Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening Study Guide

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening by Robert Frost

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Introduction

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," one of Robert Frost's most well-known poems, was published in his collection called *New Hampshire* in 1923. This poem illustrates many of the qualities most characteristic of Frost, including the attention to natural detail, the relationship between humans and nature, and the strong theme suggested by individual lines. In this poem, the speaker appears as a character. It is a dark and quiet winter night, and the speaker stops his horse in order to gaze into the woods. The speaker projects his own thoughts onto the horse, who doesn't understand why they have stopped; there's no practical reason to stop. The woods are ominously tempting and acquire symbolic resonance in the last stanza, which concludes with one of Frost's often-quoted lines, "miles to go before I sleep." One interpretation of this stanza is that the speaker is tempted toward death which he considers "lovely, dark and deep," but that he has many responsibilities to fulfill before he can "sleep."

Author Biography

Born in San Francisco, Frost was eleven years old when his father died, and his family relocated to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where his paternal grandparents lived. In 1892, Frost graduated from Lawrence High School and shared valedictorian honors with Elinor White, whom he married three years later. After graduation, Frost briefly attended Dartmouth College, taught at grammar schools, worked at a mill, and served as a newspaper reporter. He published a chapbook of poems at his own expense, and contributed the poem "The Birds Do Thus" to the *Independent,* a New York magazine. In 1897 Frost entered Harvard University as a special student, but left before completing degree requirements because of a bout with tuberculosis and the birth of his second child. Three years later the Frosts' eldest child died, an event which led to marital discord and which, some critics believe, Frost later addressed in his poem "Home Burial."

In 1912, having been unable to interest American publishers in his poems, Frost moved his family to a farm in Buckinghamshire, England, where he wrote prolifically, attempting to perfect his distinct poetic voice. During this time, he met such literary figures as Ezra Pound, an American expatriate poet and champion of innovative literary approaches, and Edward Thomas, a young English poet associated with the Georgian poetry movement then popular in Great Britain. Frost soon published his first book of poetry, *A Boy's Will* (19 I 3), which received appreciative reviews. Following the success of the book, Frost relocated to Glouces tershire, England, and directed publication of a second collection, *North of Boston* (1914). This volume contains several of his most frequently anthologized pieces, including "Mending Wall," "The Death of the Hired Man," and "After ApplePicking." Shortly after *North of Boston* was published in Great Britain, the Frost family returned to the United States, settling in Franconia, New Hampshire. The American editions of Frost's first two volumes won critical acclaim upon publication in the United States, and in 1917 Frost began his affiliations with several American universities as a professor of literature and poet-in-residence. Frost continued to write prolifically over the years and received numerous literary awards as well as honors from the United States government and American universities. He recited his work at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and represented the United States on several official missions. Though he received great popular acclaim, his critical reputation waned during the latter part of his career. His final three collections received less enthusiastic reviews, yet contain several pieces acknowledged as among his greatest achievements. He died in Boston in 1963.

Poem 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
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.

Plot Summary

Line 1:

In this opening stanza, the setting is clarified as a winter evening in a rural environment. The speaker desires to watch snowfall quietly in some woods. While these woods belong to someone, that person is not present and so will not protest if the speaker trespasses.

Lines 5-8:

The speaker emphasizes that he has no practical reason to stop, that he is stopping for the beauty of the scene only. However, in line 8, an element of darkness appears, which can indicate that all is not well. Because the speaker also emphasizes the cold with "frozen lake," readers begin to understand that the poem may not be a simple lighthearted celebration of nature.

Lines 9-12:

Although this stanza begins with an auditory image, the shaking of the harness bells, the greater emphasis of the stanza is on silence. Although the speaker can hear the "easy wind," such a sound is gentle, nearly as silent as the falling of the snow. The slight alliteration in line 11, "sound's -the sweep," mimics the sound of this wind.

