



Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

by Robert Frost

Content Synopsis

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is one of the most widely read and widely loved of all American poems. Its title already sets an appealing mood, implying rest, relaxation, contemplation, and calm. The title suggests a voluntary action undertaken in an appealing environment during peaceful conditions. (The effect would be entirely different, for instance, if the poem were entitled “Stranded in the Forest during a Night-time Blizzard.”) The poem itself, however, will ultimately prove more complicated-and even disturbing-than its title may suggest. Nevertheless, the beginning of the work could not seem simpler or less complex. Every word of the opening line (like most of the rest of the words in this poem) is monosyllabic: “Whose woods these are I think I know” (1). The line makes a simple statement; it constitutes a single, simple sentence; and even its rhythm is not complex, since its meter is a perfect example of four iambic feet. (In other words, in each pair of syllables, the first is unaccented and the second is accented, so that this line, like almost all the other lines in the poem, has the following basic rhythm: da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum [see also Monte 280]). Although the meter of the poem is mostly regular and predictable, however, the poem never seems monotonous or trite; Frost manages to make its rhythm sound perfectly colloquial and conversational, as if we

are genuinely hearing a real person speaking in the natural accents of everyday talk.

Even in the first line, however, subtle complications emerge. The very first word, for instance, implies an owner of the woods. Although we often think of nature-and especially of forested areas-as wild, free, and untamed, these woods actually belong to someone; they are someone’s property. Already, then, the poem begins to suggest distinctions between self and other, between freedom and restraint, and between the personal and the social-distinctions that will become increasingly important as the work proceeds. Although the poem centers on the perceptions and experiences of the unnamed, unknown speaker, his very first perception is less of the woods themselves than of the fact that the woods are not his. They belong to someone else. The speaker never enjoys a pure, unmediated relationship with (or contemplation of) the woods themselves; his experience of them is already colored by his awareness that they are someone else’s property, and his experience of them is also colored by his own acute self-consciousness, particularly his concern with being observed himself while he observes the woods. Already, then (in the very first line), Frost has introduced one of the major tensions implicit in this entire work-a tension between the private self and the social self, between the independent observer and the observer who must be conscious of himself in relation to others.

Lines 2 and 3 introduce more emphasis on the unnamed owner of the woods; he lives in “the village,” a place symbolically associated with society, with other people, and thus with the social obligations that will later prove so important in this poem. The entire first stanza, in fact, is overshadowed by the speaker’s awareness of this anonymous owner; the woods are “his woods” (4), and the speaker can only enjoy contemplating them if he can assure himself that the owner “will not see me stopping here” (3). Paradoxically, this emphasis on the owner of the woods suggests a great deal about the speaker himself; he seems a private man and a respecter of others’ property; perhaps he is somewhat shy, and certainly, he is concerned with what others may think or say about him. His language seems plain, direct, and uncomplicated, yet his concern to remain unobserved arouses our curiosity about his precise thoughts and motives. He wants his experience of the woods to be as private as possible, and yet his experience of them is enshrined in one of the best-known poems in the English language. By the time we have reached line 4, therefore, our attention is focused not only on the peaceful landscape implied by the title but also on the personality of the unnamed speaker and on his complex attitudes toward other people.

Another means by which Frost introduces subtle complexity into a seemingly simple poem involves the poem’s rhyme scheme. Normally a poem with stanzas comprised of four lines would consist of simple couplets (aa / bb) or (even more commonly) of alternating rhymes (ab / ab). Frost, however, chooses a highly unusual rhyme scheme for his opening stanza and for the following two: he rhymes the first, second, and fourth lines, introducing a non-rhyming word into the third line of each of the first three quatrains. Then, to complicate matters even further, he makes the last word of each third line anticipate the rhyme-words of the first, second, and fourth lines in the following stanza. The rhyme scheme of the first three stanzas

thus consists of the following pattern: aaba / bbcb / ccddc. Finally, to make the structure of the poem even more complex, and to lend the last stanza a strong sense of finality, Frost closes the poem with the following emphatic rhymes: dddd. This is one of the most unusual rhyme schemes in all of English poetry. Yet the poem never seems self-consciously clever or overtly witty. Instead, the complex rhyme scheme, with its heavy emphasis in the final stanza on similar-sounding words (all of them monosyllabic), 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. Both in technique and in theme, therefore, the poem is a fascinating combination of apparent simplicity and deeper complexity.

