



Impact of Anthropocentrism in Robert Frost's "A Brook in the City": An Eco-critical Reading

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Abstract

This article on Robert Frost's poem "A Brook in the City" analyzes the exploitation of nature resulting from human encroachment. The poem presents the transformation of the brook from "an immortal force" to a mortal one with the advancement in science and technology. The poem evokes images of a serene brook from the past and contrasts them with scenes of a modern city, drawing a comparison between the two. The article uses eco-critical perspective to examine the destructive consequences of human intrusion on nature, linking these ideas with concepts from Val Plumwood's "The Blindspots of Centrism and Human Self-enclosure", and Arne Naess' "Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects". Characteristically, the primary interest of eco-criticism has focused on literary representation of the Culture/Nature relationship, especially on the current ecological crisis and possible ways for its solution. The poem "A Brook in the City" gives a picture about the destruction of nature and Frost's critique of massive exploitation of nature due to anthropocentric attitude on human beings. The findings highlight Frost's implicit warning against the ecological harm caused by prioritizing development over environmental harmony. The study concludes that the poem serves as a poignant critique of humanity's exploitative tendencies, urging reflection on the need for a sustainable relationship with nature to address the ecological crisis.

Keywords Anthropocentrism, environment, human exploitation, human-nature reciprocity, eco-criticism

1. Introduction

The relationship between humanity and nature has been a central theme in literature, particularly within the Romantic tradition, where poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge lamented the erosion of humanity's connection with the natural world. Robert Frost, presents a more nuanced and, at times, bleak depiction of this relationship. In his poem "A Brook in the City," Frost meditates on the consequences of industrialization and urbanization, capturing the irreversible transformation of a natural brook into an underground sewer. This transformation symbolizes the broader ecological degradation caused by human activities, providing a stark commentary on the anthropocentric tendencies that have dominated modern society.

"Little we see in nature that is ours" (356), grieves a romantic poet William Wordsworth. With the very arrival of human on earth came the inherent struggle with the forces of

nature. We live with these struggles every day with the will to control and dominate. This desire has enslaved us and our will to dominate has taken over the natural world without a trace of any thought of what would remain with us overtime. The long association between human and nature, dependent on each other, striking a balance in the ecosystem had grown a reciprocity. But after the development of industrialization the economic booster groups have kept control over the natural resources. The voracious exploitation of nature has depleted natural resources and in relation caused alienation and unhappiness in human beings. Nowadays we are habituated to read the newspaper headlines covered with the news about the battle over public land use, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, global warming, destruction of tropical rainforest, wildfire in forest, illegal dumping sites in village side, toxic waste contamination, famines, droughts, floods and so on, so until some radical measures are taken, the future of humanity looks doomed. Not only Wordsworth who grieves over the weakening bond between human and nature, Robert Frost also tries to spread similar concern and awareness among the human beings towards our environment in his poem "A Brook in the City".

The paper's focus on "A Brook in the City" allows for an exploration of Frost's environmental concerns within the broader context of eco-criticism. The poem not only reflects the poet's anxiety about the loss of nature but also serves as a critique of the human-centered worldview that has led to the current environmental crisis. By drawing on eco-critical theories, this paper examines the ways in which Frost's poem challenges anthropocentrism and advocates for a more harmonious and sustainable relationship between humans and nature.

2. Methodology

This paper employs a close reading of Robert Frost's "A Brook in the City," analyzing its imagery, symbolism, and thematic content within the framework of eco-criticism. The close reading is informed by the theories of prominent eco-critics, including Val Plumwood, Arne Naess, and others, who critique the anthropocentric worldview and advocate for a more eco-centric approach to literature and life. In addition to this textual analysis, the paper engages with secondary literature on Frost's poetry, eco-criticism, and the historical context of industrialization to provide a comprehensive understanding of the poem's environmental implications. The research methodology centers exclusively on an in-depth analysis of "A Brook in the City", avoiding comparisons with Frost's other works. This focused approach enables a more nuanced interpretation of the poem, highlighting its powerful critique of humanity's destructive impact on nature.

3. Review of literature

The field of eco-criticism has gained considerable prominence in literary studies, particularly in the context of the global environmental crisis. Cheryll Glotfelty and

Harold Fromm's seminal work *The Eco-Criticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, lays the foundation for the exploration of the connection between literature and the natural environment, urging scholars to move beyond the anthropocentric frameworks that have traditionally dominated literary analysis (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). This approach challenges the tendency to view nature as merely a backdrop for human activities, advocating instead for a recognition of the intrinsic value and agency of the non-human world. Val Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism in her essay "The Blindspots of Centrism and Human Self-enclosure" provides a critical framework for understanding the destructive consequences of human-centered thinking. Plumwood argues that the separation of humans from nature has led to the marginalization and exploitation of the natural world, with significant ecological and moral implications (Plumwood, 2002). Her call for an ecocentric perspective, one that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life forms, resonates deeply with the themes explored in Frost's poem.

