The Ingenuity of Robert Frost:

“Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”

Gena Pickett

730056027

ENGL105- Professor Dan Anderson

25 July 2019

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

Frost’s self-proclaimed “best bid for remembrance” (Untermeyer 163) tells the story of a wanderer and his[[1]](#footnote-1) horse exploring the wilderness on a dark, snowy night. The speaker contemplates whether to stay in the alluring woods or to return to the village to fulfill his responsibilities. The ambiguous prose provides ample room for interpretation, and there are a few widely accepted analyses that emphasizes its themes, symbolism, and vibrant imagery. The enchanting narrative of “Stopping By Woods” unveils the thematic dichotomies of longing for freedom and needing human connection; reveling in threat and retreating to safety; succumbing to the sublime and honoring one’s commitments. Frost’s prose conveys the ominous and sinister beauty of the natural world that only persons like the speaker dare to wander (Chen).

The dark undertones in “Stopping By Woods” has much to say of the speaker’s mindset during his seemingly peculiar journey. The first stanza offers a glimpse of the speaker’s whereabouts and his initial thoughts upon stopping at his destination. There is an immediate sense of isolation and ambiguity as the speaker contemplates “Whose woods these are I think I know / His house is in the village though” (Frost 87). One can surmise that the speaker is rather distanced from the area in which the community resides. He appears to be alone, given the speaker’s realization that “He will not see me standing here” (Chen; Frost 87). It begs the question of why the speaker embarks on the trip when night is approaching and snow is accumulating. Brian Doyle interprets the woods as “a world offering quiet and solitude … a symbol of withdrawal from life for the sake of clarification” (69).

The second stanza reveals that the speaker is not alone, but is instead accompanied by a little horse that pumps life into an otherwise static atmosphere (Pearce). 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 personification of the horse is the means by which the speaker gains insight into his unorthodox situation, although his mind-reading abilities do not deter him from chasing the threat of the unknown.

The subsequent stanza presents another attempt on behalf of the horse when he “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 perils of remaining in the woods until the horse physically sounds the alarm. The little horse is thus personified again, serving to inform the speaker of his relationships— one of which is right in front of him— that can dilute the urge to prolong the stay in the woods (Hinrichsen).

Amongst the prevailing themes of Frost’s literary canons is the human’s temptation to succumb to the sublimity of the natural universe (Chen; Pearce). The implication of “[watching] the woods fill up with snow” (Frost 87) is a certain and inevitable death that the speaker entertains during the evening. The final stanza begins with the speaker expressing his attraction to the woods, which echoes throughout the poem. There comes a turning point when the wanderer admits “But I have promises to keep” (Frost 87). Following the speaker’s statement of admiration, Frost strategically places an adverb to mark a shift in the speaker’s perspective. It is only upon the traveler’s realization of the responsibilities and obligations awaiting him back at the village that he directs his attention forward as opposed to the mental and physical standstill that predominates the journey.

Perhaps the *but* in the final stanza serves as an attempt to reconcile the dichotomous tension of the poem by emphasizing that freedom and commitment do not have to be mutually exclusive. The juxtaposition of the lovely woods and the promises to keep accentuates the inner conflict that the speaker faces. It would seem, at this point, that the traveler has options, and that he could choose both freedom and human connection; threat and safety; and the sublime and commitment.

Upon contemplation, the speaker remarks that there are “Miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep” (Frost 87). According to Frost, the repetition of the final verses is not suggestive of any underlying significance, but is rather

The echoing of the “Miles to go before I sleep” (Frost 87) is among the most controversially interpreted verses in American literature. The meaning assigned to the poem’s final lines varies from benevolent to enthusiastic to morbid and to even frivolous. In the context of “The darkest evening of the year” (Frost 87)—believed to reference Winter Solstice-- the speaker is alone, vulnerable to unknown threats, during the 24 hour period when night extends the longest. Many scholars allude to the poem as a ‘death wish’ on behalf of the speaker, wherein *sleep* is symbolic of death (Doyle; Su). Marie Borroff offers a unique reading of the final verses that similarly invokes the symbolism of Winter Solstice, but shifts the reader’s perception of what that day signifies. Pointing to the speaker’s decision to stop in the woods on winter solstice, the scholar suggests that it “takes place at the moment when the encroachment of darkness on the New England landscape yields to the beginning of the return of light” (Borroff 140).

Robert Frost’s ingenuity as a prominent figure in English literature is epitomized by his poem, “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening.” The vivid imagery and extensive metaphors bring to life the nature in which the speaker finds himself. Yet the enchanting narrative serves as a means of deception, seamlessly creating a veil of thematic metaphors. 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).

Works Cited

Borroff, Marie. “Sound Symbolism as Drama in the Poetry of Robert Frost.” *Modern Language Association,* vol. 107, no. 1, 1992, pp. 131-144. doi: 10.2307/462806.

Chen, Quian. “On Frost’s Colorful Imagery with Profound Implication.” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies,* vol. 2, no. 2, Feb 2012, pp. 371-376. doi:10.4304/tpls.2.2.371-376.

Doyle, Brian D. “Enhancing Perspective, Inviting Response: Multiple Interpretations of a Frost Poem.” *The English Journal,* vol. 81 no. 7, 1992, pp. 68-72. doi:10.2307/820752.

Frost, Robert. *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays,* edited by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson, New York, Literary Classics of the United States, 1995, pp. 1-929.

Frost, Robert. “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening.” *New Hampshire,* Henry Holt and Company, 1923, pp. 3-113.

Hinrichsen, Lisa. “A Defensive Eye: Anxiety, Fear and Form in the Poetry of Robert Frost.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 31, no. 3, Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 44-57. *JSTOR,* jstor.org/stable/25167553.

Pearce, Roy H. “Frost’s Momentary Stay.” *The Kenyon Review,* vol. 23, no. 2, Kenyon College, 1961, pp. 258-273. *JSTOR,* jstor.org/stable/4334117.

Su, Yujie. “Dark energy in Robert Frost’s poems.” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies,* vol. 6, no. 7, 2016, pp. 1372-1376, doi:10.17507/tpls.0607.06. MAYBE NOT NECESSARY; ONLY ONE CITATION & CAN BE TAKEN OUT

Untermeyer, Louis. *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963, pp. 163.

1. The preferred way to address the speaker would be through gender neutral pronouns, but for the sake of simplicity and consistency, this essay assumes the speaker is male. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)