ORDER AND BEAUTY: ROBINSON JEFFERS' VIEW OF MAN

William Steimer
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The social pessimism, the total rejection of society, expressed in the poetry of Robinson Jeffers often causes a feeling of revulsion on the part of the casual reader. Here, it seems, is a poet who complains constantly about the evil, degraded, self-destructive nature of man in society, who sees mankind as ugly, vicious, and cruel, but who seemingly does not offer a solution to, or a resolution of, the problem he states. The casual reader may, as did the writer of this paper, begin to wonder why Jeffers, who, at least according to his social views, hated life so much, did not escape life by choosing death—committing suicide.

The philosophy expressed in the poetry, however, is much broader than such casual reading would suggest. Jeffers offers more than mere disgust at society. He speaks of man not merely in relation to civilized society, but in relation to the entire natural universe. He sees man not as the central focus of this universe, but simply as a rather small part of it. Jeffers' approach to the solution of the conflict of society with itself hinges on his view that man is not the most important part of the universe—in fact, that man is not necessary to the universe at all. Man may, however, through assuming his proper minor role in the universe, live as a harmonious part of the universal nature.
If the reader does not allow the probable initial revulsion against Jeffers' social pessimism to interfere with the poet's system of values, he can examine the philosophy of Robinson Jeffers in somewhat broader scope and reach a deeper understanding of the poet's expressed ideas and values.

Probably the most well-known, the most outstanding, concept in Jeffers' philosophy is his contempt for civilized society. He perceives society as both a symptom and a cause of the corrupted nature of mankind. Society symbolized as a net, or web, is a constantly recurring idea in the poetry. The net restrains man from realizing his natural freedom. Almost all Jeffers' characters are destroyed by the societal net; a very small number escape it briefly; only a select handful escape fully. This last group, those characters who are for Jeffers the fullest and most complete expression of his philosophy, will be treated later; the more typical characters, those of the first two groups, are discussed here in order to demonstrate Jeffers' view of corrupted mankind and the corrupting influence of society.

One of the best-known poems is the "Humanist's Tragedy," ¹ Jeffers modeled this narrative on Euripides' drama, the Bacchae. In Euripides' version Pentheus is destroyed because he refuses to admit the divinity of Dionysus. In Jeffers' version, Pentheus

is destroyed not because he refuses to admit the existence of a being supreme over humanity, but because he asserts the supremacy of humanity in the universe—man does not attempt merely to deny a god, but to be a god. Jeffers, of course, attacks the Greek idea of humanism. Love for humanity, he says, leads to anthropocentrism and denies man's proper position in the universal nature. Man is not naturally supreme in the universe; he has a small place in it and should attempt no more than to fulfill properly that rightful place. Jeffers' opposition to humanism, the assertion of universal human supremacy, makes the title of his version of Euripides' play especially significant: the poem demonstrates the tragedy resulting from a too-great love of humanity.

In Jeffers' version, the reader is first introduced to King Pentheus, the "humanist" of the title. Pentheus, throughout the poem, reasserts his view of the dignity of mankind. He repeats this belief in the dignity of himself and of his society often enough, however, that the reader begins to feel that the king is not fully sure of this dignity, but that he is trying, through repetition of the idea, to convince himself of it. Jeffers describes Pentheus in the beginning of the poem as being "Not like a beast borne on the flood of passion, boat without oars, but mindful of all his dignity/ As a human being, a king and a Greek."¹ Jeffers uses the rest of the narrative

to show what happens to the man holding this view. Pentheus receives word of a Dionysian revel taking place at Cythaeron, and the drunken participants are seen as a threat to the security of his Thebes. Pentheus at this point feels like a master of all human situations, feels that his eminent sanity can overcome any departure from orderliness. His mother, Agave, is one of the revelers, so that Pentheus immediately hurries to Cythaeron with the purpose of "rescuing" his mother and chastising the revelers.

Arrived at Cythaeron, Pentheus first observes the revel from a hidden position. He looks upon the celebration as beastlike; the revelers forget the "dignity of mankind," their powers and his for intellectual mastery of the universe, even for a brief control of human fate. Even at this point, however, Pentheus is bothered by what man's power and dignity are for. He opposes this pleasure because it denies his view of the dignity and integrity of mankind.

The revelers, on the other hand, are deliriously happy, and apparently much more sure of their positions than the king is of his. They have discovered, they cry, a taste of the nature of themselves and of things—"... we have found an opening"¹ (in the societal net), if only for a brief time, if only until the wine wears off.

Pentheus cannot understand this view; he wants to punish the revelers. He expresses in his thoughts at this point the humanist upward-spiral view of man's society (he is better, saner, more dignified than his reveling mother). He here makes definition of his belief that the final end of being is "To increase the power, collectedness and dignity of man." Yet he admits here that death always wipes out any possibility for individual human accomplishment. This intrusion of death into his thoughts foreshadows his final downfall.

Dionysus, leader of the revelers, provides the opposite view to the king's fear of death. "'When you are dead you become part of peace; let no man/ Dream more of death . . .'" But one must lose Pentheus' idealistic individualism, one's individual pride, in order to become a part of this peace. In life on the other hand, says Dionysus, it is possible to break the prison (web) of self, of self-love: it is possible to "' . . . enter the nature of things and use the beauty'" through revelry, art, love, self-torture, religion, and contemplation.

The items in this list have very special definitions in Jeffers, however. The reader must reserve judgment on the statement until the variant definitions are more clearly understood in the light of Jeffers' own system of values.

The rest of the story is well-known. Pentheus seeks his

2Ibid., p. 125.
3Ibid., p. 125.
mother among the revelers. Agave sees him as a lion. Jeffers describes in horrible detail the revelers' attack on Pentheus and his dismemberment. They carry his head with them on their way back to Thebes. Pentheus the king is destroyed by his love of humanity.¹

Humanity does not only destroy that overwhelming proportion of its members who are unable to escape the net of society, however, it even destroys outside itself, destroys things in the natural world which are to Jeffers far more important and far more beautiful. One of the longer narratives in his early work by which Jeffers' reputation as a major American poet first began to be recognized is "Roan Stallion."² Here Jeffers demonstrates the confusing and corrupting values of society as destroying a wild, free horse man attempted to tame—a thing rightly belonging to nature.

And he (Jeffers) loves nature, wild nature. In this he is more like a primitive American than a modern man—like the Indian who climbed Chief Mountain to be alone and see visions, or the early white hunters who went west because they loved land and animals without humanity.³

In "Roan Stallion," confusion in the mind of the protagonist stems from the conflict of primitive, naturalistic religion with

¹"Humanist's Tragedy,"


Dora struggles back to her starting point on the edge of the river. Here California assumes the Christian identity, the veneer of a civilized religion which is the other half of her ancestry. She prays to the "'dear baby Jesus born to-night,'" and asks for his aid in getting safely home to her own child. California has impressionistic illusions of light, of bright color: "the gentle thunder of water was noise of wing-feathers, the fans of paradise lifting softly." She envisions the Christ-child, but the vision is not wholly Christian. Pagan religious symbolism infuses her mental image of the Nativity.

The child afloat on radiance had a baby face, but the angels had birds' heads, hawks' heads, Bending over the baby, weaving a web of wings about him. He held in the small fat hand A little snake with golden eyes, and California could see clearly on the under radiance The mare's pricked ears, a sharp black fork against the shining light-fall.

Animal worship dates back even to prehistoric times. The image of angels with the heads of animals may remind the reader of the prehistoric cave paintings found in France, which are believed to have had religious significance.