Arne Naess, a key figure in the Deep Ecology movement, also critiques the alienation of humans from nature in his essay "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects." Naess advocates for a holistic understanding of the environment, emphasizing the intrinsic value of all life forms and the need for a more sustainable and respectful relationship with the natural world (Naess, 2015). His philosophy provides a valuable lens through which to examine Frost's critique of urbanization and its impact on the environment. In the context of Frost's poetry, scholars have long recognized his complex relationship with nature. Nina Baym, in her article "An Approach to Robert Frost's Nature Poetry," challenges the simplistic categorization of Frost as a "nature poet," arguing that his work reflects a more ambivalent and critical stance towards the natural world (Baym, 1965). This ambivalence is particularly evident in "A Brook in the City," where the beauty and vitality of nature are juxtaposed with the destructive forces of industrialization.

The book *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* by John F. Lynen explores Robert Frost's portrayal of nature, emphasizing the tension between the serene pastoral landscape and the disruptive forces of modernity. Lynen suggests that Frost's poetry captures the intricate and often contradictory relationship between humans and nature, a theme notably evident in the poem "A Brook in the City" (Lynen, 1960). Celebrated for his depictions of rural New England and profound reflections on the human experience, Frost's work continues to invite admiration and critical examination. In *Babel to Byzantium*, James Dickey identifies a metaphysical depth in Frost's writing, praising the poet's ability to transform ordinary experiences into profound insights. Dickey remarks that Frost offers a unique perspective on the world, uncovering universal truths hidden in the commonplace (Dickey, pp. 200–209). Similarly, Yue Zeng highlights Frost's love for nature, noting that his poetry often reflects a spiritual dialogue with the natural world (Zeng, p. 339). Lawrence Buell, in his analysis, underscores the importance of

place and landscape in Frost's poetic vision, interpreting the brook in "*A Brook in the City*" as a symbol of humanity's disconnection from nature and the natural rhythms of life (Buell, p. 35).

Frost's poetic style, characterized by simplicity and depth, has earned widespread acclaim. Ezra Pound, in his review of Frost's *A Boy's Will*, commends the early work for its authenticity and vivid portrayal of New England life, contrasting Frost's straightforward style with the elaborate traditions of poets like Milton and Swinburne (Pound, *Poetry*, pp. 1–2). The editors of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (1983) highlight Frost's exploration of existential themes, portraying the profound isolation of individuals in a universe indifferent to human struggles (pp. 110–129). Eco-critical interpretations of "*A Brook in the City*" reveal its ethical and ecological dimensions. David L. Vanderwerken emphasizes Frost's moral awareness, suggesting that the poem mourns not just the loss of natural beauty but humanity's ethical failure in its treatment of nature (Vanderwerken, p. 42). Adding a feminist eco-critical perspective, Karen L. Kilcup compares the marginalization of nature in Frost's work to the marginalization of women in patriarchal societies. Kilcup interprets the brook's domination by the city as a metaphor for broader systems of environmental and social exploitation, thus linking environmental and gender justice in her analysis of the poem (Kilcup, p. 78). Building on these critical insights, the article explores the poem's portrayal of human-driven urbanization and its detrimental impact on the natural environment, providing a deeper examination in the textual analysis section.

4. Textual analysis of "A brook in the city"

This poem was composed in the early 1920s, during a time marked by the industrial revolution and rapid urbanization. During this era, humanity turned destructive, leading to the unchecked exploitation of nature to pave the way for the establishment of new hydroelectric dams, power lines, highways, industrial power points, nuclear weaponry system, military camps, deforestation for pasture lands. Robert Frost is a twentieth-century poet who celebrates the interrelatedness of humanity and nature in his poetry, such as "The Pasture", "A Prayer in spring," "The Sounds of Trees", "The Exposed Nest", "My Butterfly", "The Line-gang", "The Road Not Taken", "Storm Fear", "West-Running Brook". Nina Baym in her article "An Approach to Robert Frost's Nature Poetry" states that "Critics have labeled Frost a "Nature Poet" and then assumed that he was a version of Emerson or Wordsworth" (p. 713). Being an environmentalist, in the poem "A Brook in the City" Robert Frost focuses on how human beings are entrapped in the nets of materialism that they do not hold any connection with nature. The poet opines how we take from nature in abundance and return to it very little, guided by the concept of shallow ecology rather than the concept of deep ecology. So, he makes us aware that we must be eco friendly and must be aware of what is hidden in the lap of nature. "A Brook in the City" portrays his worries regarding deteriorating man-nature relationships.

