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Stopping by Woods on a Fall Evening

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.

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.

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.

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.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, written by Robert Frost and first published in his 1923 collection, *New Hampshire*, is perhaps now the most famous poem in American literature. Having said that, we haven't really said very much. If the poem has surpassed Joyce Kilmer's *Trees* in number of times quoted, it doesn't signify anything about excellence.

However, I think that we all would agree that *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is indeed a very excellent poem. Our budget organizer, David Reichert, wrote about Frost the person. My goal is to discuss this particular poem, elucidating the excellence of Frost the poet.

Stopping by Woods is a short, deceptively simple poem. Only four stanzas of four lines each, meeting many of the shopworn criteria for poems that our daddies and granddaddies used to swear by: it rhymes, it has meter, and having read it, we think we know what it means. But like many things in life, and especially to a former English professor, appearances are somewhat deceiving, especially in the area of what a poem means, if we are allowed to talk about “meaning” at all in this post-modernist world. There is a plethora of criticism and explication of *Stopping by Woods*. My plan is to share my own perceptions of the poem with you first and then glance very briefly at a little of the criticism.

First for my own perceptions, untrammelled by delving into the critical texts. I would like to talk a little bit about the structure, texture and tone of the poem itself. You will see on the tables or have already in hand a copy of the poem, and I think it would be a good thing for those of you who are still awake to follow along as we talk about the text. I had thought about more contemporary visual aids, but wiser heads dissuaded me from such a radical innovation.

The first thing many readers find satisfying about this poem is that it presents quite efficiently the experience of stopping to gaze at a natural or memorable scene. As we know from even a cursory reading, the speaker of the poem has stopped by a patch of woods, apparently simply to gaze into them before proceeding on his journey. At first glance that seems to be it. And on that level, the poem is quite satisfactory. We see the speaker stopping; we hear his “little horse” giving his harness bells a shake; and we believe that we see the speaker determining to proceed with his journey wherever that takes him. It is a condensed image of a very human activity, one that anyone gawking

at a construction project on a sidewalk or stopping on a hike to gaze at a mountain peak or walking along the sidewalk looking at someone's azaleas can readily understand.

But the poem won't stop there. It won't leave it or us alone. As I said earlier, *Stopping by Woods* is deceptively simple, its vocabulary largely monosyllabic. The diction is simple and deceptively clear, the rhyme scheme deceptively easy.

I used the word "deceptively" three times in that last paragraph. There is much that is deceptive about this "simple" poem. For one thing, while we leave the poem with an initial sense of satisfaction in having seen a distilled portrait of a complete if homely human activity – a person on a journey stopping to look at something and starting up again – after we finish reading the poem, we will probably have a lingering sense of something very incomplete but more significant having occurred.

Let's look for instance at the rhyme scheme; that is one of the first things that tips us off that there is more going on here than a simple description of a gawking loiterer looking momentarily at the snowfall. While the rhyme scheme is elegant, it is also quite forceful. In each of the first three stanzas, the first, second and fourth lines rhyme. The end of the third line of each stanza is picked up in the succeeding stanza, where it rhymes with the first, second and fourth lines, until in the fourth stanza all four lines rhyme. Thus, the rhyme scheme is, as all poetry professors would be quick to tell you, a,a,b,a; b,b,c,b; c,c,d,c; d,d,d,d. Why is this significant? While the journey apparently continues, the rhyme scheme stops. Thus, while the meaning of the words indicates that the traveler may well continue with his journey, the rhyme scheme comes to a jarring halt in the fourth stanza, creating a tension between the ostensible meaning and the form of the poem itself.

Another element creates tension within the poem: a subtle but deft modulation of tone through the choice of the simple words that the poet selects to describe his experience. Let's take it stanza by stanza. In the first stanza, at first blush none of the words have what I would call a qualitative aspect, either positive or negative. The words simply describe the speaker's thoughts about the ownership of the woods, the locus of the owner's house, and the absence of the owner from the scene.

Or do they? How simple is this portrait? Our speaker does not disclose clear title to the woods: "Whose woods these are I think I know." How do you say it – emphasis on *I think* or *I know*? We will never know. And he (whoever the owner is) is not here to show us his title deed: "His house is in the village though," setting up for later analysis a dichotomy between wilderness and civilization. The speaker, the voyager is on a road, a journey, and he stops from his civilized pursuit of keeping promises to look into the wilderness, "the woods," a tension that Frost seems to like a lot, as it appears in a great deal of his earlier poetry. Another famous Frost poem with its two paths diverging in a yellow wood, *The Road Not Taken*, is a good example.

Back to the deceptively simple text. In the second stanza, things take a subtle turn. The little horse is not so simple a character as one might first think. He is apparently of a rather critical disposition, thinking it "queer" to stop without a farmhouse near. Why does the little horse think so? Well, because the speaker is stopping in a rather unprepossessing place between the woods "and frozen lake" on the "darkest evening of the year." Things are getting a little sticky here during our journey of explication because we are now getting into some levels of ambiguity, not perhaps seven types as William Empson would have it, but certainly a couple. Is it the darkest

evening of the year simply because it's December 21st, the winter solstice? Is it the darkest evening of the year because of atmospheric gloom created by what may be a heavy snowstorm? Or is it the darkest evening of the year because of the speaker's thoughts or emotions? We don't know, of course, and we will never know, but all of these questions are suggested.