Here, then, is the religious conflict in California. She cannot separate naturalistic pagan animal-worship from civilized Christian legend. The thin coating of Christianity to which she has been exposed begins to wear off—the unconscious paganism

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1"Stallion," p. 16.
2Ibid., p. 16.
3Ibid., p. 16.
is brought to light by the emotional intensity of her situation.

Dora again pulls the buggy back to the starting-point. California is almost overcome by the intensity of her emotions, but somehow manages to unharness the horse, bundle the toys and whiskey over her back, and ride Dora Indian-fashion across the flooded ford. Jeffers creates striking images to describe this last effort of horse and woman to reach the opposite side of the river:

... the shock of the fore-hooves
Striking bottom, the struggle and surging life of the haunches. She felt the water streaming off her
From the shoulders down; heard the great strain and sob of the mare's breathing, heard the horseshoes grind on gravel.\(^1\)

California arrives home, finds her husband in a drunken sleep, and prepares the Christmas presents for her child.

After this experience, California is much more aware of the presence of the roan stallion. She tries to see the stallion as a symbol of her husband's economic stupidity—"Horses were too cheap to breed."\(^2\) But, unconsciously at least, California's feelings are quite different. The horse is wild; he is a symbol of strong, free nature. He should not be degraded by mankind by being restrained and serving the greed of civilization. California, understanding with the deeper, pagan impulses that are the truer values in her unconscious thoughts, secretly wishes

\(^1\)"Stallion," p. 17.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 18.
that the roan stallion ". . . could range in freedom,/ Shaking
the red-roan mane for a flag on the bare hills."¹

Pagan beliefs manifest themselves later, in April, when
the stallion is being bred for the first time. California wants
to watch, but instead stays in the house to comfort her fretful
child. She tries to explain to Christine the miracle of the
ford in purely Christian terms. She is unable to do so. After
she mentions the vision of the Christ-child, she says

"His mother was named Mary: we pray to her too:
God came to her. He was not the child of a man
Like you or me. God was his father: she was the
stallion's wife--what did I say--God's wife. . . ."²

California becomes fully aware of the conflicting impulses at
this point, and begins to be torn between the naturalistic and
the civilized religions. She tries to describe the Christian
God to the child:

". . . He lives
Up high, over the stars; he ranges on the bare
blue hill of the sky." In her mind a picture
Flashed, of the red-roan mane shaken out for a flag
on the bare hills, and she said quickly, "He's more
Like a great man holding the sun in his hand." Her
mind giving her words the lie, "But no one
Knows, only the shining and the power. The power,
the terror, the burning fire covered her over. . . ."³

She begins to confuse not only the stallion with the Christian
God, but herself with Mary:

¹"Stallion, p. 18.
²Ibid., p. 18.
³Ibid., p. 18.
"She loved, she was not afraid of the hooves--
Hands that had made the hills and sun and moon,
and the sea and the great redwoods, the terrible
strength,
She gave herself without thinking."¹

Throughout her talk with the child, California is painfully
aware of the stallion and the mare outside her door; she is
torn by a desire to watch and the need to stay away.

... Three times she
had walked to the door, three times returned,
And now the hand that had thrice hung on the knob,
full of prevented action, twisted the cloth
Of the child's dress that she had been mending.
"Oh, oh, I've torn it." She struck at the child
and then embraced her
Fiercely, the small blonde sickly body.²

Johnny leaves after the mare is bred, to go after the barrel
of wine which he is taking in partial payment for the use of
the stallion.

At this point, Jeffers himself breaks into the dramatic
narrative to speak his own mind. He states that humanity, the
love of mankind for itself, is the concept from which man must
break away. Humanism is tragic; loyalty to civilization and
society keeps man from realizing his true natural role in the
universe. Society robs man of freedom. Man attempts, through
scientific knowledge, to conquer nature, and thereby to deify
himself. But, for Jeffers, man cannot create God in his own
image. The true God is nature itself--nothing man can know or
attempt can alter this fact. Humanity is a small part of the

¹"Stallion, pp. 18-19.

²Ibid., p. 19.
universal nature.

... what is humanity in this cosmos? For him [Jeffers' nature-God], the last
least taint of a trace in the dregs of the solution;
for itself, the mould to break away from, the coal
to break into fire, the atom to be split.

California is a specific example of the problem Jeffers states.
She is a part of civilized society. She is a wife and a mother.
Even though her husband is an extremely degraded excuse for a
human being, she feels a responsibility toward him growing out
of the values of civilized society. She is not however, totally
civilized. There is something in her that feels an affinity
not for society but for the wildness and freedom of nature
without civilization. The vaguely remembered pagan values will
force her to attempt to break away from humanity, to experience
the beauty and power of nature. The roan stallion symbolizes
that strength and beauty. Society has taken natural freedom
from the horse and attempted to use the animal for "civilized"
purposes. California desires freedom for the animal, as well
as for herself. She must choose between natural freedom and
her responsibilities to society.

Her husband gone, California leaves the house at night.
She wants to recapture the Christian vision which she experienced
at the crossing of the ford. At least, she tries to believe
that she is retaining a Christian identity; she cannot, however,
deny her inclinations toward the natural deity.

She had seen Christ in the night at Christmas. The hills were shining open to the enormous night of the April moon: empty and empty. The vast round backs of the bare hills? If one should ride up high might not the Father himself be seen brooding his night, cross-legged, chin in hand, squatting on the last dome? More likely leaping the hills, shaking the red-roan mane for a flag on the bare hills.\textsuperscript{1}

She tries to find the old mare Dora first, but Johnny has taken that horse. She finds the roan stallion—the wild, proud strength of free nature.

The dark strength of the stallion had heard her coming; she heard him blow the shining air out of his nostrils, she saw him in the white lake of moonlight move like a lion along the timbers of the fence, shaking the nightfall of the great mane.\textsuperscript{2}

California is not afraid of the stallion; she is overcome by his beauty. "Riding the savage and exultant strength of the world,\textsuperscript{3} she guides the horse to the top of a hill. The horse is transformed into God by her passion. She begs the horse for the mystical sexual possession of her that will enable her to transcend her humanity, to enter the freedom of nature.

Two figures on the shining hill, woman and stallion, she kneeling to him, brokenly adoring. He cropping the grass, shifting his hooves, or lifting the long head to gaze over the world, tranquil and powerful. She prayed aloud, "O God, I am not good enough, O fear, O strength, I am draggled."

\textsuperscript{1}\textit{Stallion}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{2}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 21.
\textsuperscript{3}\textit{Ibid.}, p. p. 23.
Johnny and other men have had me, and 0 clean
power! Here am I," she said, falling before him,
And crawled to his hooves. She lay a long while,
as if asleep, in reach of the fore-hooves,
weeping. He avoided
Her head and the prone body. He backed at first;
but later plucked the grass that grew by her
shoulder.1

California is overcome by her visions at this point. She
is intensely aware of her own humanity, yet she is able to see
that humanity in the same light in which Jeffers himself views
it. She sees humanity as conquered by itself; she sees the
"racial myths," one of which is Christianity, which are the
"phantom rulers" of humanity,

That without being are yet more real than what they
are born of, and without shape, shape that which
makes them;
The nerves and the flesh go by shadowlike, the limbs
and the lives shadowlike, these shadows remain,
these shadows
To whom temples, to whom churches, to whom labors
and war, visions and dreams are dedicate... 2

After her mystical experience, California returns home.
Her husband is almost intolerable to her now. The next night
he is drunk. To escape his presence, California leaves the
house. Her husband sees her departure as an invitation to a
sexual romp, and he chases her. California goes inside the
corral where the stallion is kept; Johnny follows her there.
Christine hears the cries of the stallion, the barking of the
dog, her father's cries. She is worried and drags Johnny's

1"Stallion," p. 23.
2Ibid., p. 24.
rifle to her mother. California first shoots the dog who is irritating the stallion. The horse has already felled Johnny, who is attempting to crawl out of the corral. With the irritating dog dead, the stallion again attacks California’s husband. She watches, resting the rifle on the ground, while the stallion kills Johnny—"hooves left nothing alive but teeth tore up the remnant."\(^1\) After she is sure her husband is destroyed, California shoots the stallion:

\[\ldots\text{then California moved by some obscure human fidelity}
\]
\[\text{Lifted the rifle. Each separate nerve-cell of her brain flaming the stars fell from their places}
\]
\[\text{Crying in her mind: she fired three times before the haunches crumpled sidewise, the forelegs stiffening,}
\]
\[\text{And the beautiful strength settled to earth: she turned then on her little daughter the mask of a woman}
\]
\[\text{Who has killed God}.\(^2\)
\]

California has discovered Jeffers’ true God; however, she is unable to escape the net of mankind’s restraining society.

