

**Women's Ecological Agency in Robert Frost's Selected Poems:
An Ecofeminist Study**

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of women's ecological agency in Robert Frost's selected poems through Karen J. Warren's ecofeminist philosophy. This study investigates how feminine figures and feminized natural elements function as ecological subjects in *Spoils of the Dead*, *The Tuft of Flowers*, *Wind and Window Flower*, *Gathering Leaves*, and *Asking for Roses*. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the research uses thematic textual analysis based on Warren's concepts of hierarchical dualism, the logic of domination, ecological ethics, and the ethic of care. The findings reveal Frost constructs women's ecological agency through four interrelated roles: ecological guidance, ethical mediation, environmental stewardship, and respectful negotiation with nature. He presents them as active ecological mediators who foster care, reciprocity, conservation, and contextual responsibility. Shortly, Frost's poetry advances an ecofeminist vision in which sustainable human nature relationships are achieved through ethical coexistence rather than domination. These findings enrich ecofeminist literary criticism by highlighting women's transformative roles in promoting ecological harmony and environmental responsibility.

Keywords: *women; ecological agency; ecofeminism; Robert Frost; nature poetry.*

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a medium for exploring the relationship between humans and the natural world. As environmental problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss become increasingly urgent, ecocriticism and ecofeminism have gained prominence in literary studies for examining how texts construct ecological consciousness and environmental ethics (Buell, 2005; Garrard, 2012). Ecofeminism argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature are interconnected through patriarchal systems that legitimize hierarchical dualisms, such as man/woman and culture/nature (Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 2000). Rather than focusing solely on environmental degradation, ecofeminist criticism also highlights literary representations of care, reciprocity, environmental justice, and women's ecological agency (Gaard, 2011; Warren, 2000).

Robert Frost is widely recognized as one of America's foremost nature poets. His poems portray forests, flowers, seasons, birds, and rural landscapes not merely as scenic settings but as active participants in human moral and ecological experience (Buell, 2005; Scott, 2004). Previous studies have primarily examined Frost's poetry from ecocritical, pastoral, and symbolic perspectives, emphasizing environmental ethics and human-nature relationships. However, little attention has been given to women's ecological agency within his poetry, particularly from an ecofeminist perspective. Most ecofeminist studies continue to emphasize the shared oppression of women and nature rather than women's active roles as ecological mediators, protectors, and ethical guardians (Gaard, 2011; Salleh, 2017).

Recent ecofeminist scholarship has shifted its focus toward women's ecological agency, emphasizing their roles in fostering ecological care, sustainability, and reciprocal relationships with the more-than-human world (Alaimo, 2010; Gaard, 2017; Iovino & Oppermann, 2014). Karen J. Warren's (2000) ecofeminist philosophy is particularly relevant because it rejects the logic of domination and proposes an ethic of care, contextual responsibility, and ecological interdependence. This perspective provides an effective framework for interpreting literary texts by examining how feminine figures challenge anthropocentric values and promote ethical relationships between humans and nature.

Despite the growing development of ecofeminist literary criticism, no comprehensive study has specifically examined women's ecological agency across Robert Frost's nature poems using Warren's ecofeminist framework. This study therefore investigates five selected poems—Spoils of the Dead, The Tuft of Flowers, Wind and Window Flower, Gathering Leaves, and Asking for Roses—to analyze how Frost represents women and feminized natural figures as ecological mediators, protectors, and ethical guardians. By emphasizing women's ecological agency rather than ecological victimhood, this study contributes to ecofeminist literary criticism and offers a new interpretation of Frost's ecological imagination, highlighting environmental ethics grounded in care, reciprocity, and sustainability.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design guided by Karen J. Warren's (2000) ecofeminist philosophy to examine the representation of women's ecological agency in Robert Frost's selected poems. A qualitative approach was adopted to interpret meanings embedded in literary texts through language, symbolism, imagery, and thematic patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data consisted of five poems: Spoils of the Dead, The Tuft of Flowers, Wind and Window Flower, Gathering Leaves, and Asking for Roses. These poems were selected because they portray ecological themes, human–nature relationships, and women's interactions with the natural world. Secondary data included books and scholarly articles on ecofeminism, literary criticism, and environmental humanities.

Data were collected through close reading (Bowen, 2009). Each poem was read repeatedly to identify words, phrases, metaphors, symbols, imagery, and other textual elements related to women, nature, ecological care, environmental ethics, and human–nature interconnectedness. The identified data were then categorized according to Warren's (2000) ecofeminist concepts to support systematic interpretation.