Stanza 3 introduces a third “character” into the poem: in addition to the speaker and the owner of the woods, we now meet the speaker’s “little horse” (5). Here as before, whatever the speaker says about someone else (whether it be the owner of the woods or even the horse) tells us much about himself. Since the man who owns the woods is not present to observe (and judge) the speaker, the speaker now assumes that his horse “must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse near” (5-6). Once again, then, the speaker seems highly self-conscious about his act of stopping to observe the woods, but his tone at this point seems less truly uncomfortable than in stanza one. To be observed, even potentially, by the human owner of the woods (an owner, moreover, who is male, as is presumably true of the speaker himself) is an unappealing prospect; to be observed by the “little horse” is another (and far less unsettling) experience. The adjective “little” implies the speaker’s affection toward the horse and makes the horse seem unthreatening, while the mere fact of ascribing thoughts to the horse makes the animal seem a companion rather than an indifferent, uncomprehending beast.

Even the adjective “queer” implies merely amused befuddlement rather than some harsher judgment (as such alternative adjectives as “mad,” “crazed,” or “absurd” would imply). Alone with his horse, with not even “a farmhouse near” (6), surrounded on one side by “the woods” and on the other by a “frozen lake” (7), the speaker can begin to relax and can even presumably smile at himself as he imagines what his horse must think of this pause in their journey. Yet in this stanza, as in the first, we as readers are invited to contemplate not so much the woods themselves as the speaker contemplating the woods. We are invited to wonder what he is thinking and how he is feeling, though his exact thoughts and feelings remain a mystery. Frost creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and suspense; he leads us to wonder why indeed the speaker has stopped, what precisely the speaker is thinking, why the speaker is so concerned to remain unobserved, and why exactly the speaker feels so uncomfortable for having paused. Never, though, does Frost answer these questions, and the fact that they are left hanging is just one more way in which the poem is more complex than it initially seems. The woods provoke the speaker’s thought; the speaker provokes ours.

In stanza 3, the horse “gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake” (9-10). Paradoxically, it is the horse who seems more concerned with keeping on schedule, with sticking to a routine, than the man. Perhaps Frost is implying that animals, unlike humans, are not made for contemplation or reflection; perhaps he is suggesting that animals are not likely to pause to notice beauty, consider nature, or ponder their relations with the world around them. On the other hand, perhaps he is simply implying that the horse is cold and wants to keep moving to generate warmth. In any case, the stanza further deepens our sense of the speaker’s isolation. Earlier he assumed that the owner of the woods would not understand why he had paused to stop and now he assumes that his

horse is impatient with his pausing. In each of the first three stanzas, then, the emphasis has been as much on the reaction of others to the speaker (and on the speaker’s reactions to them) as on the speaker’s response to the woods or the other natural surroundings. In stanza three, however, his characterization of the wind as “easy” and of the flakes as “downy” (12) implies his ability to appreciate the peace and softness of a gentle snowfall on a calm night. Such details, though, gain their real impact when we recall that the speaker had earlier referred to the present night as the “darkest evening of the year” (8) and that he had earlier referred to the lake as “frozen” (7). These facts give a literally dark, cold edge to the picture that balances, and complicates, the more appealing details of the scene. The speaker’s perception of the environment is neither simple nor simplistic; the scene may be beautiful in one respect, but in another respect (as the horse’s “shake” perhaps implies) it can also seem forbidding. Once more Frost implies a kind of complexity—both in the landscape and in the speaker’s perceptions of it—that prevents the poem from seeming naive or sentimental. The last line of stanza two thus balances (and is balanced by) the last line of stanza three.

