

# Romantic Idealism v/s Modern Realism: Nature in Wordsworth and Frost

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Publication Date: 2026/05/22

**Abstract:** This study explores the evolving concept of nature in English poetry, focusing on the transition from Romanticism to Modernism through the works of William Wordsworth and Robert Frost. Traditionally, nature has been perceived as a harmonious and interconnected system, reflecting philosophical ideas of constant change and scientific perspectives such as Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. It was also regarded as a symbol of divine perfection, though human intervention has increasingly disrupted its balance.

Historical perspectives on nature reveal significant shifts. Medieval thought viewed nature as degraded after humanity's fall, while classical Greek and Roman traditions idealized it. Renaissance writers like William Shakespeare employed vivid natural imagery, and the Enlightenment emphasized scientific inquiry and divine order. Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, celebrated nature as a spiritual and moral force, particularly in response to industrialization.

In contrast, Modernist literature shifted focus toward urban life, while events such as the First World War challenged idealized views of nature. Through comparative analysis, this paper argues that Wordsworth portrays nature as nurturing and spiritually significant, whereas Frost presents it as indifferent and ambiguous. This shift reflects broader cultural and philosophical changes in humanity's relationship with nature.

**Keywords:** Frost, Nature, Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Wordsworth, Concentric Circles, Greek and Roman Literature, Industrialization.

**How to Cite:** Chandra Mukesh Swami (2026) Romantic Idealism v/s Modern Realism: Nature in Wordsworth and Frost. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(5), 1120-1124. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26may517>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nature has long been a central subject in literature, functioning not merely as a backdrop but as a living force through which human identity and experience are shaped. In both poetry and prose, nature serves as setting, temporal marker, and thematic core; however, its role extends far beyond these structural functions. It becomes a medium through which characters align with or struggle against their surroundings, revealing deeper psychological and cultural dimensions. As a cultural product, literature is inevitably shaped by the social, historical, and economic contexts in which it is produced. For instance, eighteenth-century British literature played a significant role in shaping societal values and intellectual thought, while in other contexts, such as

Indonesia, literature has not held the same prominence due to differing historical and educational conditions.

Among modern poets, Robert Frost stands out as one of the most influential figures of twentieth-century American literature. Widely read and deeply appreciated, Frost is particularly known for his nature poetry, largely inspired by his life in rural New England. His national recognition was marked by his invitation to read at a U.S. presidential inauguration, and surveys conducted by Robert Pinsky highlight his enduring popularity. Scholarly engagement with Frost's work has grown steadily, evidenced by the establishment of the Robert Frost Society and academic publications such as the *Robert Frost Review*. Critics have explored his poetic techniques, themes, and philosophical

outlook, particularly emphasizing his complex use of natural symbolism. Rather than presenting nature as a purely aesthetic or descriptive element, Frost often employs it as a symbolic framework to convey deeper spiritual and existential meanings.

The literary tradition of nature poetry can be traced back to classical antiquity. The Greek poet Theocritus pioneered pastoral poetry through idylls that celebrated rural simplicity and harmony. This tradition influenced later works such as "Lycidas" by John Milton. The pastoral mode further evolved through forms like the eclogue, first developed by Virgil, and flourished during the Renaissance with writers such as Dante Alighieri and Francesco Petrarca. In English literature, important contributions include *Arcadia* by Sir Philip Sidney and *The Shepheard's Calendar* by Edmund Spenser, both of which employ natural imagery and seasonal cycles to mirror human emotions and experiences.

The Romantic Movement marked a significant turning point in the literary treatment of nature. Poets such as William Wordsworth elevated nature to a position of spiritual and emotional significance. Wordsworth viewed nature as a guiding, nurturing force that fosters moral growth and self-awareness. His famous assertion that poetry originates from "emotion recollected in tranquility" reflects his belief that close observation of the natural world leads to profound emotional and philosophical insight. This Romantic perspective influenced later writers, including transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau, who also regarded nature as a source of spiritual truth and personal enlightenment.

However, the transition to the Modern period brought a noticeable shift in the perception of nature. While Romantic poets idealized nature as harmonious and benevolent, Modern poets adopted a more complex and often skeptical view. Frost, in particular, portrays nature as neutral, indifferent, and at times even hostile to human concerns. His poetry reflects the uncertainties and ambiguities of the modern world, where nature no longer guarantees comfort or moral guidance. Instead, it becomes a space in which human beings confront isolation, conflict, and existential questions.

As noted by M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, Romantic poets "naturalized the supernatural and humanized the divine," transforming nature into a living, dynamic presence. This insight is essential for understanding the contrast between Wordsworth's idealism and Frost's realism.

