

# Dramatic Encounter in Robert Frost's "Dust of Snow"

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## Abstract

Robert Frost's "Dust of Snow" is a marvelous poetic creature of simple and concise language, which conveys complex and profound philosophical insight. This article examines how the dramatic encounter between human and nature in this poem embodies Frost's perspective on nature and human existence. By depicting the dramatic encounter, Frost reveals the therapeutic power of nature as well as its limitations, and expresses his existential concern on human predicament. The seemingly relaxing but perplexing reading experience generated by this poem, as a sort of dramatic encounter between the readers and the literary text, stimulates the readers to ponder on the vulnerability of both nature and human existence. Thus, Frost activates the dramatic power of poetry and fulfills his duty of enlightening wisdom.

**Keywords:** Robert Frost, "Dust of Snow", Dramatic Encounter, Nature, Human existence, Vulnerability.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Robert frost is (1874-1963) one of the most influential poets in the 20th century American literature. He has won the Pulitzer prize for poetry for four times. He lives in the New England countryside for quite a few years, and most of his poems depict the pastoral scenery and life in New England. His poems feature concise diction, familiar rhythm and ordinary images in daily life. And most of them are honored as beginning with delight, and ending with wisdom. Often, the unnamed narrator behaves like an actor who "runs across a situation and performs a complex species of divination, wry consideration, dismissal, wonder, and qualified avowal. Such a narrator is intuitive, instructed in the traditions of making sense of the natural world" (Wormser B, 2008). "Dust of Snow" is no exception. Beneath its deceptively simple diction is rich connotation. It is a poem about natural beauty which turns out to contain profound philosophical connotation. It reflects Frost's insight into nature and human existence.

The whole poem contains two stanzas as the following:

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.

In this short poem, the poet's emotion has found its thought (Cox J, 1962). The existing literature on this poem often focuses on the beauty of nature, which helps the narrator to forget the troubles and disappointment in life. However, by a close reading and textual analysis, we can see such evaluation ignores the metaphorical meaning of such images as "dust", "snow", and "crow". This paper proposes that the dramatic encounter between nature and human in this poem goes beyond a simple extolment of natural beauty, the underlying meaning between the lines matters more. It implies the connection between nature and death, the limitation of nature's therapeutic power, and the fragility of human existence. Surely, this poem depicts the narrator's delight when exposed to natural beauty, however, this delight is transient. The poem ends with wisdom on how to ponder on the lingering rue in life. It reveals Frost's consciousness of the vulnerability of both nature and human existence. He is not only a writer of nature, but a modernist poet with existential aesthetics.

## II. Dramatic encounter between human and nature

With its vivid diction, "Dust of Snow" gives the readers a strong visual sense. It is full of dramatic

scenes and psychological descriptions. The narrator first describes a dynamic and colorful natural scene. In this scene, the crow, tree and snow are full of motion. The first stanza is a plain description of the crow's action--the crow flaps its wings and shakes down a dust of snow from a hemlock tree. The second stanza is about the effect of the action--the dust of snow falls on the narrator and changes his mood. The close contact between nature and human gives the winter scenery a sense of vitality and dynamism.

Though the poem seems transparent, it is anything but that. Frost preoccupies himself with "making art out of what would have struck many of those predecessors as scanty and unpromising materials" (Lea S, 2011). What Frost says about poetry in general is also true of this poem. It makes use of just a couple of ordinary images. It begins by evoking a winter scene of shaking off a dust of snow from a hemlock tree. The scanty images are specific enough to summon up pictures in readers' imagination. These images together present a vivid scene that seems so real and near that we should be able to take in its lightness and gentleness. However, the poem reveals more than one presence, and it is crossing over into "the drama of real encounter" (Wormser B, 2011).

Robert Frost has consistently regarded the dramatic as the most essential quality in artistic literary production. He holds that "the height of poetry is in dramatic give and take" (Newdick R, 1937). In his introduction to *A Way Out*, Frost admits that he has always come as near the dramatic as he could, for drama is the capstone of poetry. Frost delights in reading those sorts of encounters--some human and some natural. In "Dust of Snow", the narrator encounters the dust of snow in a dramatic way. He is a roamer, someone who takes a walk in the snow. Suddenly, a dust of snow falls on him from the hemlock tree. When he looks up, he sees the crow hopping from branch to branch. A slender smile flickers over his face. The narrator is also someone who is always questing. He meets up with the natural images that make him brood. Frost has once declared that he is not a nature poet, and there is always something else in his poetry. It is not the natural setting which concerns him, but the brooding on human-nature encounter. His poetry is "a form of considering, which is to say thinking, rather than a form of reporting, witnessing, or presenting" (Wormser B, 2011) nature. In Frost's view, nature is a force neither good nor evil, neither right nor wrong. "It is the indifferent, the morally neutral" (Bartini A, 1985). However, when human encounters nature, something happens. The dramatic encounter brings delight, rapture and wisdom.

