The Ingenuity of Robert Frost:

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

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Robert Frost (1874-1963) is a renowned American poet whose work transcends time and literature. The acclaimed “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” appears in Frost’s *New Hampshire: A poem with Notes and Grace Notes*, one of the author’s later ingenious anthologies(Frost 87). Published in 1932 by Henry Holt and Company, *New Hampshire* contains other such masterpieces as “Fire and Ice” and “Nothing Gold Can Stay”, among others.

“Stopping By Woods,” Frost’s self-proclaimed “best bid for remembrance,” tells the story of a wanderer and its horse exploring the wilderness on a dark, snowy night. The speaker seems to be contemplating whether to stay in the alluring woods or to return to the responsibilities he or she is bound to in the village. The overly ambiguous prose provides ample room for interpretation, which many literary scholars and critics have welcomed with mixed reactions. According to Hochman (*Poetry for Students*), such a lack of substantive information is a mistake, considering the four-time Pulitzer Prize winner denounced the overwhelming analysis of the poem (Hochman 1). Nevertheless, there are a few widely accepted interpretations of “Stopping By Woods” that lies in its themes, symbolism, and vibrant imagery.

The poem revolves around the speaker’s indecision on staying in the woods or returning to the village. Literary scholars point to this sense of contemplation of man and nature as a prominent theme in Frost’s poetry. “Stopping By Woods” is no exception; the lyrical prose brings to life the nature in which the speaker finds himself. Yet the enchanting narrative serves as a means of deception, seamlessly veil through thematic metaphors (Chen 372). “Stopping By Woods” reveals an underlying dichotomy interwoven through the prose as nature versus man, individualism versus community, threat versus safety, and freedom versus obligation (Chen 372; Hinrichsen 49; Hochman 1; Su 1372).

The personification of the little horse in the second and third stanzas is recognized as inviting reason and life into the otherwise whimsical and static atmosphere of the scene (Duban 575). As the snow falls in the desolate woods, the speaker breaks from a trance to realize “My little horse must think it queer/ To stop without a farmhouse near” (Frost 87). The seeming ability of the protagonist to read the horse’s mind gives rise to the notion that there is a reality with which he was unaware. This reality could be the dangers of lingering around the woods on a snowy night, which the speaker is unable to surmise until its brought to attention. Seduced by the beauty of the snowy woods in the absence of company, it did not occur to the speaker that there are inherent dangers in these actions.

Frost personifies the horse again in the following stanza, which presents another opportunity for the protagonist to recognize the grave situation. After passively dismissing the companion’s discomfort (Hochman 2), the speaker may be jolted to reality when the horse “Gives his harness bells a shake/ To ask if there is some mistake” (Frost 87). This would infer that the speaker was indifferent to the dangers until the horse physically sounds the alarm, which reminds the protagonist that there is another life at stake. Gripped by this reality, the speaker may then realize that there are “promises to keep,” one of which that the horse must be taken care of, and the other that humans are intrinsically social and there are people back at the village to return to (Hinrichsen 48; Doyle 69).

John F. Kennedy’s respect and admiration for Frost is evidenced by the late president’s statement upon hearing of the author’s death, stating:

The death of Robert Frost leaves a vacancy in the American Spirit. He was the great American poet of our time. His art and his life summed up the essential qualities of the New England he loved so much: the fresh delight in nature, the plainness of speech, the canny wisdom, and the deep, underlying insight into the human soul. His death impoverishes us all; but he has bequeathed his Nation a body of imperishable verse from which Americans will forever gain joy and understanding. He had promises to keep, and miles to go, and now he sleeps. (Kennedy)

Kennedy’s sentiment echoes the final two lines of “Stopping By Woods” that many interpret as the speaker’s ode to death (Doyle 69). The context in which Kennedy uses the repeated line indicates that he held similar views of the line’s symbolism, wherein he parallels the speaker’s thoughts with the life of Frost.

“Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening” is an intricate metaphor for the inner conflict between being free and fulfilling obligations; reveling in threat and returning to safety; wanting to be alone and needing to have relationships. The push and pull that the speaker experiences is masked by Frost’s ingenious prose, and one can ultimately interpret the poem however he or she desires. In the words of Frost, a poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom… in a clarification of life- not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion” (*Collected Poems* 777).

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