This poem offers a compelling critique of the impact of urbanization on the natural environment, using the transformation of a brook as a central metaphor for the destructive consequences of human progress. The poem opens with a striking image of a farmhouse, once part of a rural landscape, now incongruously situated in the midst of a city. This image sets the stage for the poem's exploration of the tension between the natural world and the urban environment, a tension that is central to Frost's critique of anthropocentrism. The opening lines, "The farmhouse lingers, though averse to square / With the new city street it has to wear / A number in," immediately establish the dissonance between the past and the present, the rural and the urban. The farmhouse, once a symbol of human connection with nature, now appears out of place in the city, its former significance diminished by the encroaching urban landscape. This dissonance is further emphasized by the poem's central metaphor: the brook, once a vital part of the natural world, is now buried beneath the city's pavement, reduced to a mere shadow of its former self.

Human and Nature have been correlated with each other from primeval times. Still now some community people who are far from the access of modern technology have a nature worshipping tendency and their lifestyle is fully assembled in nature. Their rites and rituals, ceremonies, feast and festivals all are eco friendly. But 'man' made Nature a source of development and as a result they have started facing great natural disasters with the passage of time. In November 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations Environmental Program released their *Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report*. This report compiles findings from decades of research conducted by experts in oceanography, mathematics, climatology, chemistry, biology, and physics. In the "Summary for Policy Makers," the IPCC confirms:

Human influence on the climate system is clear and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gasses are the highest in history. Recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems. Warming of the climate system is unequivocal and many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia. The atmosphere and ocean have warmed, the amounts of snow and ice have diminished, and the sea level has risen (p. 2).

The report also warns: "(C) ontinued emissions of greenhouse gasses will cause further warming and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing the likelihood of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems" (8). During the course of development, Human beings are gradually losing their sanity to destroy the natural resources for their greed and so called progress guided by Post-Cartesian technological society. They only care and give priority only to them without realizing its impact on nature and environment. Both the poets Wordsworth and Frost criticize the growing materialism powerfully and plead for a return to nature. In this regard, John F. Lynen has remarked:

Of course no modern poet will be able to free himself completely from the romantic way of treating nature, and in Frost there are many reminiscences of Wordsworth, Keats and others. But what Frost has derived from tradition is adapted to his own different purposes. One may hear the romantic harmonies in his work, but they reverberate within a world quite changed. ... Frost simply does not look at nature through the same eyes (p. 142).

Frost's poetry seeks to deepen humanity's shared sense of responsibility for protecting the Earth's environment. Here Frost sounds just like another powerful nature writer Bell Hooks who says in his essay "Touching the Earth", "Only when we love earth, we are able to love ourselves more fully" (p. 140).

The overall lifecycle of man –birth, development, health, and death- is affected by the environment in the same way as the other non-human animals. But due to physical and mental superiority in comparison to other creatures, man is capable of changing the environment according to his own wishes. With the development of science, our life has become easy and luxurious but we cannot deny that modern natural disasters too are the result of the destructive changes in the environment as done by man. Harold Fromm in "From Transcendence to Obsolescence: A Route map" highlights that:

How the industrial revolution affected humanity's conception of its relationship to nature, warning that technology has created the false illusion that we control nature, allowing us to forget that our "unconquerable minds" are vitally dependent upon natural systems (Glotfelty XXVII).

In the essay "The Blindspots of Centrism and Human Self-enclosure" Val Plumwood says that we have dissociated ourselves from nature because we are guided by the blindspots of centrism and this "human-centered framework is a serious problem not only for non-humans but for human beings themselves" (p. 117). The anthropocentric human considers himself to be the master of the earth who has the dominance upon all the other living creatures of the earth. He regards nature as his slave whose only job is to serve him.