This short piece of poem could, indeed, be regarded as a one-act play and acted out effectively on stage for its essentially dramatic elements, such as the movements of the crow, the falling down of the dust of

snow, the narrator's reaction to the dust of snow, etc. In this play, the place to start is "a crow shaking down a dust of snow on me", which is "paradigmatic of the notion of an encounter" (Wormser B, 2011). And the drama goes on between the narrator and the dust of snow. The narrator expresses his joyful appreciation of the dust of snow which changes his emotion and endows him with sudden delight. Surely, he does not know when the dust of the snow will fall off the tree, because he is in an unconscious state when the crow shakes the hemlock. Therefore, the narrator writes down the poem as a result of the impetus. It seems that the narrator has been carried off by the dust of snow and adjusted himself to the motion of the snow dust. At that moment, he just needs the expression for the sudden pleasure and makes the best of the encounter to brood and discover. The narrator's visionary experience is not only inspiring but redemptive. This seemingly trivial event alters the poet's mood by suggesting to him the possibilities of communion between human and nature. Like Emerson, Frost seems to have believed that "faith comes in moments, and there is a depth in those brief moments, which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences" (Liebman S, 1996). Thus, having a moment of encounter is an event of significance.

### III. Dramatic encounter between the readers and the text

Besides the dramatic encounter between human and nature depicted in the poem, there is another sort of encounter triggered by the poem, which is the encounter between the readers and the text. From the readers' reading experience, this poem, just like Frost's other significant works, can be valued as "taxingly ambiguous" (Lea S, 2011). It is not simply a poem of glorifying the sudden pleasure aroused by ordinary and trivial natural images. Its view on nature is complex. Nature is a contradictory existence. On the one hand, it is beautiful and pure, but on the other hand, its beauty is transient and fragile, and it is difficult to bring thorough healing to human beings. The narrator's mood is changed by the motion of the snow, but not changed completely. He can temporarily forget the troubles in life and obtain inner peace, but cannot wipe out the rue for long. The final word of the poem "rued" adds some sad hue to the enlightened mood. A sweet picture stands out, but it stands out against the somber background. The dust of snow brings delight, but no one knows whether or not another dust of snow will fall, or when the crow may hop again, or when the tree may rock again. The pleasure that resides in the chance encounters seems dodgy. Therefore, the healing power of nature is limited.

Moreover, nature itself is fragile. The meanings of such natural images as dust, snow and crow in this poem can hardly be accurately positioned. They may reveal the purity and vitality of nature; however, they may also imply the fragility of nature. Wolfgang

Iser, the critic who has put forward reception aesthetics, claims that a literary work is a dynamic interaction between the readers and the text. The encounter between the literary text and the readers makes literary works really exist, but this encounter can never be accurately positioned. The meaning generation process is neither the realization of the text, nor the individual intention of the readers. There is always a blank to be filled. It is a structural mechanism that calls on the readers to explore, thus giving them the freedom to participate in generating the meaning of literary works. From this perspective, what makes the meaning of nature in the poem complex is the exquisite imagery which presupposes a series of “blanks” linked with each other.

Frost takes “Dust of Snow” as the title, describing snow as dust, forming the first “blank” of meaning. The word “dust” has its cultural connotation in the religious background. According to Christianity doctrines, God created Adam with dust. “For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt you return”. This is also the origin of the “dust to dust, earth to earth” commonly used at Western funerals. Therefore, the word “dust” is related to life and death. In this way, the readers fill in the “blank” of the image of the dust, that is, dust may indicate death in nature. The image of snow is also related to the theme of fragility of natural beauty. On the surface, snow is beautiful and pure, but it is extremely transient. It can only exist in a fleeting moment. When it touches the ground, it melts and disappears, which implies “nature’s law of self-slaughter” (Foster R *et al.*, 1973). Frost also uses the unique image of “crow”. Crows, which cry sadly, are often considered as a symbol of death. They are regarded as messengers from hell. As this poem reveals, Frost sometimes depicts dark natural images and implies that there are some terrible factors that make people feel uneasy about nature. Indeed, in Frost’s poetry, the beauty and vulnerability of nature are always intertwined. Even in a poem which praises nature, readers can always feel “a bittersweet quality” (Manorama T, 1990). What nature gives always conflicts with human’s needs. The so-called “beauty” that nature gives to people may not be what they can bear. Seeing the beauty of nature, they may also sense the brevity of life.

Frost is a contemplative poet on nature. Through his contemplation in “Dust of Snow”, he has developed complex attitude towards nature: on the one hand, he reveals that the magical nature brings sudden pleasure to people, dispels the boredom in their hearts, and gives them spiritual inspiration. Such instantaneous beauty in nature as the dust of snow outlines a perfect, mysterious and ideal world for people. But on the other hand, the natural beauty is always fleeting, and it can only make people forget the troubles of life temporarily. It is impossible to remove human sufferings, and nature itself is vulnerable. Frost’s affirmations are the willful

assertions of an essentially skeptical poet who knows that “order or form or meaning is imposed on nature as an expression of human-need not as a revelation of nature itself” (Liebman S, 1996).