The data were analyzed using thematic textual analysis based on Warren's (2000) ecofeminist framework. The analysis involved repeated reading, coding relevant textual units, organizing the codes into broader

themes, and interpreting them through the concepts of hierarchical dualism, the logic of domination, ecological ethics, and the ethic of care. Finally, the findings were synthesized to explain how Frost represents women as ecological agents who promote environmental stewardship, challenge patriarchal domination, and foster reciprocal relationships between humans and the more-than-human world.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

FINDING

This study examines five selected poems by Robert Frost through Karen J. Warren's (2000) ecofeminist concept of ecological agency. Although women are not the central protagonists, Frost represents them through symbolic feminine figures, including fairies, flowers, Mary, the mysterious mistress, and other feminized natural elements. These figures embody ecological agency through care, mediation, preservation, reciprocity, ethical responsibility, and ecological wisdom rather than domination over nature.

Women as Ecological Mediators Between Humans and Nature

Women's ecological agency in Robert Frost's selected poems is primarily represented through feminine figures who function as ecological mediators, guiding humans toward respectful relationships with the natural world. Rather than exercising authority over nature, these figures cultivate environmental awareness through care, observation, and ethical responsibility. In *Spoils of the Dead*, Frost introduces "two fairies" who enter the forest "with the flowers to play" and are later described as "flower-guided" as they discover "something that lay/In the shape of a man." By depicting the fairies as following the guidance of flowers rather than directing nature themselves, Frost emphasizes ecological understanding begins with attentiveness and humility toward the more-than-human world. The flowers become moral guides, while the fairies embody an ecological consciousness grounded in cooperation rather than domination. This representation reflects Karen J. Warren's (2000) ecofeminist ethic of care, which rejects hierarchical relationships between humans and nature in favor of reciprocal and respectful coexistence.

Similarly, the pattern appears in *The Tuft of Flowers*, where ecological mediation is symbolically represented through a butterfly and a patch of preserved flowers. Frost writes that the butterfly "*turned first, and led my eye to look/At a tall tuft of flowers beside a brook,*" directing the speaker toward an overlooked aspect of the landscape. The speaker subsequently realizes that "*The mower in the dew had loved them thus, / By leaving them to flourish, not for us,*" revealing the flowers were intentionally spared simply because of their intrinsic worth. The butterfly therefore functions as an ecological guide, while the mower's decision to preserve the flowers exemplifies environmental stewardship founded on care rather than utility. Frost further develops this ecological ethic in *Wind and Window Flower*, the flower quietly resists the invitation of the winter breeze: "*She a window flower, / And he a winter breeze,*" yet "*the flower leaned aside / And thought of naught to say.*" Instead of yielding to external pressure, the flower maintains her position with quiet restraint, suggesting that ecological agency can be expressed through stability, patience, and respect for natural balance rather than through domination or conflict. These poems portray feminine figures as mediators who foster ecological harmony by encouraging humans to value coexistence, preservation, and ethical responsibility.

Frost further reinforces women's ecological agency through environmental stewardship and ethical restraint in *Gathering Leaves* and *Asking for Roses*. The speaker repeatedly emphasizes that the leaves possess "*Next to nothing for weight*" and "*Next to nothing for use,*" before questioning, "*Who's to say where / The harvest shall stop?*" Although the leaves appear materially insignificant, this rhetorical question challenges anthropocentric assumptions that nature exists solely for human exploitation. It advocates moderation and respect for ecological limits, reflecting an ecofeminist ethic that values nature beyond economic usefulness. Likewise, *Asking for Roses* explicitly frames human interaction with nature as an ethical relationship based on consent and humility. Mary reminds the speaker that "*one we must ask if we want any roses,*" while the mysterious mistress later "*grants us by silence the boon of her roses.*" These lines suggest that nature is not an object of ownership but a gift that must be approached respectfully. Mary and the mistress therefore function as ecological guardians who regulate human access to the natural world.

through ethical principles rather than human entitlement. These five poems consistently portray feminine figures as ecological mediators, protectors, and ethical guides who cultivate reciprocal relationships between humans and nature.

Women as Ethical Guardians Against Human Exploitation of Nature

Ethical guardianship against the exploitation of nature also emerges as an important dimension of women's ecological agency in Robert Frost's poetry. Rather than presenting nature as a resource for unlimited human use, Frost promotes an ecological ethic grounded in restraint, reciprocity, and moral responsibility. This perspective is particularly evident in *Spoils of the Dead*, *Asking for Roses*, and *Gathering Leaves*, where the desire to possess nature is repeatedly questioned and replaced by values of care and respect. Although female characters are not always physically present, feminine ethical values shape the poems' ecological vision by guiding human interactions with the natural world through compassion, humility, and stewardship rather than domination.