The poem "A Brook in the City" has depicted a panoramic view on nature and man's meanness. The poet elaborates, noting that in the modern city, characterized by tall buildings, monuments, and farmhouses, there is only a small trickle of water running through a drain. This minor stream used to be a powerful brook. Anyone who knows a brook well understands its original strength. In the poem, the brook is initially depicted as an "immortal force" (line 13), almost like a deity. However, due to human selfishness and greed, this once vibrant and lush grass has been replaced by concrete. The meadow grass has been covered over, with pavements taking its place in the town (lines 9/10). The apple trees used as firewood and will no longer provide nourishment as suggested in the line "The apple trees be sent to hearth-stove flame" (line 11). The lines, "*Deep in a sewer dungeon under stone / In fetid darkness still to live and run*" (lines 16/17), suggest that the once-sacred brook now flows underground, relegated to a place of

waste and decay. This imagery underscores how the city has engulfed and obscured the rural landscape. This whole area of the country is now a part of this newly-built city. Through these lines, Frost illustrates the destructive impact of this anthropocentric worldview, showing how the natural world is devalued and destroyed in the pursuit of human progress.

Driven by a human-centered attitude, mankind has transformed something once eternal into something finite. Due to this self-centered approach, the brook, once a symbol of strength, has become nothing more than a feeble sewer. Eventually, people may forget that there was ever a powerful brook in existence. It would only exist on maps because 'the farmhouse lingers' has now been replaced by 'the new city street' (lines 1/2). The poem's message is about the destruction of natural beauty by the human drive to build cities. The poetic persona of the poem wonders if mankind will ever recognize his mistake. The man who is so absorbed in his personal advancement—will he ever understand that the brook in the city also deserved a fulfilling existence? In the poem, Frost tries to make people aware of this issue, warning that otherwise, their actions will eventually have consequences. The poetic persona of the poem wonders if man could ever understand his mistake. The man who is so engrossed in his personal growth will he ever be able to understand that the brook in the city also deserved an accomplished life. In the poem Frost attempts to sensitize man or else his deed would pay back his actions.

The tone of the poem shifts between lamentation and resignation, reflecting Frost's profound concern over the environmental degradation caused by urbanization. The mournful quality is evident in the poem's depiction of the brook, once described as a vibrant "immortal force" (Frost, line 9), now reduced to a "sewer dungeon" (Frost, line 11). This transformation, from a source of life to a polluted and diminished shadow of its former self, encapsulates the poem's deep sense of loss. Frost's language further underscores this tone of inevitability and despair. Expressions like "cemented down" and "sent to hearth-stove flame" evoke images of finality and destruction, suggesting that the harm done to the natural world is both irreversible and absolute (Frost, lines 5–7). The brook's description as being confined to "fetid darkness" not only symbolizes physical pollution but also represents the moral decay Frost attributes to unchecked urbanization (Frost, line 12). Val Plumwood's critique of anthropocentrism offers a valuable lens for interpreting this tone of lamentation. Plumwood argues that human-centered worldviews often ignore the intrinsic value of the natural world, leading to its exploitation and degradation. Frost's sorrowful tone can thus be understood as a critique of this anthropocentric mindset, mourning the destruction of nature by a society that prioritizes human advancement over ecological preservation (Plumwood, pp. 97-122). During the primeval time, man's basic need was limited to food and that was the reason why there was an eco friendly relationship between the two as both were dependent on each other. Before industrialization humans were fully dependent on agricultural

activities and guided by the sustenance mentality. The poet in the poem “But what about the brook / that held the house as in an elbow –crook?” (lines 3-4) personifies the river into a caring human giving the house a hug. But unfortunately, as time progressed and humans were uplifted socially, along with the development of skills and technology, he turned from being an integral part of Nature to becoming a conqueror of nature. The changes that the farmhouse, the brook, and other elements of the rural landscape were subjected to illustrate how they were polluted by humans. As a result, the brook in this newly modernized city emerges as a poignant symbol of nature's lost purity, reflecting the narrator's profound despair. Through vivid imagery, the poem's narrator laments the relentless march of urbanization and its devastating impact on the natural world. He resents that the beauty of the brook was destroyed and paved over. The area circumscribed with the brook is turned into big buildings with the arrival of the modern time. Donald Worster, a great historian also states that these calamities are made by us and comments:

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact in nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding (Glotfelty, 90).

The ethical systems of modern human beings are associated with human-centeredness and this is the major cause of the environmental crisis. In the poem “A Brook in the City” the self – centered human turns the green grass to the cemented one and even the apple trees have lost their image and converted into the big houses. The poetic lines “The farmhouse lingers, though averse to square/with the new city street it has to wear/ A number in (lines 1-3)” highlight how humans are eradicating the existence of rivers, woods, farmhouses, viewing land covered by nature as wasteful and only valuable for its potential utility.