Balance and complexity are again the hallmarks of the masterful fourth (and final) stanza. Now, for the very first time, the speaker explicitly characterizes the woods in openly emotional language. Earlier he had merely reported, in a simply factual tone, that the woods were “fill[ing] up with snow” (4); now, however, he calls them “lovely, dark and deep” (13). “[L]ovely” is the key word; it implies as much about the speaker as it says about the woods. It suggests his ability to perceive and appreciate beauty; like the reference earlier to the “little horse,” it therefore suggests a “lovely” (and loving) aspect to his own character. It is a word conventionally associated with softness and femininity, and it thus reveals a side of his personality that the speaker might normally be reluctant to share,

especially with another male (as lines 3-4 suggest). The adjectives “dark and deep” can also be read as implying the speaker’s emotional response to the woods, or they can be read as more neutrally descriptive. In either case, they balance “lovely,” for they imply that the woods are not only attractive but also potentially threatening, or at least ominous and disturbing. The darkness and depth of the woods—whether literal, metaphorical, or both—make them beyond human control, perhaps even beyond human understanding. Seen from one perspective, the woods are “lovely,” seen from another perspective, they can appear somewhat menacing or unsettling. Perhaps, from yet another perspective, even the darkness and depth of the woods can seem appealing, especially if these traits are associated with a kind of “death-wish” on the speaker’s part (Ciardi 15; see also McLaughlin 313). This could mean a desire to cease participating in the daily struggles of life, to take refuge in a kind of rest that might seem attractively “dark and deep” (see Thompson 26; Unger and O’Connor 599-600). Whether these adjectives, then, are interpreted as neutral, ominous, or seductive, they help contribute to the complex tone of the poem as a whole.

The poem ends, however, not by emphasizing the woods themselves but by stressing instead the speaker’s obligations elsewhere—the “promises” he feels committed “to keep” (14). The fact that they are “promises to keep” (rather than “duties to fulfill” or “burdens to discharge”) implies the speaker’s sense of ethical responsibility, his moral commitment to other people. He feels the weight of his “promises” (the only word in the poem with more than two syllables [see also Monte 280]). Once more, an awareness of others enters the speaker’s consciousness (and ours). However attractive or fascinating the woods may seem, the speaker feels impelled to move on: he has “miles to go before” he can “sleep” (15)—a statement that at first seems simply literal but whose meaning is deepened, and made metaphorical, when

the speaker repeats it, making it the very last line of the work. The “sleep” mentioned in line 16 is often interpreted as the symbolic sleep of death, an interpretation that makes the speaker’s journey not simply a movement through space from one point to another but also the larger journey of life, from the womb to the grave. The tone of the last line can be interpreted as one of weariness, resignation, or determined commitment, or perhaps as all at once. Certainly, the repeated phrasing of the last two lines gives the poem one last complex twist, yet the effect of the line is typical of the poem as a whole: it is quiet, it is understated, and it relies on subtle implication rather than overt statement. Like the woods themselves, this line (and the poem as a whole) invites our contemplation and reflection. 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.

Historical Context

Frost’s lyric can profitably be examined not only within the contexts of literary history but also within the broader historical context of the era in which it was first written (as well as the time that has elapsed since then). 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, an international movement that affected not only literature but also all the other arts. For instance, by the time Frost’s poem was first published in 1923, it had been ten years since Stravinsky had unleashed his stridently avant-garde ballet “The Rite of Spring” on a shocked music world. Braque and Picasso had similarly unsettled the world of painting with their unconventional cubism. Most relevantly, T. S. Eliot had charted new (and, to some readers, unattractive and incomprehensible) directions in poetry with the publication of such works as “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (first printed in

