

A Critical Reading of Robert Frost's Poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'

Shridhar Bhat

Assistant Professor of English

Dr. G. Shankar Government Women's First Grade College, Ajjarkadu, Udupi-576101

Abstract

The poem captures the relationship between man and Nature and also highlights the conflict between wishes and obligations we quite often face in our lives. The poem effectively brings out a subtle tension between the timeless attraction of the Nature and the pressing obligations of the present moment. This poem most convincingly depicts the boundaries and limits within which human beings normally go through the journey of their lives, and which do not allow them to get derailed from their respective paths.

Key words

Woods, snow-clad, enticing, mesmerizing, queer, solstice, obligation

1. Introduction

The poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', written by Robert Frost and published in 1923, is one of the most popular poems in English literature. The poem revolves round a splendid winter scene involving beautiful snowy woods, a horse and its rider. The poem presents the perspectives of an adult, who stops by the woods to enjoy the mesmerizing beauty of Nature. It brings before the readers' eyes the eye-catching beauty of the snow-laden woods on a winter evening. The idea of 'stopping' expressed in the beginning of the poem continues until the traveler decides to resume his journey. The temptation to watch the enticing beauty of the woods and then realizing one's duties mark the central idea of the poem. The poem comprises the thoughts of an adult, the reason as to why he takes a moment off to pause in the quiet woods to watch its beauty, forgetting all his worldly affairs, and why he is compelled to resume his journey.

2. Poem at a Glance

On a dark winter evening, the narrator stops his horse to watch the beauty of the snow-covered woods on his way to an unknown destination. The first line of the poem immediately grabs the reader's attention. The speaker says, "Whose woods these are I think I know." There is a gentle, slightly mysterious atmosphere created by the remaining lines of the first stanza which suggest that the owner of the woods lives in the village and hence would not see the narrator enjoying the beauty of his woods.

The second stanza throws light on the reaction of the rider's horse to his act of stopping. The horse thinks that it is 'queer' on the part of the narrator to stop without a farm-house nearby. Moreover, it is the 'darkest' evening of the year. The word 'darkest' may indicate the narrator's emotional state or perception of the undisclosed task at hand. 'The darkest evening of the year' may also suggest the Winter solstice, the longest night of the year which usually happens around December 21st or 22nd in the Northern Hemisphere.

The speaker's horse is confused. He shakes the bells on his harness, reminding the rider that he has many miles to cover. The horse may be taken as a symbol of intuition which alerts the rider to focus on the reality that he ought to move ahead. The only other sound that the speaker hears is the sweep of easy wind and the sound of the flakes falling on the leaves of the trees.

The woods are lovely, restful, seductive, dark, and deep- like deep sleep, like oblivion. The narrator would prefer to watch the mesmerizing beauty of the woods, in spite of his horse's impatience, but he has "promises to keep"- obligations that he cannot ignore even if he wants to. It is unclear what his specific obligations are.

The last two lines: And miles to go before I sleep/ And miles to go before I sleep- make a strong claim to be the most celebrated example of repetition in English poetry. Frost's decision to repeat the last line can be interpreted in several ways. On one hand, it reiterates the idea that the narrator has responsibilities that he has promised to fulfill. The repetition serves as a reminder to the narrator as if he would ultimately decide to stay in the woods unless he forces himself to remember his responsibilities. On the other hand, the narrator's "promises to keep" can also be seen as a reference to traditional duties of an American farmer in New England. In a society, where hard work is valued above everything else, the act of watching the beauty of the snow-covered woods may be viewed as a trivial indulgence. The narrator is well aware of the fact that this behaviour

is not appropriate. The phrase “miles to go” suggests life’s journey and the “sleep” suggests death. The basic conflict in the poem, resolved in the last stanza, is between the attraction towards the beauty of the woods and the pull of responsibility outside the lure of the woods. The question also arises whether the poem express a death wish considered and then discarded or whether it merely describes the temptation to halt and watch the natural beauty while responsibilities are forgotten for a while.

3. Major themes

In poetry, themes are major ideas explored by the poet through a poem's characters and setting. The major themes of isolation, duty/responsibility and the tranquility found in nature are the dominant themes in the poem. The idyllic lure of nature and its ability to distract human beings from their duty are strong themes here.

3.1 Isolation

The speaker seems to find comfort in isolation. The first three stanzas focus on the fact that the speaker and his horse are alone and unnoticed as they stop in the dark woods. The lines like "He will not see me stopping here," "To stop without a farmhouse near," and "The only other sound's the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake" remind the reader that the events of the poem take place far away from the busy world. The narrator enjoys the solitude of his journey and being isolated for some time.

3.2 The Tranquility of Nature

The poem also dwells on the tranquility of nature which lures the narrator away from his societal obligations for some time. The "lovely, dark and deep" woods constitute the primary focus.

3.3 Duty/Responsibility

The poem also deals with the theme of duty and responsibility on the part of a human being. Despite the peace and comfort the narrator seems to get while being alone in the dark woods, he has "promises to keep" that compel him to continue his journey. The narrator, the contemplative master of the horse, is highly committed to the duties of his ongoing life’s journey. His consciousness of his duty and responsibility keeps him going ahead ignoring all momentary temptations.

4. Structure and Poetic Devices

The poem consists of four stanzas wherein the first, second, and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme. The third line initiates the rhymes for the stanza which appears next. For instance, in the third stanza, *queer*, *near*, and *year* rhyme, but *lake* rhymes with *shake*, *mistake*, and *flake* in the following stanza. However, there is an exception to this pattern in the last stanza, where the third line rhymes with the previous two and is repeated as the fourth line. The rhyme scheme hence is aaba bbcb ccdc dddd.

Though the poem is seemingly simple, it is loaded with meaning on account of the use of many literary devices. Imagery is used to make readers feel things through their senses. The poet has used the images for the sense of sight such as the snow-covered woods, house, horse, frozen lake etc. These images help the readers perceive the woods as a source of solace and comfort to a lonely traveler.

There are two extended metaphors in the poem. The last line of the third stanza, “sweep of easy wind and downy flake” and the last line with repetition, “And miles to go before I sleep.” Here, miles represent life’s long journey, while sleep represents death.

We can notice that enjambment, a poetic device in which one line runs into another without a loss of sense, is employed throughout the poem.

5. Conclusion

The poem is thus symbolic of the life’s long journey which is embedded with responsibility and loyalty towards life’s purposes. The speaker, who stops by the snow-clad woods on a snowy evening, takes in the lovely scene in near-silence and is tempted to stay longer. But soon, he acknowledges the pull of obligations and the considerable distance yet to be traveled before sleep. Thus the poet conveys the message that one must focus on life’s goals without yielding to temptations which cause distractions.

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