This research paper examines the differing representations of nature in the works of Wordsworth and Frost, focusing on the shift from Romantic idealism to Modern realism. Through comparative textual analysis, it explores how changing historical, intellectual, and cultural contexts shaped these contrasting perspectives. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that evolving perceptions of nature reflect

broader transformations in human consciousness and the relationship between humanity and the natural world.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study relies mostly on evaluating previously published works on the subject topic because it is theoretical in nature. Numerous published references on the subject were consulted by the researchers. The internet and other information sources were consulted. Additionally, encyclopedias and specialized literary dictionaries were consulted to gather pertinent data on this topic. Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy evening" and Wordsworth's "I Wondered Lonely as a Cloud" served as examples.

Information about the subject of nature was gathered from well-known websites that focus on literary subjects, including [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org), [archive.thedailystar.net](http://archive.thedailystar.net), [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com), and [www.shmoop.com](http://www.shmoop.com). The researchers thoroughly examined and assessed this data in light of its importance to the study question. The information gathered from one website was contrasted with information found on other literary websites. The researchers then categorized and adopted the information. William Wordsworth's usage of the concept of nature was closely investigated in regard to how English romantic poets used it to generalize, using "I Wondered Lonely as a Cloud" as an example. However, the idea of nature was also thoroughly examined as Robert Frost employed it in the United States. Frost's use of nature was closely analyzed in relation to the use of nature by American poets both before and during his lifetime. Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" served as an example. After then, a close comparison was made between Wordsworth's and Frost's use of nature. There was a significant attempt to find out if America's use of nature was exactly the same as England's. Furthermore, the transcendentalist movement that gained popularity in the United States in the 1840s was strongly linked to the idea of nature in Frost's poetry.

## III. PURPOSE, IMPORTANCE, AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH:

This research aims to investigate the different meanings of the term "nature" while identifying the major similarities and differences in its use in the poetry of William Wordsworth and Robert Frost, focusing on how both poets employ nature in relation to the specified research questions. Nature has long served as a source of inspiration for poets throughout history, even dating back to the Greek and Roman eras, and in modern literary criticism, Frost is often regarded as the American counterpart to Wordsworth due to similarities in poetic style and thematic focus. Therefore, this study is significant as it highlights both convergences and divergences in the poets' attitudes toward nature, helping readers better understand their poetic techniques and perspectives on nature as a timeless source of motivation and creativity. However, the research is limited in scope, as it examines only two poets—Wordsworth

and Frost—and focuses specifically on their interpretations of nature within particular literary and historical contexts. It explores Frost’s depiction of nature in America, considering its possible connection to the Transcendentalism Movement led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and compares this with Wordsworth’s treatment of nature in relation to the English Romantic Movement of the 18th century. Furthermore, the analysis is restricted to only two poems: “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” by Wordsworth and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Frost.

➤ *Romantic Idealism and Nature in Wordsworth’s Poetry: A Research-Based Analysis:*

William Wordsworth’s poetry reflects the core principles of Romantic idealism, particularly in its profound engagement with nature as a spiritual, moral, and emotional force. Within the Romantic tradition, nature is not merely a physical landscape but a dynamic and living presence infused with divine significance. Wordsworth presents nature as a manifestation of a higher spiritual reality, as illustrated in *Tintern Abbey*, where he describes a “sense sublime” that unifies all elements of the natural world, suggesting a pantheistic vision in which God and nature are inseparable. This perspective aligns with critical interpretations such as that of Cleanth Brooks, who argues that Wordsworth’s conception of nature extends beyond the external world to include its transformation through human perception, thereby emphasizing the interconnectedness between mind and environment. Furthermore, Wordsworth elevates nature as a teacher and moral guide, advocating experiential learning over formal education, as seen in *The Tables Turned*, where he encourages readers to “let nature be your teacher.” This reflects the Romantic emphasis on intuition, emotion, and personal experience rather than rationalism, a view supported by Geoffrey Hartman, who characterizes nature in Wordsworth’s poetry as a moral educator whose lessons are internalized through feeling. In addition to its spiritual and moral dimensions, nature in Wordsworth’s work serves a therapeutic function, offering emotional healing and psychological stability. His poetry often depicts natural landscapes as sources of comfort and solace, particularly through memory, a concept highlighted by Helen Vendler, who notes that Wordsworth records the mind’s recovery through remembered nature. This healing aspect can also be understood as part of the broader Romantic reaction against industrialization, with nature providing refuge from the alienation and chaos of urban life. Moreover, Wordsworth envisions a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, asserting that such a connection is essential for both emotional and spiritual well-being, thereby encapsulating the essence of Romantic idealism. More broadly, the Romantic Movement conceptualizes nature in two primary ways: as an extension of human emotion, capable of reflecting and sympathizing with inner states, and as a vessel of divine spirit shared by both humanity and the natural world. This dual perspective is often accompanied by an appreciation for rural life and unspoiled landscapes, alongside a sense of melancholy