In order to fulfill the same purpose, humans cut themselves off from the green atmosphere, turning fire to the forests as mentioned in the line, “The apple trees be sent to hearth-stove flame” (line 11). The devastation of the brook arouses the speaker's emotion, and he wonders whether anyone will ever be able to realize that nature and man are interconnected and need a proper balance. As is mentioned in the lines: “The meadow grass could be cemented down/ from growing under pavements of a town” (lines 9-10), this emphasizes the caustic nature of industrialization. But materialistic objects have lured humans in such a manner that they have forgotten that this maliciousness toward their habitat gives rise to scenes of drought, which occur due to the hot, dry winds and lack of moisture in the ground. The reason is that they have confined themselves to their own business and do not even try to look at such things. This fact compels the poet

to utter, “the thoughts may not have risen that so keep/ This new-built city from both work and sleep” (lines 23-24), because modern humans have no time or appreciation to enjoy nature. They are busy only with gaining material prosperity by exploiting natural resources, and they are working solely for this purpose.

The observation of Robert Frost’s poem highlights the fact that we are motivated by anthropocentric attitudes that we have started ignoring our environment. We do not sympathize with nature so the basic intention of Robert Frost behind writing this poem is to lay emphasis on environmental exploration and to show how our earth is facing the oppressions of human beings day by day. So, the chief aim of the study of ecology is to focus our attention on the matters we need to think about. This is the reason Nitchie comments:

In “A Brook in the City”, natural behavior appears to involve non-interfering with the phenomena and processes of the inorganic, non-human world; nature is those processes. Organic phenomena- meadow grass and apple trees- can be sacrificed, perhaps with impunity, to the utilitarian demands of urban living. But a brook is an “immortal force”; neither made by man nor sharing in his common, its energies are radically different from man’s - not necessarily hostile, but demanding respect for their unkillable and unmanageable “otherness.” ...it requires man’s respectful awareness, constantly reminding him that his capacity for truly altering the world is narrowly limited. (p. 11)

It can be commented that this poem is concerned with the philosophy of Deep Ecology, which emphasizes the intrinsic value of all life forms, and requires a more holistic and respectful relationship with the environment. In his essay “The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects,” Arne Naess argues that anthropocentric thinking has alienated humans from their natural environment and led to its exploitation. He suggests the need to move away from this anthropocentric view, which places humanity at the center and displaces nature and all other non-human animals. The brook, once a vibrant and life-sustaining force, is now reduced to a mere conduit for the city’s waste, reflecting the devaluation of nature in an anthropocentric society. Frost’s depiction of the brook’s transformation serves as a powerful critique of the belief that nature exists solely for human use, and a call for a more eco-centric approach to the human-nature relationship.

The poem vividly illustrates the exploitation of nature. Instead of merely hinting at how humanity corrupts the natural world, the poem portrays the brook’s degradation as the city grows and engulfs both the farmhouse and the brook itself, ultimately burying the brook beneath the urban sprawl. The beginning line of the poem, “The farmhouse lingers, though averse to square,” gives the house a dilapidated feel as if it is being suppressed by the city, while “fetid darkness” creates a mood akin to the sewer in which the brook is placed (lines 1/17). The “meadow grass cemented down”, while the “The apple trees sent to hearthstone flame” and “cinder loads” are used to block the brook

(lines 9/11/15). In place of the brook, there is a 'sewer dungeon under stone,' where the brook is forced to run in 'fetid darkness.' This not only personifies the brook but also creates an image of imprisonment (lines 16/17). These poetic lines urge humanity to see nature as a self-sufficient being and make a conscious effort to comprehend it. Otherwise, there is a price we pay for all this anthropocentric activity. The poem argues that humanity should move away from its self-centered perspective on what is important, which has become common in the Post-Humanist era. Instead, it advocates for adopting a worldview that prioritizes nature's intrinsic value and rights, suggesting a shift to a more eco-centric or bio-centric approach. This is exemplified by the call to “protect the rivers, lakes and streams. Do not pollute them with waste” (Dady Burger, p. 25).

5. Conclusion

Robert Frost’s “A Brook in the City” offers a powerful critique of the impact of urbanization and industrialization on the natural environment, using the transformation of a brook as a central metaphor for the destructive consequences of human progress. The poem uses vivid imagery and symbolic language to delve into themes such as environmental degradation, human-centered thinking, and the ethical aspects of our relationship with nature. Frost’s depiction of the brook’s transformation serves as a powerful critique of the belief that nature exists solely for human use, and a call for a more eco-centric approach to the human-nature relationship. The eco-critical analysis of the poem reveals the deep engagement of Frost’s work with contemporary environmental concerns, highlighting its relevance to modern ecological debates.

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