In *Spoils of the Dead*, Frost critiques possessiveness through the speaker's response to the removal of valuable objects from the dead. After the fairies move gently through the forest "flower-guided" and innocently play with the jewelry, the speaker concludes with a profound ethical rejection: "I recognised death / With sorrow and dread, / And I hated and hate / The spoils of the dead." The expression "I hated and hate the spoils of the dead" extends beyond condemning the theft of material possessions. It symbolizes a broader rejection of exploiting vulnerability for personal gain. Significantly, the earlier image of the fairies being "flower-guided" establishes an alternative ecological orientation in which nature provides moral guidance rather than becoming an object of acquisition. From an ecofeminist perspective, Frost contrasts two opposing value systems: the patriarchal logic of appropriation represented by "the spoils," and a feminine ecological ethic founded on respect, care, and relational responsibility. Consequently, the poem suggests that genuine relationships with nature are nurtured through ethical coexistence rather than ownership.

A similar ecological ethic appears in *Asking for Roses*, where Mary explicitly rejects the assumption that humans may freely appropriate

nature. When the speaker asks about the roses, Mary responds, "*But one we must ask if we want any roses,*" emphasizing that access to nature requires permission rather than entitlement. This principle is reinforced when they respectfully call, "*Pray, are you within there, Mistress Who-were-you?*" before the mysterious guardian silently appears and "*grants us by silence the boon of her roses.*" These moments redefine flowers not as commodities but as gifts received through humility and mutual respect. Mary's insistence that "*we must ask*" and the mistress's silent act of granting permission establish women as ethical mediators who regulate human interaction with nature according to moral responsibility instead of economic interest. Rather than exercising authority through domination, these feminine figures protect ecological integrity by teaching that nature possesses intrinsic value independent of human ownership.

Although *Gathering Leaves* contains no explicit female character, it reinforces the same feminine ecological ethic by challenging utilitarian attitudes toward the environment. After describing the endless task of collecting fallen leaves, the speaker observes that they are "*Next to nothing for use,*" yet immediately qualifies this judgment by acknowledging that "*a crop is a crop,*" before asking, "*Who's to say where / The harvest shall stop?*" The apparent contradiction between the leaves' limited economic usefulness and their ecological significance invites readers to reconsider conventional measures of value. The rhetorical question "*Who's to say where the harvest shall stop?*" functions as an ethical warning against unlimited extraction of natural resources, advocating restraint rather than exploitation. Together with *Spoils of the Dead* and *Asking for Roses*, the poem demonstrates that Frost consistently associates feminine ecological values with humility, stewardship, and environmental responsibility. In line with Warren's (2000) ecofeminist philosophy, these poems reject the patriarchal logic of domination and instead promote an ethic of care that recognizes nature as a living community deserving respect, reciprocity, and moral protection.

Women as Protectors and Caretakers of Ecological Life

Robert Frost consistently represents women's ecological agency through feminine values of protection, care, and environmental stewardship. Rather than portraying nature as an object for human

exploitation, his poems construct ecological relationships based on preservation, reciprocity, and ethical responsibility. This pattern appears prominently in *The Tuft of Flowers*, *Gathering Leaves*, and *Asking for Roses*, where flowers, leaves, and gardens are treated as living entities deserving respect regardless of their economic usefulness. Such representations challenge anthropocentric assumptions that value nature only for its material benefits and instead affirm that ecological care is an ethical commitment to sustaining life. From an ecofeminist perspective, these feminine ecological values reflect women's role as protectors and caretakers who nurture ecological continuity rather than dominate the natural world.

In *The Tuft of Flowers*, ecological care is expressed through the mower's deliberate decision to preserve a cluster of wildflowers. Frost writes that "*A leaping tongue of bloom the scythe had spared/Beside a reedy brook the scythe had bared,*" emphasizing that the flowers survive because they are intentionally protected rather than accidentally overlooked. This ethical choice is reinforced when Frost explains that "*The mower in the dew had loved them thus, / By leaving them to flourish, not for us,*" indicating that the flowers are allowed "*to flourish*" without expectation of recognition or personal benefit. Their preservation stems solely from "*sheer morning gladness,*" revealing an ecological ethic grounded in affection rather than utility. A similar attitude appears in *Gathering Leaves*, where the speaker repeatedly acknowledges that the fallen leaves possess "*next to nothing for use*" and "*next to nothing for color,*" yet continues gathering them because "*a crop is a crop.*" Although economically insignificant, the leaves are treated with patience and respect, suggesting that every element of nature possesses intrinsic value. By caring for what appears materially worthless, Frost rejects utilitarian views of nature and instead promotes ecological stewardship based on appreciation, responsibility, and respect for the natural cycle.