Lines 13-14:

In this stanza, the speaker emphasizes his attraction to the unknown and perhaps the dangerous. He is tempted to go farther into the woods which are "lovely" but are also "dark and deep." He can't, however, lose himself in these woods because he has obligations to fulfill. Here, his life in a social community conflicts somewhat with his desire for communion with nature.

Lines 15-16:

The repetition of this line as the conclusion to the poem indicates that the idea contained in it is highly significant. Although the speaker may literally have "miles to go," the line also functions as a metaphor. He has much life to live before he can "sleep" permanently in a "dark and deep" woods. These lines suggest that although death may at times be more attractive than life to the speaker, he is nevertheless determined to choose life. The tone of the lines, however, may also indicate that the speaker is resigned to life but not necessarily enthusiastic about it.

Themes

Beauty

This poem presents nature as a standard of beauty that is so strong that it captures the speaker's attention and makes him or her halt whatever they are doing. There are not many descriptive words used to convey what it is that the speaker finds so beautiful, only "lovely," "dark" and "deep." Of these, "lovely" simply restates the whole idea of the poem, which most readers would already have gotten a sense of from the speaker's tone and actions. The darkness of the woods is an idea so important that it is mentioned twice in this poem, emphasizing a connection between beauty and mystery. The emphasis on darkness is strange, and more obvious because the poem takes place on a snowy evening, when the dominant impression would have been the whiteness blanketing everything. Some reviewers interpret the fascination with darkness as a death wish, which Frost discounted. By using light and dark imagery and having his speaker favor the dark, Frost leads the reader toward an aesthetic judgement about nature: that it is fascinating precisely for the things that humans do not understand, for the depths that consciousness cannot penetrate. The beauty of this scene is, of course, not registered by the horse, whom the poem shows to be impatient. Once again, the poem shows beauty to exist in the tension between understanding and non-understanding, which the horse does not have the mental capacity to appreciate.

The only other indication of beauty this speaker experiences is the silence of nature-"the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake." Of course, wind can be heard, but an "easy" wind would just barely be perceptible; there is nothing audible about snowflakes unless they are hard and frozen, not "downy" like soft feathers. By bringing attention to these nearly unmeasurable sounds, the poem offers us another standard for beauty. The deep dark woods do not present any appreciable pattern and the hushed blowing snow presents no melody: the source of nature's beauty lies in its mystery, not its familiarity.

Return to Nature

With sadness, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" examines just how difficult it has become in the modern world for man to stay in touch with nature. The poem is made up of contrasting images of the natural and the man-made: the woods and the village, the farmhouse and the lake, even the horse and the harness-bells. The speaker is enchanted with the things of nature, but is constantly reminded of human things, and, after a few minutes of giving in to the enchantment, decides with regret that this return to nature cannot last. In this poem humanity is represented not just by objects but by the concept of ownership. The first two words focus attention on an absent character about whom we only find out two things: that he lives in the village, away from nature, and that he owns the woods. It is the irony of this, that the owner does not appreciate what he has, that establishes the poem's mood. Man, it tells us, is wasteful.

One of the most striking things about this piece is that the human and the animal appear to ex change their values. The horse is the one who is in a hurry, who needs a place of business-a farmhouse-in order to make sense of their brief stop. H is the human who is able to temporarily put aside the idea of property ownership and destination and to appreciate the moment. The horse is impatient, the human tranquil. This shows us how completely the horse has been brought into the human world, indicating the completeness of nature's transformation to mankind's uses. Other works of literature, such as Thoreau's *Walden,* show us people casting aside their social lives in order to live with nature, but in the world presented here a brief unplanned visit with nature is all that is possible.

Duty and Responsibility

The speaker of this poem has "promises to keep," and regardless of what these promises are or who they were made to they have to be fulfilled. Obviously, the scene in the wood is important to this person, who is practically hypnotized by the falling snow. Another observer might feel that experiencing this unexpectedly beautiful scene is more important than anything, including promises, or that they are not responsible for doing what they promised because they did not know, at the time the promise was made, that this snowfall in the wood would be so attractive. Promises are broken every day by people who find some reason to forgive themselves. The speaker of this poem loves the snowfall's beauty enough to be distracted by it, but even more than that he or she values keeping a promise. The repetition of the final two lines gives us an indication of how this person feels about the responsibilities that lie ahead: they are not frightening or unpleasant, they are just tedious, involving travel, lack of sleep, and numbing repetition. Unenthusiastic about obligations but enthusiastic about the snowfall, this speaker nevertheless lives up to the promises that were made.