California destroys something beautiful out of fealty to humanity, even though she is made aware that humanity is not supreme in the universe; Pentheus destroys himself without ever realizing that his destruction is due to love of humanity. But a human being, for Jeffers, is not an evil being by nature; even masses of people could be, and, in certain historical cases, were, good—that is, they were not, by nature of their humanity,

\(^1\)"Stallion," p. 27.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 28.
a destructive force in the universal nature. The question then arises: If Jeffers finds man neither evil nor good, why does he view civilization pessimistically? The answer to the question lies not in mankind, an objective part of the universe in Jeffers' terms, but in the way man has developed his society. It is society, and man's behavior in society, that Jeffers finds contemptible. Man in society attempts to upset the natural order of universal nature by making himself the supreme being in the universe. But man is only a minor part of the universe, and the unmistakable fact, for Jeffers, is that nature is the deity, not man. In order to consider himself supreme in the universe, then, man must deny the natural order, and turn away from the natural deity and into himself. This turning into the self, this introversion, is the fault in man which gives rise to all his destructive power. Man must tear down that which is naturally good in order to attain a supreme place—he must destroy God in order to become God. It is this unnatural egocentrism of man in society that Jeffers despises.

In his poetry, Jeffers symbolizes mankind's introversion by using the theme of incest. As man's introversion stems from a love of humanity that denies universal nature, so sexual love between brother and sister is unnatural and ultimately destructive. Incest is an obvious theme in another of Jeffers'

best-known narratives, "Tamar." Incest occurs on several levels in the poem. Tamar is the daughter of a very strange family which lives almost isolated on the California coast. The family is composed of five people. David Cauldwell, Tamar's father, is a man who has suffered guilt for forty years because of his youthful incestuous relationship with his long-dead sister Helen, Tamar's aunt. David Cauldwell's guilt has driven him to the brink of insanity. He reads his Bible constantly, and he fatalistically quotes the Bible whenever new sins are visited on his house, yet despite his years of penance he can feel no forgiveness for his sin. Another of David's sisters, Stella, is also insane. She is a mystic visionary who enters trances, a medium through whom the voices of the dead speak to the living. Her insanity is also a result of the guilt in the house. She is aware of the incest between her brother and her sister. Another sister is Jinny, an idiot, a forty-year-old woman with an infant mind. She is, however, a voice of the past—she blurts out the events of her childhood, including the incest of David and Helen, to which she was a witness. The younger generation of the family consists of Tamar and her brother Lee.

At the beginning of the poem, Lee nearly dies when the horse he is riding falls over a cliff. His recovery brings about a huge change in his character. He gives up the wickedness of his younger days and becomes a lover of nature, determined to devote

1Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, pp. 105-169.
his life to the work of the farm and to the natural beauty which abounds on the California coast. His downfall is his failure to escape from the infecting microcosmic web of society of which his guilt-ridden family is a symbol. He becomes further entangled in the web of guilt when his sister seduces him. This unnatural love, this further introversion of a family into itself, is the central focus of the narrative— the sin of the father is visited on the children, and there is no escape.

The sexual relationship between Lee and Tamar continues, and Tamar becomes pregnant. Her guilt and fear drive her to action: she seduces a former suitor in order to name him father of her unborn child. She attempts to discover a solution to her feelings of guilt by talking to her father's dead sister Helen through the medium Stella. The dead spirits come to life for Tamar on the cliffs of the California coast.

When Tamar announces, through Stella, that she wishes to talk to Helen, the spirits refuse her. Even the dead have not found the peace which Tamar seeks. The spirit of an old Indian demands that the pregnant Tamar dance naked for the members of his dead tribe—a ritual of his own civilization. Her dance will appeal to his own false gods, will please them. Tamar refuses; she wants only to talk to her aunt. Yet the spirits will not be denied. Tamar

... danced naked on the shore
Where a pale couch of sand covered the rocks,
Danced with slow steps and streaming hair,
Dark and slender
Against the pallid sea-gleam, slender and maidenly
Dancing and weeping...
It seemed to her that all her body
Was touched and troubled with polluting presences
Invisible, and whatever had happened to her from her two lovers
She had been until that hour inviolately a virgin,
Whom how the desires of dead men and dead Gods and a dead tribe
Used for their common prey . . . dancing and weeping,
Slender and maidenly . . . The chant was changed,
And Tamar's body responded to the change, her spirit wailing within her. She heard the brutal voice
And hated it, she heard old Jinny mimic it
In the cracked childish quaver, but all her body
Obeyed it, wakening into wantonness,
Kindling with lust and wilder
Coarseness of insolent gestures,
The senses cold and averse, but the frantic too-governable flesh
Inviting the assaults of whatever desired it, of dead men
Or Gods walking the tide-marks,
The beautiful girlish body as gracile as a maiden's gone beastlike, crouching and widening,
Agape to be entered, as the earth
Gapes with harsh heat-cracks, the inland adobe of sun-worn valleys
At the end of summer
Opening sick mouths for its hope of the rain,
So her body gone mad
Invited the spirits of the night . . .

Tamar is damned in life because she has committed an unnatural sin; yet her mystical rape by "a God or a troop of Gods" demonstrates that even death can bring no freedom and no peace to her—she is rejected and shamed by death as well as life. Helen speaks to her, rejecting with finality Tamar's desparate attempt to obtain peace from the dead and adding further punishment for Tamar's sin.

1"Tamar," pp. 129-130.
2Ibid., p. 130.
"Tamar, the child will die, and all for nothing
You were submissive by the river, and lived, and
endured fouling.
I have heard wiser flights
Of better spirits, that beat up the breasts and shoulders
of our
Father above the star-fire;
Say, 'Sin never buys anything.'"1

But Tamar, having defied natural laws of the living, attempts
to transcend them even further—she will defy the dead: "It
will live, and my father's/ Bitch be proved a liar."2 She tries
to shame the dead as they have shamed her. They are disgusting,
they are polluted with worms and maggots, they are totally
horrible. Further, she tries to demonstrate that she is capable
even of controlling her own fate. Before coming to the cliffs
she has set a fire which will destroy her evil house and cleanse
her of her sins. She is attempting to be God by being supreme
over the living and the dead. She cannot succeed. Helen tells
her that the fire she has set will be discovered and extinguished
by Lee. Tamar becomes more desperate. She tries to defy the
entire universe, and after her speech she turns her back on the
dead spirits and ignores them.