1917), while the even more unconventional Ezra Pound had been publishing practically a book a year of deliberately innovative verse since 1908. James Joyce's path-breaking and puzzling novel "Ulysses" had been appearing in serial form from 1918 to 1920 and was first printed entirely in 1922. Similarly, Eliot's lengthy poem "The Waste Land" (the instantly acknowledged masterpiece of modernism) appeared in print just a few months before Frost's lyric. Eliot's poem thus probably had no impact on the composition of Frost's "Stopping" (although see Hamilton 125), but "The Waste Land"-at least in technique, structure, manner, and form-symbolizes almost everything that Frost's lyric is not. "The Waste Land," for example, comes equipped with a Greek and Latin epigraph, unpredictable meter, an unconventional rhyme-scheme, quotations from French and German literature (in French and German), puzzling historical allusions, and footnotes provided by the poet himself. And, all of that happens just in the first eighty lines! By contrast, Frost's poem seems immediately clear and accessible: its debts to earlier (and more conservative) traditions of poetry are signaled by its use of quatrains, its simple meter, its plain speech, and its straightforward themes. Part of the historical importance of Frost's poem, therefore (and of Frost's writings in general), is its importance as a symbolic alternative to the stylistic modernism that dominated so much of twentieth-century art. Frost's poem is unforbidden, and the general ease and openness of his style, in this work and others, helps explain his enormous popularity.

Frost's poem can also be related to non-literary historical developments. The poem was first published, after all, during a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization, when the kind of rural landscape and rural lifestyle implied by this lyric were increasingly becoming outdated (and thus subjects for nostalgia). World War I had recently devastated Europe and had shaken Western civilization to its core, but Frost's poem implies an

admiration for such traditional values as an appreciation of beauty as well as an appreciation of personal responsibility. In a world that was becoming increasingly unpredictable and uncertain, Frost's poem speaks to (and for) ancient patterns of thought, feeling, and life.

Societal Context

The society implied in "Stopping by Woods" is a rural society of the sort that was fast disappearing during the time when Frost wrote. It is a society in which property rights are important and in which most property is still owned by males (1-4). It is a society that values the work ethic and ethical obligations of all types, especially "promises" made to others (14). It is a society in which males are the ones who tend to go off to work and in which males are the primary breadwinners. Thus, it is a society in which men value themselves (and are valued by others) for the work they do, the income they earn, and the social obligations they fulfill. There is precious little time for philosophizing or aesthetic contemplation (let alone artistic creativity) in this society. Most people resembling Frost's speaker were relatively poor (or were certainly lower middle class); they had to be concerned with the opinions of others, and they had to be concerned with making a living rather than reflecting, too often or too long, on life's meanings or complexities. The audience for whom Frost wrote-and who embraced Frost as they embraced no other modern poet-was an audience that appreciated plain speech, traditional forms, and the kind of thoughts and feelings a "common man" could share and comprehend. In the plain-speaking, clear-thinking, sensitive but unsentimental speaker of Frost's poem, many of Frost's first and subsequent 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.

Religious Context

The relevance of religion is even less obvious to this poem than the relevance of science and technology. God is never mentioned or clearly implied; even the precise thoughts of the speaker as he contemplates the woods are unclear: the most explicit thing he says about them is that they are “lovely, dark and deep” (13). Frost’s own religious beliefs are a matter of uncertainty and even controversy (see Cook and McWilliams 386-90), and the poem itself certainly stakes out no obvious religious position. Perhaps that fact, however, is significant, especially if we read the final lines as implying something about the nature of life (and death). Many readers believe that the last line does allude to the final and most permanent kind of “sleep,” and some readers have even argued that the speaker is tempted by a desire to die (Ciardi 15). The poem can be read as implying, however, that life’s obligations must be accepted, not refused, and that death will come when it comes and may even be a kind of rest. The philosophy the poem implies seems more Stoic than overtly Christian; certainly, a different kind of poet could easily have turned the poem into a sermon. Frost, however, does not; in this sense, as in most others, he lets readers draw their own conclusions.

Scientific & Technological Context

At first glance, Frost’s poem seems to have almost nothing to do with science and technology. However, that, of course, is precisely why these topics are relevant to this lyric. The poem was written, after all, during a period of intense scientific and technological innovation. Automobiles had been mass-produced beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century; airplanes had already proven useful as weapons in World War I; more and more of the U.S. was powered by electricity; radio broadcasts became common beginning in 1922; factory jobs were increasingly typical; and the list

could easily be extended. Yet Frost’s poem reflects none of these developments. The speaker still travels with a horse and sleigh; the nearest community is not a huge city but a small “village” (2); the nearest residence is not an urban tenement but a rural “farmhouse” (6). Frost’s poem evokes simpler times and a simpler life, and in the decades since the poem was first published it has taken on an even greater air of quaintness and nostalgia. It would be difficult to write such a poem (with such a setting and such a speaker) today, when the pace of scientific and technological change has accelerated even more than was true when Frost first composed the work. Frost wrote the poem at exactly the moment when the kind of relatively uncomplicated rural life the poem depicts and celebrates had begun to slip irretrievably into the past.