arising from the perceived threat of societal and environmental change (Johnson, 2015). In the context of this research, Wordsworth’s attitude toward nature is particularly significant, as he is widely regarded as the father of English Romantic poetry. His work, especially *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), co-authored with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, marks a foundational moment in Romantic literature, emphasizing simplicity, emotional depth, and a close connection to nature. The poems in this collection celebrate the natural world and employ simple, lyrical language reflective of rural life, particularly that of shepherds who maintain an intimate relationship with nature. Wordsworth’s distinctive approach lies in his perception of nature as sacred and instructional, a view that differentiates him from other Romantic poets who, while inspired by him, often treated nature primarily as a source of aesthetic pleasure rather than a profound moral and spiritual guide.

➤ *Modern Realism and the Representation of Nature in Robert Frost’s Poetry:*

Robert Frost’s poetry reflects the principles of Modern realism through its nuanced and often unsettling portrayal of nature as indifferent, ambiguous, and detached from human concerns. Unlike the Romantic idealism of William Wordsworth, Frost presents nature not as a benevolent or guiding force but as an autonomous entity that operates independently of human emotions and moral frameworks. This perspective is evident in poems such as *Design*, where the natural world appears disturbing and raises profound questions about the existence of order or purpose in the universe. Critic Lionel Trilling notably argues that Frost has often been misinterpreted as a simple pastoral poet, whereas his work in fact conveys a deeply “terrifying” vision of existence, thereby underscoring the darker implications embedded within his natural imagery. In this sense, nature in Frost’s poetry does not offer comfort or moral guidance; instead, it reflects a modern worldview shaped by scientific reasoning and philosophical skepticism.

Furthermore, Frost frequently employs natural settings to explore themes of human isolation and existential loneliness. In *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, the speaker is momentarily captivated by the quiet beauty of the woods, yet ultimately chooses to continue his journey, suggesting a tension between the allure of nature and the obligations of human life. As critic Randall Jarrell observes, Frost’s poetry often portrays “the loneliness of the individual in an indifferent universe,” reinforcing the idea that humans are fundamentally separate from the natural world. This depiction aligns with the broader characteristics of Modern realism, where nature is not harmoniously integrated with human experience but instead accentuates feelings of detachment and solitude.

In addition, ambiguity and uncertainty are central features of Frost’s treatment of nature. Unlike Wordsworth, who derives clear spiritual and moral meanings from the

natural world, Frost leaves his interpretations open-ended, transforming nature into a space of inquiry rather than resolution. Critic Frank Lentricchia highlights this aspect by suggesting that Frost's work embodies "a skepticism that resists closure," reflecting the intellectual climate of the modern age in which traditional beliefs are frequently questioned. Consequently, nature in Frost's poetry becomes a medium through which uncertainty and doubt are expressed, rather than clarity and reassurance.

Moreover, Frost adopts a realistic and observational approach to nature, focusing on precise detail rather than emotional idealization. His language is simple, direct, and rooted in everyday experience, yet it carries layers of deeper meaning that reveal the complexity of the natural world. Nature is depicted as unpredictable and indifferent, resisting human attempts to impose order or significance upon it. In conclusion, Frost's representation of nature marks a significant departure from Romantic idealism, presenting instead a modern, realistic perspective in which nature is detached, ambiguous, and reflective of the uncertainties of human existence.

➤ *Comparative Analysis of Nature in the Poetry of Wordsworth and Frost:*

William Wordsworth's poetry reflects the core principles of Romantic idealism through its profound engagement with nature as a spiritual, moral, and emotional force. Within the Romantic tradition, nature is not merely a physical landscape but a living entity infused with divine significance, as illustrated in *Tintern Abbey*, where Wordsworth describes a "sense sublime" that unifies all elements of the natural world and suggests a pantheistic vision in which God and nature are inseparable. Critics such as Cleanth Brooks emphasize that Wordsworth's nature is not simply external reality but a world transformed by human perception, highlighting the interconnectedness between mind and environment. Moreover, Wordsworth elevates nature as a teacher and moral guide, advocating experiential learning over formal education, as seen in *The Tables Turned*, where he urges readers to "let nature be your teacher," reflecting the Romantic emphasis on intuition and emotion rather than rationalism. Geoffrey Hartman further supports this view by describing nature as a moral educator whose lessons are internalized through feeling. In addition, nature in Wordsworth's poetry serves a therapeutic function, offering emotional healing and psychological stability; his depiction of memory as a restorative force is noted by Helen Vendler, who argues that Wordsworth records the mind's recovery through remembered nature. This healing quality also reflects the Romantic response to industrialization, positioning nature as a refuge from urban alienation. Furthermore, Wordsworth envisions a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, asserting that such unity is essential for spiritual and emotional well-being, thereby encapsulating the essence of Romantic idealism. More broadly, Romanticism conceptualizes nature both as an extension of human emotion and as a vessel of

divine spirit, often accompanied by an appreciation for rural life and a sense of melancholy over the loss of natural simplicity. Wordsworth's contribution is particularly significant, as he is regarded as the father of English Romantic poetry, and his work *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), co-authored with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and marks a foundational moment in Romantic literature through its emphasis on simplicity, emotional depth, and close connection to nature.