Style

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is written in iambic tetrameter. "Iambic" means that each metrical foot contains two syllables, an unstressed :me followed by a stressed one. "Tetrameter" means that each line contains four metrical feet. So 1 poem written in iambic tetrameter would contain 1 total of eight syllables in each line. This idea will become clearer if we scan a line, or diagram the meter:

Of easy wind and downy flake.

When the line is scanned, it will look like this: Of eas / y wind / and down / y flake.

Such metrical patterns generally make poetry sound more musical. Occasionally, a line will vary from the established pattern, which often emphasizes the importance of that line.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" also relies on rhyme to achieve some of its music. For the first three stanzas, the rhyme scheme is consistent. Its pattern is *aaba bbcb ccdc.* The fourth stanza, however, rhymes every line with d. This means that in the first stanza, lines one, two, and four rhyme with each other, with line three ("here") seeming odd. However, in stanza two, lines one, two, and four rhyme with "here," while the rhyme on line three, "lake," is picked up in stanza three. Such a pattern links the stanzas together and indicates that the ideas contained in the stanzas are strongly related.

Historical Context

"Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" was first published in 1923, when the pace of social growth was in the process of breaking out into a gallop. In all areas of life, new ways of looking at established ideas suddenly rose up and challenged tradition. In literature, old formal structures were redefined by the writings of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and T.S. Eliot; in art, Dadaism was a short-lived revolution but Cubism arrived to stay; mainstream architects started using the revolutionary ideas of Frank Lloyd Wright; and musicians including Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet invented America's indigenous music, jazz. The ideas of Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Einstein were not just the business of intellectuals anymore, but were discussed openly at dinner tables and in magazines on the grocer's rack. This sudden breakout pace of social change would naturally make people uncomfortable if they were used to slower times. Many readers probably felt like the narrator of "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" who takes a few quiet moments with nature before going on to fulfill obligations.

Often, discussions about the flood of new ideas in the 1920s will focus attention on the end of World War I in 1919. More than any war that came before it, this war made people question the value of human existence, as advances in long-range weaponry and in vehicles to shift troops quickly across long distances, and the first use of airplanes for combat, expanded the scope of human experience while crushing individual lives. As a result, many of the literary figures of the 1920s are said to have felt a sense of alienation, as if the tie between their individual lives and the world in general had been severed. This made it easy for them to break with tradition. American artists in particular became even more alienated when they found they could live much more cheaply in France than they could at home because the American dollar kept rising: in 1919 a dollar bought eight francs, in 1923 it was worth sixteen, and by 1926 it bought twenty-five francs. Separated from the American tradition, these artists could look at their country more objectively, and many chose a new style to express this new view. Robert Frost, who had lived in England from 1912 to 1915 when his literary career was just getting started, may have been able to get a clearer look at American values from that distance, but it did not lead him to a revolution in style. The words he wrote about poet Edward Arlington Robinson in 1935 were equally true about Frost himself-that he "stayed content with the old-fashioned way to be new."

Another type of alienation that became commonly known by mainstream Americans in the 1920s was the Marxist idea of "alienation of labor." Since the last decades of the nineteenth century, the world had become increasingly industrialized, which meant that a generation that had grown up on farms, as Frost had, was now for the most part living in cities. For workers who made their livings in factories, this meant selling their time to their employers during working hours. For intellectuals, it meant that society valued a factory over a stream or a meadow, because the factory provided jobs. Writers pointed out the double disgrace of workers who trampled nature while selling their own lives away for twelve or fourteen hours a day. The Russian revolution of 19 I7 was seen as a triumph for Communism, and it gave laborers hope that the trend of having power collect in the hands of a few rich men could be reversed, so that people could control their own destinies. In the 1920s, Communist organizations flourished across America, as did all labor unions and workers' organizations. Some of these groups were radical and supported violent means for changing the government, but most, such as the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, worked within the system and are still influential today.

