

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

Complete Text

*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 5
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. 10
The only other sounds 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, 15
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Summary

On the surface, this poem is simplicity itself. The speaker is stopping by some woods on a snowy evening. He or she takes in the lovely scene in near-silence, is tempted to stay longer, but acknowledges the pull of obligations and the considerable distance yet to be traveled before he or she can rest for the night.

Form

The poem consists of four (almost) identically constructed stanzas. Each line is iambic, with four stressed syllables:

Within the four lines of each stanza, the first, second, and fourth lines rhyme. The third line does not, but it sets up the rhymes for the next stanza. For example, in the third stanza,

queer, near, and year all rhyme, but *lake* rhymes with *shake, mistake, and flake* in the following stanza.

The notable exception to this pattern comes in the final stanza, where the third line rhymes with the previous two and is repeated as the fourth line.

Do not be fooled by the simple words and the easiness of the rhymes; this is a very difficult form to achieve in English without debilitating a poem's content with forced rhymes.

Commentary

This is a poem to be marveled at and taken for granted. Like a big stone, like a body of water, like a strong economy, however it was forged it seems that, once made, it has always been there. Frost claimed that he wrote it in a single nighttime sitting; it just came to him. Perhaps one hot, sustained burst is the only way to cast such a complete object, in which form and content, shape and meaning, are alloyed inextricably. One is tempted to read it, nod quietly in recognition of its splendor and multivalent meaning, and just move on. But one must write essays. Or study guides.

Like the woods it describes, the poem is lovely but entices us with dark depths—of interpretation, in this case. It stands alone and beautiful, the account of a man stopping by woods on a snowy evening, but gives us a come-hither look that begs us to load it with a full inventory of possible meanings. We protest, we make apologies, we point to the dangers of reading poetry in this way, but unlike the speaker of the poem, we cannot resist.

The last two lines are the true culprits. They make a strong claim to be the most celebrated instance of repetition in English poetry. The first “And miles to go before I sleep” stays within the boundaries of literalness set forth by the rest of the poem. We may suspect, as we have up to this point, that the poem implies more than it says outright, but we can't insist on it; the poem has gone by so fast, and seemed so straightforward. Then comes the second “And miles to go before I sleep,” like a soft yet penetrating gong; it can be neither ignored nor forgotten. The sound it makes is “Ahhh.” And we must read the verses again and again and offer trenchant remarks and explain the “Ahhh” in words far inferior to the poem. For the last “miles to go” now seems like life; the last “sleep” now seems like death.

The basic conflict in the poem, resolved in the last stanza, is between an attraction toward the woods and the pull of responsibility outside of the woods. What do woods represent?

Something good? Something bad? Woods are sometimes a symbol for wildness, madness, the pre-rational, the looming irrational. But these woods do not seem particularly wild. They are someone's woods, someone's in particular—the owner lives in the village. But that owner is in the village on this, the darkest evening of the year—so would any sensible person be. That is where the division seems to lie, between the village (or “society,” “civilization,” “duty,” “sensitivity,” “responsibility”) and the woods (that which is beyond the borders of the village and all it represents). If the woods are not particularly wicked, they still possess the seed of the irrational; and they are, at night, dark—with all the varied connotations of darkness.

Part of what is irrational about the woods is their attraction. They are restful, seductive, lovely, dark, and deep—like deep sleep, like oblivion. Snow falls in downy flakes, like a blanket to lie under and be covered by. And here is where many readers hear dark undertones to this lyric. To rest too long while snow falls could be to lose one's way, to lose the path, to freeze and die. Does this poem express a death wish, considered and then discarded? Do the woods sing a siren's song? To be lulled to sleep could be truly dangerous. Is allowing oneself to be lulled akin to giving up the struggle of prudence and self-preservation? Or does the poem merely describe the temptation to sit and watch beauty while responsibilities are forgotten—to succumb to a mood for a while?

The woods sit on the edge of civilization; one way or another, they draw the speaker away from it (and its promises, its good sense). “Society” would condemn stopping here in the dark, in the snow—it is ill advised. The speaker ascribes society's reproach to the horse, which may seem, at first, a bit odd. But the horse is a domesticated part of the civilized order of things; it is the nearest thing to society's agent at this place and time. And having the horse reprove the speaker (even if only in the speaker's imagination) helps highlight several uniquely human features of the speaker's dilemma. One is the regard for beauty (often flying in the face of practical concern or the survival instinct); another is the attraction to danger, the unknown, the dark mystery; and the third—perhaps related but distinct—is the possibility of the death wish, of suicide.

Not that we must return too often to that darkest interpretation of the poem. Beauty alone is a sufficient siren; a sufficient protection against her seduction is an unwillingness to give up on society despite the responsibilities it imposes. The line “And miles to go before I sleep” need not imply burden alone; perhaps the ride home will be lovely, too. Indeed, the line could be read as referring to Frost's career as a poet, and at this time he had plenty of good poems left in him.