#### IV. Existential predicament encountered by individuals

By depicting the transience of natural beauty in “Dust of Snow”, Frost ponders on human beings’ anxiety and lingering depression, and implies the brevity, uncertainty and vulnerability of human existence. Human existence is fragile, and “rue” can never be totally wiped out. Life is full of uncertainty, just like the uncertainty of the time when the snow dust will fall again or when there can be another trace of joy. Such contemplation on human existence reveals Frost’s existential thought. Existentialism, which studies the way and meaning of man’s existence, tries to reveal the relationship between man and the world. It holds that human beings live in an indifferent universe, and their existence is insignificant. The world is meaningless, and life is painful. Man is just a painful individual in an absurd plight. The world can only give him endless depression and disappointment. By depicting the lingering rue encountered by man, “Dust of Snow” reveals the existential predicament encountered by individuals. Their accidental encounter with natural beauty could not bring everlasting redemption. They just walk aimlessly to the future.

Therefore, “Dust of Snow” could be acted out not only for its dramatic elements but also for its dramatic suspense, for example, when reading this poem, the readers may wonder: why does the speaker rue some part of the day? The narrator does not clearly state the reason for his depression. But not matter what reason it is, the depression is always lingering there. Hence, the pleasure is transient while the gloomy pensiveness is for long. “The gradual elaboration of the thing felt with delight leads naturally to a statement of the larger understanding, the half-sad half-happy wisdom of the conclusion” (Faggen R, 2001). Frost regards poetry as creating a momentary stay against confusion. To him, “life consists of a series of advances and retreats, of contractions and expansions” (Osborne W, 1969), of moving into the light sometimes and then back into the darkness. By the end of the poem, we slide from delight to gloominess as we perceive some part of the day which the narrator has rued. Frost has said that a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom, and by wisdom he often means a perception of human frailty. In Frost’s natural symbology, the dust of snow, in its ethereal and transient beauty, is the reflected image of all human beings’ dream. Frost says, “Sure, I wished for impossible things, even for perpetual summers sometimes, but...think poetry as tragedy” (Rodman S *et al.*, 1973). Under the simple appearance of the poem, one finally comes to appreciate that the images and themes are woven into a complex pattern of provocative thought—Frost’s poetry is about tragedy.

Frost's existential thoughts may be connected to his life experience, which is full of pain. He has been tortured by poverty, disease and bereavement. He lost his father when he was young. He dropped out of school due to lung disease when he was studying at Harvard. Experiencing so many tortures of life, he might be thinking about the origin of suffering. Most of his works are related to the dark world in his heart, such as fear, confusion and death. He integrates this theme into the description of nature, and indicates that human beings would eventually go with the snow dust in nature.

Liebman claims that all of Frost's visionary poems follow the pattern of Wordsworth's spots-of-time experiences, i.e. illumination following disappointment. However, what exists after the illumination? At best, in Frost's own word, they are "momentary stays against confusion"—but only momentary and therefore negligible. This poem reflects the poet's self-reflexivity on the insignificance and vulnerability of human beings. The poet's "structural self-reflexivity" (Hinrichsen L, 2008) can thus be seen as a technique by which he explores and expresses his existential disturbances.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in this pastoral poem "Dust of Snow", Robert Frost uses his simple and concise language to convey his philosophical thinking about nature and man. This poem is full of dualism: temporary and eternal, joy and depression, survival and death, etc. Frost's was once misinterpreted as relaxing and enjoyable, however, through the above analysis, it is easy to find the dark and melancholy elements in this poem. Nature, in Frost's poetry is mostly short and human life tragic. He has experienced tragedy, witnessed tragedy, and presented tragedy by depicting fleeting natural beauty.

In Frost's verse, the existence of human beings is always full of thorns. Frost expresses deep concern for the plight of human existence in the form of poetry. His poems seem to be about the beauty of nature and life, but in fact they expose the limitations of nature's healing power and reveal human's confusion and loneliness. "Dust of Snow" reveals Frost's hunger for encounter. He glorifies the moment of encounter between human and nature, which brings about certain

delightfulness. He is willing to be changed by such encounter. However, natural beauty is transient, and the utmost redemption from nature is unachievable. "Through presenting the psyche as a landscape, Frost's poem becomes the linguistic stage on which fears and anxieties can be performed and confronted" (Hinrichsen L, 2008). The poet really knows that "nothing gold can stay" as he says in a poem under this title. In "Dust of Snow", Frost raises it again, measuring the fragility of human's life, joy and hope.

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