Her punishment must come now. Nature attacks her; with
much pain and intense suffering, Tamar suffers a spontaneous
abortion. Jeffers' true Deity speaks to her through Stella:

..."It was no good to do too soon, your
fire's out, you'd been patient for me
It might have saved two fires."3

1"Tamar," p. 131.
2Ibid., p. 131.
3Ibid., p. 135.
Tamar asks, "What are you, what are you, mocking me?"/ More dirt and another dead man?"\(^1\) Jeffers' God replies:

"Not a voice from carrion. Breaker of trees and father of grass, shepherd of clouds and waters, if you had waited for me You'd be the luckier."\(^2\)

Tamar is now totally alone. She has been rejected by the living, by the dead, even by the natural deity; she is now a being apart from the entire universe. But the infinite magnitude of her sin brings her to a kind of peace, because she realizes that her condition is now utterly hopeless. She must die, but her defiance of the universe will not let her do so until she has destroyed the evil house which she holds responsible for her condition.

She is brought back to the house by Stella, where she begins to recover. Tamar is determined to let the members of her family destroy themselves by their own evil. Lee has enlisted in the army, and Tamar interprets his action as a desire to escape from his sexual desire for her to "lust for the taste of a French woman."\(^3\) She tempts her father's lust, too, by equating herself in his sick mind with his sister Helen. After his temptation, she denies his feeble advances; she has proven that the evil in him has not been lessened by his forty years of Bible reading and penance. Afterwards, her father is a completely broken man,

\(^1\)"Tamar," p. 135.
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 135.
\(^3\)Ibid., p. 152.
ready to be destroyed. She entices Will Andrews, the suitor she seduced, into the house. Lee's jealousy overcomes him, and he stabs Andrews. Tamar brings to light that the reason Stella has stayed in the house is that she, too, is tortured by a sexual desire for her brother, but that she is simply too timid to have admitted it. When Stella's lust is brought to light, she is broken as her brother has been. She loses track of the idiot sister Jinny, who plays with a candle and sets the house afire. When the house is burning, no one can escape. Tamar will not let Lee go, David Cauldwell wants to die, Andrews lies dead, Stella is too grief-stricken by the uncovering of her long-hidden guilt to be aware of the fire, and the idiot Jinny is a "blackened morsel on the floor."¹ The house and its people are destroyed; only nature endures it and reclaims its offal:

Grass grows where the flame flowered;
A hollowed lawn strewn with a few black stones
And the brick of broken chimneys; all about there
The old trees, some of them scarred with fire,
endure the sea wind.²

For Jeffers, the Cauldwell family is a microcosm. The house is isolated, severed from relation with the rest of the world because of the introversive nature of the family, a family that is related only to itself, not to the universe. The social entanglement brought on by the introversive nature of the Cauldwell family and its guilt can only lead to violence and brutality and

¹"Tamar," p. 168.
²Ibid., p. 169.
destruction. Turned away from the universal nature that is for Jeffers the ultimate good, society can only further enmesh itself in the social web, just as incestuous relationships in the Cauldwell leads to highly-wrought conflicts between its members.

The "unnatural" connotation of the sin of incest equates with the "unnatural" sin of introversion that man commits in society. "Jeffers' painful motifs of introversion are intended as racial symbols of the same evil on a broader and more fatal plane that of civilization turning in upon itself."¹ Man must turn away from the "natural" deity in order to set himself up as an "unnatural" deity. Tamar defied God and attempted to control the universe she knew. She was unable to succeed; the true god of the universe--nature--attacked her and destroyed her with her family. For Jeffers, the desires for supremacy of man in society cannot succeed either. In order to be supreme in the universe, man must deny God, and that denial is to Jeffers an unforgiveable crime.

The result of man's attempt for supremacy in the universe is violence, and that violence is one of the most striking elements in Jeffers' poetry. A few critics of Jeffers' poetry find his concentration on violence, pain, and suffering a repulsive quality, but they base this criticism on divergent bases.

M. L. Rosenthal,\(^1\) for example, states that Jeffers is overcommitted to his art. He finds that the characters and the premises in two poems already mentioned, "Tamar" and "Roan Stallion," will not support the extreme brutality and sexuality which Jeffers describes. In other words, Rosenthal seems to feel that such characters as California and Tamar, who are simply two young women who are native Californians, could neither project, nor be subjected to, all the intense pain and suffering Jeffers' poetry suggests.\(^2\) Another critic, Horace Gregory,\(^3\) believes that Jeffers' tendency to concentrate on violent action leads to an artistic imbalance which is disgusting to the reader:

Jeffers desire to deal solely with the elemental passions tends to mislead the reader into the colder regions of hell which are a paradox of romantic agony: the reader is repelled.\(^4\)

Gregory also feels that the preponderance of violent imagery leads to an arid humorlessness, so that the reader becomes bogged down in unrelieved intense imagery.\(^5\)

But other critics view Jeffers' insistence on the dominance of violence in his poetry differently. They discover various reasons for Hildeg![image]aarde Flanner's observation that


\(^{2}\)Ibid., pp. 156-57.


\(^{4}\)Ibid., p. 80.

\(^{5}\)Ibid.
Unless we except the tragic but gentle character of "The Loving Shepherdess," and to a lesser degree "Dear Judas," all his themes are of vehemence, intense and frequently frustrated passion, perversion, bitter introspection...1

The critics who find violence in Jeffers' poetry a positive quality tend to agree that times of violence and intense passion are the truest and the most meaningful events in human existence, and that since Jeffers is an artist, he will naturally be most concerned with such experience.

We are not, of course, to take Jeffers with perfect literalness; we are not to suppose that the inhabitants of Carmel spend their time in bestiality and incest, torture and self-torture. Jeffers chooses his events not because they are representative in any statistical sense, but because they do symbolize what seem to him the significant and revealing moments of human life.2

Vernon Loggins3 also praises Jeffers' adherence to his own esthetic principles when he discusses the artistic value of Jeffers' work in comparison to that of Thomas Hardy.

It might be said that in "Tamar" Jeffers began where Hardy left off--with the scene in "Jude the Obscure" in which Sue finds the bodies of the three dead children hanging in the closet. Jeffers' pessimistic outlook on life is Hardy's. But he has gone deeper into human suffering than Hardy dared to go. He is more startlingly dramatic, more primitively poetic, and more excruciatingly exciting...4

1Flanner, p. 125.


4Ibid., p. 65.
Yet Jeffers' use of violent imagery and of intense personal
conflict and suffering reflects not only his artistic viewpoint
but his own view of values in human life as well:

He is unlike most of us in his view of
happiness. Most people, I think he would say,
want easy pleasure and drowsy happiness. But
real fulfillment is not pleasure: it is some­
thing more powerful. Effort and suffering are
more natural than rest and enjoyment. Pain
lasts longer and is more real than pleasure.¹

Jeffers himself is probably most qualified to answer those who
criticize the violent intensity of his poetry. His short poem,
"Self-criticism in February,"² provides such an answer.

The bay is not blue but sombre yellow
With wrack from the battered valley, it is
speckled with violent foam-heads
And tiger-striped with long lovely storm-shadows.
You love this better than the other mask;
    better eyes than yours
Would feel the equal beauty in the blue.
It is certain you have loved the beauty of
storm disproportionately.
But the present time is not pastoral, but founded
On violence, pointed for more massive violence:
    perhaps it is not
Perversity but need that perceives the storm-beauty.
Well, bite on this: Your poems are too full
    of ghosts and demons,
And people like phantoms--how often life's are--
And passion so strained that the clay mouths go
    praying for destruction--
Alas, it is not unusual in life;
To every soul at some time. But why insist on it?
And now
For the worst fault: you have never mistaken
Demon nor passion nor idealism for the real God.
Then what is most disliked in those verses
Remains most true. Unfortunately. If only you could sing
That God is love, or perhaps that social
Justice will soon prevail. I can tell lies in prose.³

¹Highe, p. 27.
²Selected Poetry, p. 501.
³Ibid.
Jeffers' expression of the violence of society was an honest expression of human life as he viewed it. Discussing his own poetic principles in his introduction to _The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers_, he states:

Another formative principle came to me from a phrase of Nietzsche's: "The poets? The poets lie too much." I was nineteen when the phrase stuck in my mind; a dozen years passed before it worked effectively, and I decided not to tell lies in verse. Not to feign any emotion that I did not feel; not to pretend to believe in optimism or pessimism, or irreversible progress; not to say anything because it was popular, or generally accepted, or fashionable in intellectual circles, unless I myself believed it; and not to believe easily.  

