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Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

It is difficult to think of American poetry without thinking of Robert Frost. A quintessential American poet, his work is among the most highly regarded in English. Always approachable and yet always complex, Frost develops multi-layered poetry through simple, conversational language. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is one of his most famous, and is the topic of this essay. The poem was published in 1923 in a collection Frost titled *New Hampshire* ("Overview"). Frost can be viewed as a deviant from the norm of his time as he did not follow the then-current trend of modernism (Evans). Robert Evans states in *Literary Contexts in Poetry: Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"* that "The most striking aspect of the poem from a literary-historical point of view is its extreme accessibility. Frost, after all, was writing during the hey-day of modernism..." (Evans). He further postulates that its position as a "symbolic alternative to... stylistic modernism" contributed to its success (Evans). Frost wrote a masterpiece that, under the guise of simplicity, explores the human condition and its relationship with society, nature, and isolation.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has a deceptively simple structure that works to easily draw the reader in. The poem is comprised of four quatrains and is written in iambic tetrameter. Its unique rhyme scheme is one of its defining characteristics. Whereas many poems written in quatrains would employ a rhyme scheme of simple or alternating couplets, Frost takes

a different approach (Evans). Instead of following the norm, he uses a rhyme scheme of aaba / bbcb / ccde / dddd. The third line of each of the first three stanzas sets up the rhyme used in the next stanza. The last stanza departs from this established rule and thus enhances the strength of the poem's conclusion. According to Robert Evans, the "complex rhyme scheme, with its heavy emphasis in the final stanza on similar-sounding words... ironically contributes to the poem's impression of plain, blunt, laconic speech, as if the speaker is so focused on the woods and on his own thoughts that he cannot be bothered to search out highly varied rhymes" (Evans). The poem's flow is effortless as it sweeps the reader through its sixteen lines. Frost's approachable style was readily appreciated by his readers. As detailed by Robert Evans, "Frost's... readers saw reflections of their own better selves, and in the realistic society Frost evokes (with its beauties as well as its obligations) many of Frost's readers saw reflections of the society they themselves inhabited and the kind of life they themselves lived" (Evans). It is clear that the language of the poem intentionally sought to bridge the gap between modernist poetry and the common person, which Frost did with ease.

Frost masterfully molds simple language into one of the greatest examples of imagery poetry has to offer; "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" provides the reader with an immediate feeling of tranquility that is nearly without peer. The title itself suggests such a feeling: a momentary pause in time. Frost explores themes of man versus society, society versus nature, isolation, and even the path of life. The first quatrain of the poem introduces the speaker's voice as he or she walks through the woods: "Whose woods these are I think I know. / His house is in the village though; / He will not see me stopping here / To watch his woods fill up with snow" (1-4). Right away, Frost introduces the themes of man versus society and society

versus nature. He also introduces the theme of isolation in lines two and three; the speaker is far removed from the village.

Frost employs personification to place the view of society within the frame of the speaker's "little horse" in the second quatrain: "My little horse must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse near / Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year" (5-8). The speaker's horse represents rational thought: why would anyone stop by these woods at such a time? Why would anyone put their obligations on hold? During a snowfall on the coldest night of the year, to stop could prove dangerous; and yet, the speaker is drawn to the forest regardless. The second quatrain furthers the theme of isolation by expanding on the speaker's location, far away from anyone between the woods and a "frozen lake" on the "darkest night of the year". This word choice is important and it introduces a darker tone: "Because the speaker also emphasizes the cold with 'frozen lake,' readers begin to understand the poem may not be a simple light-hearted celebration of nature" ("Overview"). Indeed, the second stanza marks a shift that carries through the rest of the poem.

The third stanza uses descriptive language to paint a scene of insurmountable tranquility, undisturbed by society and free for the speaker to enjoy. It also heightens isolationist sentiments to their peak: "He gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake. / The only other sound's the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake" (9-12). The sound of bells shaking cuts through the silent air, which is in stark contrast to the sounds of the "easy wind and downy flake" produced by nature. Frost doesn't use aggressive language here, though. The phrase "gives his harness bells a shake" implies mere curiosity rather than a warning of danger or an agitation to leave (Evans). "To ask if there is some mistake" in line ten continues the speaker's placement of

rational thought onto the horse; surely one would not choose to stay out here for so long? “Easy” describes the wind and “downy” describes snowflakes. Frost continuously uses words with such peaceful connotations to describe nature, implicitly stating the idea that nature is something to be marveled at and appreciated.

The last stanza drives the poem to its conclusion by breaking from the previous stanzas’ rhyme scheme and introducing repetition for the first and only time: “The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep” (13-16). The speaker is entranced by the woods’ call to stay with them, to stop moving, to settle down, to sleep. Their pull is almost strong enough to enforce this request, but the speaker’s societal obligations and moral duty to fulfill them removes him from their grasp, albeit reluctantly. Frost juxtaposes “lovely” with “dark and deep,” suggesting that the woods are both a sight to behold and an escape into the unknown. He raises a question in the reader’s mind at this point: is the speaker merely pausing to admire the trees? Or is the speaker grappling with societal constructs and the desire to be free of them? If that is the case, can the reader extrapolate that idea further and wonder if the speaker is longing to go into the forest to die? Frost builds ambiguity into the poem and allows the reader to make such judgments for themselves. The final two lines show the speaker’s resignation to continue forward. And is that not what everyone must do in life?

Frost brilliantly depicts human nature’s struggle with desires and duties against the backdrop of a beautiful forest. Robert Evans details the effect of the last stanza by stating “The poem functions for us as the woods function for the speaker: it gives us a chance to pause, to ponder, to admire. Inevitably, however, we-like the speaker-must finally move on” (Evans). This

poem is a microcosm that represents the overall path of life everyone embarks on between birth and death, wrapped up in a bow of fantastic imagery and in a form simple enough for anyone to appreciate. It is exceedingly profound, firmly earning its place amongst literary canon.

Works Cited

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