Biographical Context

Frost himself admired this poem, once remarking that the work contained “all [he] ever knew,” yet he often expressed annoyance with the elaborate interpretations the work provoked (see Greenburg and Hepburn 12). He particularly rejected claims that the poem implied any kind of “death-wish” (Henry 69), and when “a friendly critic asked if the last two lines in ‘Stopping by Woods’ referred to going to Heaven, and, by implication, death, the poet replied, ‘No, all that means is to get the hell out of there’” (see Greenburg and Hepburn 13). According to David Hamilton (relating a story reported by N. Arthur Bleau):

“‘Stopping by Woods’ was [Frost’s] favorite poem because it arose from a particularly bleak Christmas and the ‘darkest evening of the year’ just before it. Having no money, Frost loaded a wagon with farm produce and went to town, but he found no buyers and returned empty-handed, without even small gifts for the children. He felt he had failed his family, and rounding a bend in the road, by

woods, and quite near his house, the horse, who seemed to understand his mood, and who had already been given the reins, slowed and stopped, letting Frost have a good cry. 'I just sat there and bawled like a baby,' Bleau reports Frost as having said." (127)

Frost also claimed that he had written the poem in a burst of inspiration after working long and hard on a different piece, although Hamilton thinks that the idea that "Frost finished it at one sitting seems a bit of a stretch since drafts exist that indicate his revisions" (128-29). Critics have even debated how Frost intended the poem to be punctuated (Monteiro 38-40). The one aspect of the poem few readers disagree about, however, is its fine artistic success.

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Discussion Questions

1. Frost himself strongly objected to the idea that the last two lines of the poem imply anything about death, and yet many readers have interpreted the lines that way. Should a writer's personal interpretation of his or work have any special authority, or should interpretations be authorized simply by the words on the page?
2. Is the poem more (or less) effective because Frost refuses to spell out a "lesson" or "moral"?
3. How might the tone and the effect of the poem be different if the speaker were stopping by the woods on a spring or summer evening?
4. What can we infer about the personality, character, and lifestyle of the speaker, and what evidence supports those inferences?
5. Are there any details of this poem that might be accused of being sentimental?
6. How does the speaker of the poem try to behave according to conventionally "masculine" ideals? How does he also violate some common "masculine" stereotypes?
7. Should we even assume that the speaker of this poem is a male? What is the evidence for or against this assumption?
8. How would you explain the enormous popularity of this poem? What are some possible reasons that it appeals so strongly to so many readers?
9. In some editions of the poem, line 13 reads as follows: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep." In some other editions, the line is printed as follows: "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep." Does the presence or absence of the extra comma make any real difference?
10. How does the rural setting contribute to the impact of the poem? Could a poem on a similar theme take place within a large city? How might you write such a poem?

Essay Ideas

1. Read a detailed scholarly biography of Frost. What was happening in his life (and in the life of his era) in the years and months preceding his composition of this poem? How might those events have affected the writing of this lyric?
2. Study Frost's own comments about the writing of poetry, including his views of its purpose and value, and then discuss the ways this poem exemplifies his ideals.
3. Using a detailed bibliography of Frost criticism, study a variety of interpretations of this poem. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each approach, and explain which analysis you find most convincing.
4. Using a basic introduction to literary theories, discuss the comments different kinds of theorists might make about this poem. How (for instance) might a feminist read this work? How might an archetypal critic respond? What might a Marxist have to say about this lyric?
5. Study the ways nature is often described, not only in Frost's poems but also in American literature in general. How is the depiction of nature in this lyric typical of (or different from) its depiction by Frost or by other American writers?

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