But the desire of a human being to turn himself away from the universal nature and to deify himself in defiance of the natural divinity does not only lead to minor violent incidents involving small groups of people, as is the case with the Cauldwell family, California, or King Pentheus. Violence and destruction is a tendency which is traceable throughout the history of mankind, and the desire for power and dominance has infected whole civilizations. Jeffers recast Aeschylus’ version of the Agamemnon-Clytemnestra legend into his own terms in "The Tower Beyond Tragedy." Clytemnestra in Jeffers’ version is seen as killing Agamemnon for two major reasons other than Agamemnon’s sacrifice of the daughter Iphigenia. First, she

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1. Selected Poetry, xv.

2. Roen Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, pp. 29-32.
is desirous of the power over the city of Argos that will result when King Agamemnon is murdered and her young son Orestes becomes king. Second, Clytemnestra's maneuverings are a sexual struggle—with Agamemnon dead, she can make her lover and cousin, Aegisthus, her husband. The two reasons for Clytemnestra's actions then are in Jeffers' terms the major reasons for the violent action of civilization that is responsible for the destructive nature of society—power and sexual dominance.

But another of Jeffers' poems, "Dear Judas," modeled on the Biblical story of Judas' betrayal of Christ, generalizes even further Jeffers' view of societal conflict stemming from the desire for universal power. Christ is the figure who desires power in "Dear Judas;" however, in attaining this power, he need only pander to the lusts of a society entrapped in its own social web.

All the characters, except Lazarus, in "Judas" are trapped by the web of society, and Jeffers' characterizations of Mary, Judas, and Christ therefore differ radically from the characterizations found in the Biblical source. The poem takes place in 1933, but the ghosts of the major characters—Christ, Judas, and Mary—are constantly "re-dreaming" their actions: They are "Three passions too violent to vanish." Judas is a tormented

1"Dear Judas and Other Poems, pp. 9-49.
man. He constantly feels the pain and misery of all men and all beasts. He comes to Christ asking deliverance from his pain. Jeffers' Christ simply advises Judas to be cruel; cruelty will balance the pity and mercy which torments him. But Judas cannot be cruel and rejects the advice. He does, however, agree to become one of Christ's disciples out of the love he bears Christ.

Mary appears. She is a "poor, half-crazed old woman," who is seeking news of her son's rise to power. While she waits, Judas questions Christ about his ambivalence in referring to "my" or "our" Father. Christ is obviously anxious about this point, and shifts erratically from a beneficent to an antagonistic manner. He speaks of his own high glory, then explains his uneasiness to Judas by discussing his youth. He discovered early that Joseph was not his father, but Mary did not state until much later that he was the son of God--he has suffered, in Jeffers' view, an early traumatic experience. "I blame my mother," he states. "Truly the torment of those my days of ignorance has never healed." At the present time, however, the psychologically-disturbed Christ feels his "immeasurable height above men." He is power-mad.

The reader is warned of Christ's psychological power over the masses since he raised Lazarus from the dead. Christ is aspiring to dominate, aspiring to the glory of a king. He will

1"Dear Judas," p. 12.
2Ibid., p. 13.
3Ibid., p. 14.
lead all men in rebellion against Herod, and only violence can result. Mary comments that Christ, her son, will succeed because he promises bloodlessness and a kingdom of peace and mercy. But Judas is aware of the bloodshed that will result from Christ's plan, and asks him to give it up. Jesus feels too strong, however—he is elevated above humanity. He tells his followers to declare him king, and Judas begins to realize the bloody destruction that will result from their action—he sees Christ as a wild-minded visionary. Mary meanwhile takes a very motherly pride in the political success of her son.

And Christ has discovered a secret of such success—he has found the "dreadful key to their hearts." He drove hucksters from a temple with a whip and gained followers because humanity loves pain and destruction. People follow him because of their lust for suffering.

As Christ gains power and followers, he becomes even more power-mad. He thinks himself God and leaves off the sham of peace and mercy: "I bring not peace but a sword." Judas sees what he must do—he must betray Christ in order to put an end to the destruction which will come inevitably if Christ remains powerful. He attempts to tell Mary of Christ's evilness, but she is too proud of her son's success and considers Judas'

1"Dear Judas," p. 23.
2Ibid., p. 24.
remarks as being only the results of envy. Judas leaves to betray Christ. He loves humanity and feels that his betrayal will rob Christ of power.

Mary attempts to warn her son of Judas' action, but Christ thinks only of his own divinity and immortality. Mary's desperation leads the reader to believe that she is on the point of denying that Christ was fathered by God, but before she can make any explanation, Christ soliloquizes, exalting himself above all things in the universe. He wants to possess mankind completely, and he knows that he will be able to do so by appealing to society's love for pain and suffering--people will love a crucifixion.

Judas returns and tells Christ to leave the city because Roman priests intend to have him arrested. But Christ's desire for power over the minds of men demands that he force Judas to bring about the crucifixion. Judas does so, and Christ is taken away, an unstable man, unsure of his humanity, his divinity, or his immortality.

Mary, separated from the action, at this point admits that Christ was born in sin, and that he is only the son of two mortals; yet she is confident of his success as a leader of men.

Lazarus, the only character in the poem who is free of the societal net, announces the crucifixion to Mary. He has suffered even death and understands life according to Jeffers' views, and therefore has the same view of society. Christ was mortal, but
not an ordinary mortal. He chose death in order to elevate himself, in order to become a god in the eyes of men. Christ praised God in the only way man trapped in the societal net is able to do so--through pain and suffering. Christ operated outside of society, and therefore was able to choose and make his own fate, as most men are unable to do. Yet since he was mortal, a man whose power was derived only from an evil society, only violence and destruction and pain can be the result of his actions.

Formalized religion, then, including Christianity, is a product of man's civilization; therefore such religion is an evil in Jeffers' view of the universe. Civilization creates God, or gods, in its own image and out of its own needs and desires. By so doing, it denies Jeffers' true natural deity, his god which is all nature. Religion is therefore an outgrowth which further entraps mankind in the societal net.