The little horse continues his critical inquiry in the next stanza, giving his harness bells a shake to "ask if there is some mistake." Again, we won't know what the answer to that question is, at least not immediately, and perhaps never will but this dark, critical attitude as to the reasons for the stopping is quickly changed because the shaking harness bells are balanced against the only other sound on this dark winter evening, the "sweep/of easy wind and downy flake."

Visitors to New England, especially the island of Nantucket, will remember, of course, the Downy Flake Donut Shop formerly located downtown but now regrettably moved to a shopping center in the middle of the island; but certainly, donuts or not, the "sweep of easy wind and downy flake" lessens the foreboding created by our critical horse and that positive attitude is continued in the fourth stanza – or is it? Because in the first line of the fourth stanza we come to the most ambiguous words in the entire poem: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep." We would agree that dark and deep woods can be lovely, but we also might ask the question, are dark and deep woods just lovely or are they not full of foreboding as well? That question can never be answered either because the speaker snaps out of it, tells us that he has "promises to keep." Of course, he doesn't tell us what they are and he has "miles to go before I sleep." And, of course, he doesn't bother telling us whether the "miles to go" are metaphorical or literal

and even more so, whether the “before I sleep” concerns a night’s sleep or something more intense, the “big sleep” as Raymond Chandler called it.

What we have then is a portrait of a person stopping to look at woods on a snowy evening, seeing that the woods are “lovely, dark and deep,” but not succumbing (perhaps) to the attraction of the lovely, dark and deep woods but going back to the thought that he has “promises to keep” and “miles to go before I sleep.” Thus, is it not a portrait of a person having thoughts of some sort that want to make him linger by this perhaps bucolic, perhaps foreboding scene and probably go back to the stern path of duty on whatever the journey is?

Having gone through this elementary analysis without the benefit of much more than my own rudimentary understanding, let’s briefly take it a little deeper, with some largely filched critical analysis. Names furnished on request. Frost, of course, like many writers had a lot of fun telling audiences that he didn’t intend any of the outlandish things that this critic or that critic saw in his poems, including this one. Nevertheless, this reader believes the great man was hiding the poetic ball.

One of the most fertile references echoed in *Stopping by Woods* comes from a somewhat longer, somewhat earlier poem. Who else stopped in woods? Why Dante Alighieri, of course, in the *Commedia*, where in the middle of the journey of his life he came to himself in a dark wood. Thus it is possible to see in *Stopping by Woods* an echo of the concern of that greatest poem of Western civilization, the *Commedia* – what is the proper path on the journey of life?

This concern is emphasized, of course, in the final three lines – or is it two? –

But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

As said earlier, these lines are evocative, and while they give us a hint about meaning, they are as devoid or as full of content as the individual reader wants to make them.

Our final concern is about the “finality” of the poem itself. It is up to the reader to determine whether the poem is about a man stopping by woods, or rather stopped, stymied by what he sees in the lovely, dark and deep woods, or a man who has stopped by woods and now has determined to go on. Has he? I think the ending can be read either way. As touched upon in other respects earlier in this paper, one can emotionally emphasize either the future thrust of the infinitive phrases – “promises to keep;” “miles to go” or go with the sound of the lines – the end of the forward thrusting rhymes, with the startling dead-end repetition of the most passive of human activities – “sleep” – the last word of the poem.

I hasten to point out that when we leave the speaker and the little horse, they are still standing there, in the middle of the snow storm. If they go on (and they must – we guess), we know nothing about it. Not wishing to push things too far, I will not point out that some have proposed that Frost is talking here of death, which gives the poem an even deeper, if ominous meaning. Some, however, will want to recall that James Joyce’s story “The Dead,” published 9 years before *Stopping by Woods* in *Dubliners*, ends with the central figure gazing out a hotel window at the snow falling all over Ireland, as some have noted covering all that are and is dead in Ireland.

What do we have then: a very subtle, philosophically and linguistically rich piece of literature. It is only 16 lines long, but evocative of both elementary lonely feelings and the deepest aspirations and fears of mankind, constructed from some of the simplest words in the English language. A towering achievement, that Frost says he wrote in one night.

Which way do you want to take it? That is up to you, of course, but I would hope that you would take it both ways, or all ways – *Stopping by Woods* is a small feast of sounds; a succinct, precise portrait of a person gazing at woods on a snowy night; a look at the tug between wilderness and its fears and freedoms, and civilization and its discontents; a meditation on the role of duty in human life. It is a tonic for all of us aging Literarians as we gaze at the dark woods of our own lives and make the decision to write another paper, attend another meeting of the Club, go that additional mile, fending off, for the moment, the final sleep. In three simple words, a great poem.

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