep.

There are sunsets who whisper a good-by.
It is a short dusk and a way for stars.
Prairie and sea rim they go level and even,
And the sleep is easy.

There are sunsets who dance good-by.
They fling scarfs half to the arc,
To the arc then and over the arc.
Ribbons at the ear, sashes at the hips,
Dancing, dancing good-by. And here sleep
Tosses a little with dreams. (Sandburg 84)

Frost's "The Bear" is another instance of contrasting and identifying the human and the animal, here the man and the bear. Frost speaks about acceptance of one's worldly condition, finding out that the bear accepts the span of its allowed room in the universe, while man is never satisfied. Throughout the poem, the bear is personified. At the beginning, he has a lover's attitude towards the tree, hugging it. Then he travels, like a free human wanderer through nature. He loves freedom and space.

The world has room to make a bear feel free;
The universe seems cramped to you and me.
In contrast, man "acts like a poor bear in cage". (Frost 69)

Either on analysing the micro-universe or the macro-universe, a human is dissatisfied.

The telescope at one end of his beat
And at the other end the microscope,
Two instruments of nearly equal hope,
And in conjunction giving quite a spread. (Frost 69)

Man, like the bear, both "when sedentary and when peripatetic" is an "equally pathetic figure".

The bear is personified to such an extent that it is said to be philosophical, coming under opposite influences:

At one extreme agreeing with one Greek,
At the other agreeing with another Greek,
Which may be thought, but only so to speak” (Frost 69)

In Frost’s “Choose Something like a Star,” light contrasted to dark makes a star more attractive to the looker. Humans are attracted by the mysteries of the cosmos because these appear to be unsolvable, and their efforts to understand give their lives purpose and discipline. Astronomy and talking about chemical elements are the technical side of the talking to stars. The gazer may not be answered by the lofty star, but the latter’s silence enhances its mysterious charm.

Thus, Frost’s passion for and identification with the natural world ranges from cosmic dimensions to earthly wildlife, from Garrard’s “Earth” to his “Animal” tropes (2004).

In Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” life choices are compared to two forked itineraries. A non-conformist, “sorry [he] could not travel both and be one traveller,” Frost chooses the untrodden one, full of undergrowth and asking for more time and efforts to be travelled by. Even if regret remains with the traveller forever, he knows that his choice of “the less travelled by” road “made all the difference”, giving his life both meaning and trouble (Frost, pp. 222-223). Thus, a trodden road can determine a different destiny from an untrodden one, and nature is always a quandary.

In Frost’s “Birches”, trees are a trigger of childhood memories, of a taming of birches by a boy who would climb them , swung and bent them. He felt like a king of the forest, an owner of gems, hidden in the birch bark.

When I see birches bent to left and right,
[.....] I like to think some boy’s been swinging them.
[....] Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. (Frost 223)

The sunlight does masterwork with these birches and their cracked ice:

Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust-
Such heap of broken glass to sweep away
You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen. (Frost 223)

When he sees bent birches, the poet imagines they have not suffered a snowstorm, but the game of a poor boy having as his only entertainment the bending of the birches.

By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them.
And not one, but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. (Frost 223)

The poet was “once a swinger of birches” and this memory often raises his morale when

...life is too much like a pathless wood
[...] I’d like to go climbing a birch tree,

And climb back branches upon a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, [...]
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than a swinger of birches.” (Frost 223)

Pleasure mingles with power over nature, in an ecophobic portrait of cruel games. The swinging birches tell their story, as Serenella Iovino’s nature always tells a story, biographies of trees.

The counterpart of this poem is Frost’s optimistic “Putting in the Seed,” describing the farmer’s burying white petals from the apple tree blossoms to give the seeds power to struggle their way up the soil to turn into new plants, in a miracle of rebirth.

The sturdy seedling with arched body comes

Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs. (Frost 225)

The rebirth of seeds unto young plants makes them a hyperobject gloriously celebrating the unstopping beginning of new vegetal life from dead seeds, and human existence transcorporeally appears to gather life from flora, in a celebration of the universal rebirth which is spring.

But again, Sandburg uses a monologue to give the floor to the “Grass” rhizome, an omnipresent omni-spreading vegetal element showing that human battles, either won or lost, are nothingness when flora overpowers humans, both alive and dead ones, equally impotent in front of it, as the symbol of nature. Humans’ wars all end in death, while vegetation outlives the human species and works by covering it ironically. History, with absolutely all its wars, becomes storied matter.

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work –
I am the grass: I cover all.
And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?

I am the grass.
Let me work. (Sandburg 81)

In Frost’s “After Apple-Picking”, at the end of a long day of apple selecting and throwing into the drinking trough, in a rich abundance of fruit,

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall. (Frost 218),

While all the apples

That struck the earth, even if not bruised,
went to the cider-apple heap. (Frost 218)

Now, the exhausted apple-picker is going to sleep and dream of apples

Magnified apples appear and disappear (Frost 218)

This ensuing slumber after apple picking cannot be defined as either human or a kind of universal sleep, hibernation.

The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I described as coming on,
Or just some human sleep. (Frost 218)

There are identifications between the human and the woodchuck. By transcorporeality, the thousand thousand apples pervade the porous human mind, as they have pervaded his labour and his home, and make of his place and life a kingdom of the apples.

Robert Frost's poetry is an elusive mixture of apparent simplicity and deep wisdom, expressed by rural scenes with farmers, who love nature, who work and die in nature. They identify with wildlife, ecocentrism characterises them.

Similarly, Carl Sandburg's humans live and die in nature, be it rural or urban, and are overpowered by nature and confounded with it.

These poems observe the tropes of Garrard's *Ecocriticism* and Iovino's nature telling stories and being told in stories. Frost's literature does not exist without nature, it ceases to be literature if nature is excluded from it.

In Carl Sandburg's "Wind Song", the same theme of the sleep and dream about red apples is found. The red apples are a symbol of life with both poets. What Frost tries to identify as either winter hibernation or death is with Sandburg the personified wind, travelling over the world as a hyperobject and uniting things and human existences alike, in storied matter.

Long ago I learned how to sleep,
In an old apple orchard where the wind swept by
counting its money and throwing it away
In a wind-gaunt orchard where the limbs forked out
and listened or never listened at all,
In a passel of trees where the branches trapped the wind
into whistling, "Who, who are you?"
I slept with my head in an elbow on a summer afternoon
and there I took a sleep lesson.
There I went saying: I know why they sleep,
I know how they trick the trippy winds.
Long ago I learned how to listen to the singing wind
and how to forget and how to hear
the deep whine,
Slapping and lapsing under the day blue and the night stars:
Who, who are you?
Who can ever forget
listening to the wind go by
counting its money
and throwing it away? (Sandburg 82)

The money that the wind counts is either the apples in the crop of the orchard or the human lives he encounters and influences, then throws away into the slumber of death.

The same “Apocalypse” trope as universal death awaiting the perishing humans is expressed in the theme of memory and death as a loss of memory in Sandburg’s “Stars, Songs, Faces”:

Gather the stars if you wish it so.
Gather the songs and keep them.
Gather the faces of women.
Gather for keeping years and years.
And then...
Loosen your hands, let go and say good-by.
Let the stars and songs go.
Let the faces and years go.
Loosen your hands and say good-by. (Sandburg 80)

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