Yet religion is not the only method by which man attempts to assert a false universal supremacy. Jeffers often points to man's use of science as a further demonstration of his refusal to live simply as a minor part of universal nature. Jeffers feels that man uses science as a tool to help make himself more than what he is in relation to the universe. In so doing, however, man makes himself much less than what he could be. Man's knowledge of science could be a valuable tool toward an understanding and fulfillment of his proper role in the universe,
according to Jeffers' beliefs. Jeffers' own studies in the field of medicine were carried on not because he intended to become a physician, but because he was interested in medicine as a tool helping him to a basic understanding of the nature of life. Speculation into the metaphysical world beyond man can begin only after natural phenomena and the ideas behind them are understood. Jeffers did not feel that he could speak toward the transcendence of science until he understood science itself.¹

Jeffers' view of science in relation to society parallels his view of other of man's accomplishments, but because he undertook more extensive training in this area, he alludes more often to science in the explication of his view of society. His objection to science in the hands of society is that man uses it to lead himself away from his proper place in the universe, thereby causing further curtailment of natural freedom, further entanglement in the societal net. Jeffers wants mankind to adopt the view toward science that he takes—seeing it as the tool for a better understanding of man at the most basic level. Instead, society uses science as a method of self-aggrandizement and self-praise. This view is succinctly expressed in a passage from "Roan Stallion."²


²Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, pp. 11-28.
Tragedy that breaks man's face and a white
fire flies out of it; vision that fools him
Out of his limits, desire that fools him out of his
limits, unnatural crime, inhuman science,
Slit eyes in the mask; wild loves that leap over the
walls of nature, the wild fence-vaulter science,
Useless intelligence of far stars, dim knowledge of
the spinning demons that make an atom,
These break, these pierce, these deify, praising
their God shrilly with fierce voices: not in
man's shape
He approves the praise, he that walks lightning-naked
on the Pacific, that laces the suns with planets,
The heart of the atom with electrons: what is humanity
in this cosmos? For him, the last
Least tint of a trace in the dregs of the solution;
for itself, the mold to break away from, the coal
To break into fire, the atom to be split.1

In this passage, Jeffers points out that man using science, not
for deeper understanding of the role of man in the universe, but
as a device to upset the ultimate natural harmony by pulling
mankind out of its rightful place is wrong; man is a part of
nature--nature is not subject to man, as civilized society would
have it. Man fools himself when he attempts to utilize science
in this manner.

Man further corrupts himself through science because he
uses such little knowledge as he has for self-destruction.
Jeffers comments on this destructive attitude in his poem,
"Science."2 Man, seen as turned away from universal nature
and concerned only with himself, has created tremendous inven-
tions. However, man cannot properly manage these inventions

1"Stallion," p. 20.
2Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, p. 101.
because he cannot govern himself in society. Societal conflicts, the "net" of civilization, causes man to corrupt nature, to turn nature into weapons which society uses to destroy mankind.

Jeffers becomes more bitter when he sees man destroying not only himself but the natural world as well. He finds destruction of the beauty of nature a much more serious crime than the destruction of corrupted mankind—he would sooner kill a man than a hawk. In "A Redeemer,"¹ Jeffers speaks of an old man who attempts to suffer for all the sins of the American society in its westward expansion.

"There never," he said, "was any people earned so much ruin.
I love them, I am trying to suffer for them.
They have done what never was done before. Not as a people takes a land to love it and be fed,
A little, according to need and love, and again a little; sparing the country tribes, mixing
Their blood with theirs, their minds with all the rocks and rivers, their flesh with the soil:
no, without hunger
Wasting the world and your own labor, without love possessing, not even your hands to the dirt but plows
Like blades of knives; heartless machines; houses of steel; using and despising the patient earth...
Oh, as a rich man eats a forest for profit and a field for variety, so you came west and raped
The continent and brushed its people to death..."²

Here again, Jeffers sees society attempting to conquer an unconquerable nature, using nature for himself, not adapting to it and living within it. Civilization forces man to live outside nature, and, in Jeffers' view, that is not his rightful place.

¹Selected Poetry, pp. 189-91.
²Ibid., p. 190.
Jeffers is then pessimistic about society and civilization, but this statement is not the totality of Jeffers' view. Jeffers indeed turns away from society, but he does not reject human life completely, isolating himself only to write grumbling poetry about the stupidity, arrogance, and irrationality of man in society and nothing more. As stated earlier, Jeffers does not despise human beings simply because they are human beings, but rather because the societies of which they are a part are destructive, and, primarily, introvertive. The introversion of society implies that society has turned away from, denied, a concept that is of high value in Jeffers' philosophic system—that man is not supreme in the universe, but that he is a relatively minor part of the universal nature. Nature itself is Jeffers' deity, and man is naturally a part of that deity. But man upsets the harmony of nature by attempting to live outside it and thereby denies Jeffers' true God—nature.

Jeffers therefore finds value in nature, not in society, because all nature is his God, not man. His poems are filled with passages descriptive of the beauty of the natural world, and Jeffers treats that beauty with a truly religious adoration. The wild, graceful birds native to the California coastline are among his favorite subjects. Hawks and eagles and falcons often become symbolic not only of the beauty of all nature, but of the proud freedom that is a result of maintaining a natural role
in the universe. Here is Jeffers' poem entitled "Birds."¹

The fierce musical cries of a couple of sparrowhawks
hunting on the headland,
Hovering and darting, their heads northwestward,
Prick like silver arrows shot through a curtain
the noise of the ocean
Trampling its granite; their red backs gleam
Under my window around the stone corners;
nothing gracefuller, nothing
Nibler in the wind. Westward the wave-gleaners,
The old gray sea-going gulls are gathered together,
the northwest wind wakening
Their wings to the wild spirals of the wind-dance.
Fresh as the air, salt as the foam, play birds
in the bright wind, fly falcons
Forgetting the oak and the pinewood, come gulls
From the Carmel sands and the sands at the river-mouth,
from Lobos and out of the limitless
Power of the mass of the sea, for a poem
Needs multitude, multitudes of thoughts, all fierce,
all flesh-eaters, musically clamorous
Bright hawks that hover and dart headlong,
and ungainly
Gray hungers fledged with desire of transgression,
salt slimed beaks, from the sharp
Rock-shores of the world and the secret waters.²

A bird is a beautiful part of nature; it is naturally good.
When natural freedom is lost, when the bird is no longer able
to soar above the California coast, it will ask for death.
Jeffers in "Hurt Hawks"³ tells of an injured hawk he finds.

... at night he remembers freedom
And flies in a dream, the dawns ruin it.
He is strong and pain is worse to the strong,
incapacity is worse.
The curs of the day come and torment him
At distance, no one but death the redeemer will
humble that head,

¹Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, p. 86.
²Ibid.
³Selected Poetry, pp. 198-99.
The intrepid readiness, the terrible eyes.
The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those
That ask mercy, not often to the arrogant.
You do not know him, you communal people, or you
have forgotten him;
Intemperate and savage, the hawk remembers him;
Beautiful and wild, the hawks, and men that are
dying, remember him.¹

The poet tries to help the injured hawk for a time, then sets
it free; but the hawk

... returned in the evening,
asking for death,
Not like a beggar, still eyed with the old
Implacable arrogance. I gave him the lead gift
in the twilight. What fell was relaxed,
Owl-downy, soft feminine feather; but what
Soared: the fierce rush: the night-herons by the
flooded river cried fear at its rising²
Before it was quite unsheathed from reality.

The injured hawk is unable to maintain a proper role and function
in the universal nature. But it is a part of nature, and good;
therefore death is its proper choice. Society, on the other
hand, although it attempts to turn away from the deity of nature
and to refuse to fulfill the natural role of mankind in the
universe, demands that life is the only good and death an evil.
For Jeffers, death is a natural phenomenon, and therefore not
evil.

Jeffers' view of death is one aspect of his philosophy
that is clearly positive, and an understanding of Jeffers'
ideas about death is vital to full understanding of that philosophy.

¹Ibid., p. 198.
²Ibid., pp. 198-99.
Frederick I. Carpenter, writing in *American Literature and the Dream*, 1 discusses the poet's concept of death at some length. Jeffers reverses the Grecian and Christian values in which "life, here or hereafter, has seemed absolutely good, and death evil." 2 His poems "have celebrated 'death' and 'night,' and have questioned the goodness of life." 3 It is this stand, says Carpenter, that makes his poetry rejected by the majority, for "the habits of thought of three millenniums are not altered so easily . . . death still seems the ultimate evil to the majority." 4 And Jeffers' view of death "often becomes confused with mere denial of life," 5 while it is in reality the culminating experience of life. Traditional ideas hold that man is the center and the most important part of the universe. Jeffers' new concept, however, which is based on scientific experimentation and discovery, finds that humanity is not the center of the universe, but only a relatively minor part of it. Each part is good only in relation to the universal whole, and each part has its own limitations. The perfection of the part can only be partial, but humanity denies this concept by attempting to perfect itself while denying it relation to the entire universe.