The same ethic of care is further developed in *Asking for Roses*, where ecological responsibility is expressed through humility and consent. Before gathering flowers, Mary insists that "*one we must ask if we want any roses,*" emphasizing that human desire alone does not justify taking from nature. Although she recalls Herrick's observation that "*nothing is gained by not gathering roses,*" harvesting remains subject to ethical permission rather

than ownership, culminating in the mysterious mistress who "grants us by silence the boon of her roses." This interaction presents nature as an autonomous participant rather than passive property, reflecting Karen J. Warren's (2000) ecofeminist ethic of care, which rejects the patriarchal logic of domination in favor of reciprocity and contextual responsibility. Across *The Tuft of Flowers*, *Gathering Leaves*, *Asking for Roses*, *Spoils of the Dead*, and *Wind and Window Flower*, Frost consistently portrays women's ecological agency through conservation, environmental stewardship, and the protection of vulnerable life. The preservation of flowers "to flourish," the recognition that "a crop is a crop" despite the leaves' apparent worthlessness, the requirement to "ask" before gathering roses, the fairies' preservation of flowers for others, and the flower's peaceful coexistence with the winter breeze all illustrate that ecological harmony is sustained through care rather than exploitation. Collectively, these poems present feminine ecological values as embodying preservation, reciprocity, and ethical responsibility, anticipating Warren's (2000) ecofeminist vision of harmonious and sustainable relationships between humans and the more-than-human world.

DISCUSSION

The findings reinforce contemporary ecofeminist scholarship by demonstrating that Robert Frost represents women as ecological mediators whose relationships with nature are grounded in care, reciprocity, and ethical responsibility rather than domination. Through figures such as fairies, Mary, and the mysterious mistress, together with feminized natural elements including flowers and butterflies, Frost presents women as guiding respectful interactions between humans and the more-than-human world. This representation is consistent with Karen J. Warren's (2000) ecofeminist philosophy, which advocates replacing hierarchical dualism and the logic of domination with an ethic of care and contextual responsibility. The findings also support previous ecofeminist studies that emphasize relational and reciprocal human-nature relationships (Gaard, 2011; Plumwood, 1993; Sturgeon, 2016). Likewise, Alaimo's (2010) concept of trans-corporeality and Cuomo's (1998) ethics of care reinforce the view that ecological responsibility emerges through interconnectedness, mutual respect, and environmental stewardship rather than human mastery over nature.

The study further shows that Frost portrays women and feminized ecological values as ethical guardians who resist anthropocentric and patriarchal exploitation by promoting conservation, restraint, and ecological responsibility. This finding aligns with Merchant's (1996) argument that ecological ethics require reciprocal relationships between humans and nature, as well as Shiva's (1988) view that women's ecological knowledge is rooted in conservation and sustainability. Similarly, Salleh (2017) emphasizes that women's environmental practices challenge patriarchal models of exploitation, while Estok (2011) and Huggan and Tiffin (2015) argue that literature can promote ecological ethics by critiquing exploitative attitudes. Extending previous ecofeminist scholarship, this study highlights women's ecological agency rather than ecological victimhood. Consistent with Gaard (2017) and Iovino and Oppermann (2014), Frost's poems portray women, flowers, butterflies, and gardens as active ecological agents that collectively foster care, reciprocity, environmental stewardship, and sustainable coexistence between humans and the natural world.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Robert Frost represents women's ecological agency through feminine figures who act as ecological mediators, protectors, and ethical guardians of the natural world. Guided by Karen J. Warren's (2000) ecofeminist philosophy, the findings demonstrate that women promote ecological harmony through care, reciprocity, environmental stewardship, and ethical responsibility while challenging exploitative attitudes toward nature. Rather than portraying women as passive figures, Frost presents them as active ecological subjects whose relationships with the more-than-human world foster sustainability, coexistence, and environmental justice. These findings contribute to ecofeminist literary criticism by emphasizing women's agency as a central force in constructing ethical human–nature relationships and provide a useful framework for integrating ecofeminist perspectives into literary studies and environmental humanities.

This study is limited to five selected poems by Robert Frost and adopts Karen J. Warren's ecofeminist philosophy as its primary analytical

framework. Consequently, the findings reflect only one theoretical perspective and focus exclusively on textual representations without considering historical, biographical, cultural, or reader-response contexts. Future research may examine a broader range of Frost's works or compare his poetry with that of other poets using complementary approaches, such as intersectional ecofeminism, ecocriticism, environmental ethics, or posthumanism, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between gender, nature, and ecological agency in literature.

Suggestions

Future studies may examine a broader selection of Robert Frost's poems or compare his ecological vision with that of other American nature poets using diverse ecofeminist, ecocritical, or environmental humanities approaches. Comparative studies incorporating historical, cultural, and interdisciplinary perspectives could further explore how literary representations of women's ecological agency contribute to contemporary discussions of environmental ethics, sustainability, climate justice, and human-nature relationships.

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