In contrast, Robert Frost's attitude toward nature differs significantly from that of English Romantic poets, including Wordsworth, despite certain surface similarities. Frost's perspective, as illustrated in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, reflects the influence of the Transcendentalist movement associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson, in which nature is linked to spiritual and metaphysical contemplation. While Frost, like the Romantics, appreciates the beauty of nature, his treatment is more complex and often introduces darker or more ambiguous undertones. In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker acknowledges the woods as "lovely, dark and deep," yet emphasizes his obligations and the journey ahead before death, thereby connecting nature with themes of mortality, duty, and the afterlife. This suggests that, for Frost, nature is not merely a source of inspiration or harmony but also a space for reflection on existential realities. Such a perspective aligns with Transcendentalist ideas that view nature as a medium for exploring deeper spiritual truths, while also incorporating elements influenced by Biblical thought.

A direct comparison between Wordsworth and Frost reveals both similarities and fundamental differences in their treatment of nature. Wordsworth, consistent with English Romanticism, views nature as a source of beauty, inspiration, and moral instruction, as demonstrated in *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*, where natural imagery inspires poetic creativity and emotional uplift. He regards nature as sacred and as an effective teacher that imparts wisdom and shapes human character. Frost, on the other hand, while acknowledging the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of nature, approaches it with greater ambiguity and philosophical depth. Nature in Frost's poetry often becomes a medium for meditation on life, death, and the human condition, rather than a purely harmonious or idealized force. His perspective reflects a blend of Transcendentalist influence and religious thought, presenting nature as both inviting and mysterious, beautiful yet potentially unsettling. In conclusion, while both poets recognize the significance of nature as a source of inspiration and reflection, Wordsworth idealizes it as a benevolent, guiding force, whereas Frost presents it as a more complex and introspective domain, thereby highlighting a shift from Romantic idealism to a more modern, contemplative understanding of the natural world.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In light of the research questions addressed in this study, several significant conclusions can be drawn regarding the concept of nature and its representation in the poetry of William Wordsworth and Robert Frost. First, the term “nature” does not possess a fixed or universal meaning; rather, its significance has evolved across different historical periods and cultural contexts. From its early interpretations in the Greek and Roman eras to its Romantic and modern redefinitions, nature has continuously undergone semantic transformation. This study has demonstrated how nature was central to English Romantic poetry, particularly in the works of Wordsworth, and how its interpretation shifted within the American literary context, especially in the poetry of Frost.

Second, Wordsworth’s attitude toward nature reflects the core ideals of Romanticism, where nature is perceived as a profound source of inspiration, beauty, and emotional connection. For Wordsworth, nature is not only aesthetically pleasing but also spiritually enriching and intellectually instructive. He envisions a deep, intimate bond between humans and the natural world, regarding it as a moral guide and a teacher capable of shaping human character and understanding. This perspective is largely shared by other English Romantic poets such as Blake, Shelley, and Keats, who similarly viewed nature as a primary source of poetic inspiration and emotional fulfillment.

Third, Frost’s attitude toward nature differs considerably and can be understood in relation to the influence of Transcendentalism, particularly the ideas associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson. While Frost appreciates and frequently incorporates nature into his poetry, he approaches it as a medium for meditation and philosophical reflection rather than as a purely harmonious or nurturing force. Nature, in Frost’s work, becomes a space for contemplating deeper existential questions, including life, death, and the possibility of an afterlife. His perspective reflects a more complex and modern understanding of nature, one that integrates spiritual inquiry with ambiguity and realism.

Finally, although both Wordsworth and Frost assign great importance to nature, their interpretations reveal fundamental differences shaped by their respective literary movements and philosophical influences. Wordsworth idealizes nature as a benevolent, inspiring, and instructive force that nurtures imagination and fosters a harmonious relationship with humanity. In contrast, Frost presents nature as a more ambiguous and introspective domain, often associated with spiritual contemplation and existential uncertainty. Thus, this comparative analysis highlights a broader shift from Romantic idealism to Modern realism, demonstrating how changing intellectual and cultural contexts influence literary representations of the natural world.

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