2Ibid., p. 144.

3Ibid., pp. 144-45.

4Ibid., p. 145.

5Ibid., p. 147.
Life can therefore be good in Jeffers' view, but only if humanity realizes and accepts the limitations resulting from its minor universal role. In Carpenter's words:

"Life is wholly good, therefore, when it welcomes death as the evidence of its own limitations. The man who is ready to die, is ready to live. And the more he lives, the better he becomes, once he has freed himself from the old fear of death."

Jeffers feels that man must live all life--youth, maturity, and old age--in order to reach fulfillment of his natural role. Then death brings a welcome peace. Untimely or unnatural death is bad, because it does not allow such natural fulfillment. Thus suicide, which seems to the casual reader of Jeffers a handy solution to Jeffers' abhorrence of society, could not serve as an answer for the poet--suicide is unnatural.

Nature is the positive value in Jeffers' philosophy. The poet turns away from society because nature is the ultimate good--God, in Jeffers' view--and it is beautiful, as he reminds his readers in almost all his short lyrics. Here, for example, is "Divinely Superfluous Beauty."

The storm-dances of gulls, the barking game of seals,
Over and under the ocean... Divinely superfluous beauty
Rules the games, presides over destinies, makes trees grow
And hills tower, waves fall.
The incredible beauty of joy
Stars with fire the joining of lips, 0 let our loves too be joined, there is not a maiden
Burns and thirsts for love

1Carpenter, p. 147.
2Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, p. 205.
More than my blood for you, by the shore of seals 
while the wings
Weave like a web in the air
Divinely superfluous beauty.  

When man turns away from society and gives up the desire to assert his own supremacy in the universe, he can appreciate this beauty and be a part of it.

The old voice of the ocean, the bird-chatter of little rivers, 
(Winter has given them gold for silver 
To stain their water and bladed green for brown to line their banks) 
From different throats intone one language. 
So I believe if we were strong enough to listen without Divisions of desire and terror 
To the storm of the sick nations, the rage of the hunger-smitten cities, 
Those voices also would be found 
Clean as a child's; or like some girl's breathing who dances alone 
By the ocean-shore, dreaming of lovers.  

Jeffers' conception of the overwhelming beauty of nature causes him to comment on his own ability as an artist to capture such beauty in his poetry. This poem is Jeffers' "Love the Wild Swan."  

"I hate my verses, every line, every word. 
Oh pale and brittle pencils ever to try 
One grass-blades's curve, or the throat of one bird 
That clings to twig, ruffled against white sky. 
Oh cracked and twilight mirrors ever to catch 
One color, one glinting flash, of the splendor of things. 
Unlucky hunter, Oh bullets of wax, 
The lion beauty, the wild-swan wings, the storm of the wings."

1 Roan: Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, p. 206. 
2 Ibid., p. 232. 
3 Selected Poetry, p. 573.
As this poem suggests, with its allusions to the "lion beauty" and the "flame" of nature, Jeffers' idea of beauty in nature is not that of the nature-lover who walks about only on sunny days sniffing wildflowers but avoiding thistles—"he envisages, as did Wordsworth, Nature as Deity; but his Nature is the Nature of the physics textbook and not of the rambling botanist." Jeffers does not perceive an idyllic nature. He sees nature in its fullest scope—sometimes comfortably pleasant and calmly beautiful, and at other times terribly destructive. Mankind should not expect nature to be always kind, for nature is not designed to provide man with comfort and ease. Rather, mankind is a minor part of nature and as such should not look for a purely human perfection. As has been stated earlier, only the entire universal nature is perfect, and that perfection is not discoverable in each minor part of the whole.

Following up the idea that man's place in the universe is a minor and therefore sometimes painful one, Jeffers finds that

1 Ibid.

the ability to accept and endure harsh buffetings of nature on human life is of supreme importance to man. Society attempts to overcome or to avoid the natural law which demands that life be not always pleasant and comfortable. But nature is permanent and undying, while man is not; therefore, "the wise man is he who is able to live gladly in its presence and die without grief or fear knowing it survives us."¹

Jeffers comments on the ability to endure harsh nature in "Granite and Cypress,"² and the poem is useful in understanding his position on this point.

White-maned, wide-throated, the heavy-shouldered children of the wind leap at the sea-cliff. The invisible falcon brooded on water and bred them in wide waste places, in a bride-chamber wide to the stars' eyes. In the center of the ocean, where no prows pass nor island is lifted ... the sea beyond Lobos is whitened with the falcon's Passage, he is here now, The sky is one cloud, his wing-feathers hiss in the white grass, my sapling cypresses writhing In the fury of his passage Dare not dream of their centuries of future endurance of tempest. (I have granite and cypress, Both long-lasting, Planted in the earth; but the granite sea-boulders are prey to no hawk's wing, they have taken worse pounding, Like me they remember Old wars and are quiet; for we think that the future in one piece with the past, we wonder why tree-tops And people are so shaken.)³

¹Deutsch, p. 20.
²Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, p. 89.
³Ibid.
Here the waves, "the heavy-shouldered children of the wind," represent the harsher aspects of nature. They are the result of the wind, and therefore a part of Jeffers' nature-God, here symbolized as "The invisible falcon." The winds and waves beat at the cliffs and the cliffs endure the treatment endlessly. The cypress trees the poet has planted, however, do not endure the attack with such motionless peace as the cliffs—their motion suggests that they suffer. Jeffers prefers to accept the buffetings like the boulders, with a calm endurance and acceptance of nature, realizing that the harshness is timeless. The masses of people can only meet the cruel aspects of nature with the violent reaction that the trees symbolize. Rather than realizing the fact that they are a part of nature and accepting its cruelty as well as its benevolence, men in society, like the cypress trees, reject nature by reacting to it. Jeffers, like the boulders, prefers patience and acceptance.

The ability to live as a proper part of nature—that is, living within nature rather than trying to live outside it—is for Jeffers the good which man should attempt to achieve. Such an existence is not impossible, and Jeffers finds an example of such ordered and peaceful existence in a scene from the California coast, "Boats in a Fog."¹

Sports and gallantries, the stage, the arts,
the antics of dancers,
The exuberant voices of music,
Have charm for children but lack nobility; it is
bitter earnestness

¹Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, p. 88.
That makes beauty; the mind 
knows, grown adult.

A sudden fog-drift muffled the ocean,
A throbbing of engines moved in it,
At length, a stone's throw out, between the rocks
and the vapor,
One by one moved shadows
Out of the mystery, shadows, fishing-boats,
    trailing each other
Following the cliff for guidance,
Holding a difficult path between the peril of the sea-fog
And the foam on the shore granite.
One by one, trailing their leader, six crept by me,
Out of the vapor and into it,
The throb of their engines subdued by the fog,
    patient and cautious,
Coasting all round the peninsula
Back to the buoys in Monterey harbor. A flight
    of pelicans
Is nothing lovelier to look at;
The flight of the planets is nothing nobler;
    all the arts lose virtue
Against the essential reality
Of creatures going about their business among the equally
Earnest elements of nature.  

The poet first looks at society trapped in its self-inflicted
web. Society produces arts and traditions that are in their
highest expression only "charming" for Jeffers, and do not
measure up against the "essential reality" of the universal
Nature. These products of society "lack nobility"—they do
not help to fulfill man's proper role in the universe. A more
sophisticated system of values admits that man's role in the
universe is a minor one, and that man should realize that the
highest beauty is a result of his proper fulfillment of this
role.

1 Roan-Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, p. 88.
The next part of the poem deals with an image of fishing-boats. The boats, and the men on them, are quietly going about the business of fishing; the men are living within nature—they catch fish in order to survive. They have used their skill and their knowledge of science to help them live harmoniously within nature. The quiet orderliness of the file of fishing-boats expresses the harmony that is possible when man lives properly as part of the universal nature without attempting to subdue the natural world to his own self-interest. Fishing is hard work, and, as the poem suggests, sometimes dangerous—the boats here are imperilled by both the fog and the cliffs. Yet man meets nature on its own terms in this instance, faces it squarely. The unity with nature that results from this harmonious activity is, for Jeffers, an example of humanity at its best—here is mankind fulfilling to the utmost his proper place in the universal nature.

Jeffers rejects society, but his poetry does not stop with that rejection. He turns from society to nature and finds, as the previous poem suggests, that it is possible for man to find beauty and harmony in his existence. Such a poem demonstrates the resolution of Jeffers' conflict with society. Other poems demonstrate the same possibility for peace in human life when the individual commits himself not to society but to fulfilling a relatively good, although minor, role in the universal nature.
In the poem, "Fawn's Foster-Mother," Jeffers portrays a woman who is able to escape the web of society and discover the peace of a natural role for only a short time.

The old woman sits on a bench before the door and quarrels with her meager pale demoralized daughter. Once when I passed I found her alone, laughing in the sun and saying that when she was first married she lived in the old farmhouse up Garapatas Canyon. (It is empty now, the roof has fallen but the log walls hang on the stone foundation; the redwoods have all been cut down, the oaks are standing; the place is now more solitary than ever before.)

"When I was nursing my second baby my husband found a day-old fawn hid in a fern-brake and brought it; I put its mouth to the breast rather than let it starve, I had milk enough for three babies. Hey, how it sucked, the little nuzzler, digging its little hoofs like quills into my stomach. I had more joy from that than from the others." Her face is deformed with age, furrowed like a bad road with market-wagons, mean cares and decay. She is thrown up to the surface of things, a cell of dry skin soon to be shed from the earth's old eyebrows, I see that once in her spring she lived in the streaming arteries, the stir of the world, the music of the mountain.

The old woman has been a part of nature for only a short time. Her remembered joy is the type of joy that Jeffers believes is possible when man turns away from society and enters the beauty and harmony that is found in universal nature. Her present condition is that of man in society as Jeffers views him, trapped in unimportant matters that deny peace and beauty.

1Selected Poetry, p. 188.
2Ibid.
A very small number of characters in Jeffers' works are able to escape the entrapping societal web completely. One such character is Orestes in "The Tower Beyond Tragedy." The poem has already been briefly discussed from the standpoint of the character Clytemnestra as in one sense demonstrating that Jeffers looks upon man in society as constantly striving for power and sexual dominance. But the poem presents humanity in a fuller scope, and in so doing explains Jeffers' view of humanity in greater breadth.

Whoever reads Jeffers should begin with "The Tower Beyond Tragedy." It explains and justifies his violence. It proves that he is not the sensational melodramatic spinner of horrors which a number of critics have pronounced him. Like all his narratives, it is crowded with action, moves with rapidity, and is profoundly intense. No English treatment of the Agamemnon legend has such force of interest, and none has been made to say more. A myth, often violent because it is primitive and universal, may be adapted to suit many ends. Whether Jeffers borrows his plots or invents them, he treats them all as myths. He is as frank as the Bible in dealing with sex, and as direct as Homer in depicting physical torture. With the method and meaning of "The Tower Beyond Tragedy" clear in mind the reader has no difficulty in determining the symbolism and intended effect of "Tamar" and all the other narratives.

"The Tower Beyond Tragedy," then, contains the full range of ideas in Jeffers' philosophic system. Balancing the character of Clytemnestra, who represents the evil and destructiveness of man trapped in the societal net, is Orestes, who is resolved to and a part of the harmony of the universal nature.

1 Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, pp. 29-82.
2 Loggins, p. 68.
At first, Orestes is simply one of the pawns that his mother Clytemnestra maneuvers in order to gain power. His sister Electra makes him aware of the plot, however, and Orestes kills Clytemnestra and her accomplice Aegisthus. He suffers greatly in his mind for his action, but in so doing he has successfully attacked the evil nature and desire for dominance that is, for Jeffers, characteristic of man entrapped in the societal web. By breaking that web, even though the break is not a permanent one, Orestes is able to enter into the universal nature and to transcend the evil nature of humanity. His statement of the peace and harmony he has found defines Jeffers' view of the highest possible achievement mankind can attain, freedom in nature from the web of society.

... I have cut the meshes
And fly like a freed falcon. To-night, lying on the hillside, sick with those visions, I remembered The knife in the stalk of my humanity; I drew and it broke; I entered the life of the brown forest
And the great life of the ancient peaks, the patience of stone, I felt the changes in the veins
In the throat of the mountain, a grain in many centuries, we have our own time, not yours; and I was the stream Draining the mountain wood; and I the stag drinking; and I was the stars, Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the lord of his own summit; and I was the darkness
Outside the stars, I included them, they were a part of me. I was mankind also, a moving lichen
On the cheek of the round stone ... they have not made words for it, to go behind things, beyond hours and ages,
And be all things in all time, in their returns and passages, in the motionless and timeless center
In the white of the fire ... how can I express the excellence I have found, that has no color but clearness; No honey but ecstasy; nothing wrought nor remembered;
This overwhelming mystical peace is the promise that Jeffers holds up for mankind when it is able to break away from the web of society and assume its proper place as a part of the universal nature. The individual man sacrifices his individuality and becomes a part of a universal perfection. The universal nature is orderly and good, while man outside nature can only be destructive; entering the universal nature awakens man to the beauty of the universe and makes his a part of it, while man outside nature attempting to assert his own supremacy can only be ugly and vicious. Jeffers leaves the choice between society and the universal nature up to each human being, but knows that the universal nature is the only correct choice.

The poetry of Robinson Jeffers expresses his pessimistic view of man in society. Man himself is not inherently evil, but does become destructive when he attempts to make himself the center and most important part of the universe using false values derived from civilization. When man attempts to become supreme, he must deny the true God, and that God is, for Jeffers, nature—the total universe. Jeffers describes this turning away from the true God as introversion and symbolizes the introversion

1Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems, pp. 81-82.
as incestuous. The concern of man in society, says Jeffers, is with himself rather than, as it properly should be, with all nature. Man's concern only with himself, with society, creates what Jeffers describes as a net or web which entraps man in civilization and denies the freedom and beauty which are proper to all parts of nature. Trapped in an unnatural social web, man can only be destructive, both of himself and of the nature from which he has cut himself off.

The proper role of man in the universe is, however, much different from the role that man in his civilization attempts to assume. Man is a part of nature, not apart from it as he attempts to be. But he is not the most important part of nature or of the universe; his role is a relatively minor one. The whole of nature is perfect, but man is only a minor part of that whole and therefore should not expect to realize perfection in himself. Thus man's existence, even as part of the universal nature, is not painless and easy. Nature is sometimes cruel; yet man in nature is capable of the strength to endure the buffetings of the natural world, because all the parts of nature exist in perfect harmony. The order and beauty derived from being a part of a harmonious universal nature is, in Jeffers' view, the goal of peace for which mankind should strive.
LIST OF REFERENCES CITED