Popular media still refer to that decade as "the Roaring Twenties," offering images of a faster paced city life increasingly controlled by automobiles and violent organized crime. To an extent, this perception is true. There were four automobiles on the road in the U.S. in 1895; in 1920 there were eight and a quarter million; by 1927 that number had doubled. The factories needed to build these machines bought people from farms and other countries to the cities. With liquor outlawed by Prohibition from 1919 to 1933, there were great profits to be made in illegally providing liquor, and the criminals who did this could only protect their profits from each other by violent means. The popular imagination focuses on the flashy, exciting images of the 1920s, but it usually misses the discomfort people felt when they saw the peaceful countryside slipping away. Robert Frost captures this mood in "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Critical Overview

Because it is so well known, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has received significant critical attention, generally positive. Writing in *The Virginia Quarterly Review,* James M. Cox states that this poem contains "haunting rhythms" which are formed partly by the "logic of the rhyme scheme." This rhyme scheme, he says, "is an expression of the growing control and determination" of the speaker. John T. Ogilvie, in his article in the *South Atlantic Quarterly,* suggests that the poem becomes richer with each reading. It has, he says, "a disconcerting way of deepening in dimension as one looks at it, of darkening in tone." A poem which might initially seem simply to describe a natural scene becomes more ominous as the reader becomes more attentive.

John C. Kemp, in his book, *Robert Frost and New England: The Poet as Regionalist,* also believes the poem is successful in part because of its structure. Here, "we find restraint, economy, and gracefully tuned cadences," he says. In this passage, Kemp is suggesting that Frost is able to use language skillfully, that he is able to draw several levels of meaning from each word and line, and that he is able to do so attractively.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Jhan Hochman is a freelance writer and currently teaches at Portland Community College, Portland, OR. In the following essay. Hochman maintains that the apparent simplicity of this popular, well-known poem invites over analysis of its meaning.

Perhaps no poem of Robert Frost is more anthologized and studied than "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The poem appeared in Frost's collection, *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* (1923) for which he won one of four Pulitzer Prizes. Even Frost called the poem his "best bid for remembrance." "Stopping," describes an unremarkable moment: a driver stopping his horse-drawn buggy to look at the woods, his horse shaking the harness bells which the driver thinks is the horse's way of saying, "There must be some mistake," and the driver deciding it is time to move on. It is not known who the person is, nor whether male or female. Neither is it known from where or to where the driver is going, nor why, and the promises the driver must keep also go unexplained. Finally no clue is supplied as to where this scene takes place. Here then, is a poem that functions as a perfect vehicle upon which to heap meaning, since, one is likely to think, the mere situation of stopping and looking at woods surely cannot be all there is to the poem. The reader feels compelled to read into and perhaps even overread the poem. Frost complained that the poem was overinterpreted, especially when critics remarked that "sleep" probably meant death. Still Frost should be expected of some good-natured trickery here: the poem seems deliberately fashioned to lure its readers into either a simplistic underreading or an anxious overreading. The poem itself comes to function like the "lovely" woods it describes: one is either prone to simply drive by and regard the snowy woods as if a beautiful landscape painting or photograph, or, on the other hand, tempted to plunge into the woods, become overwhelmed by the "forces" or the "deeper meanings" of the forest.

Just imagine four possible (overreadings of the poem. First, the driver contemplates the purity of life without sin (snow), but decides one must move on-spurred on by the bestial horse-before living as sinless a life as if one were sleeping or dead. Or the interpretation can be just the opposite: the reader contemplates a fallen nature represented by the woods and wants to indulge in sin, but at the last moment is reined in by the harnessed horse. Third: the driver contemplates the coldness of the snow and is tempted to give up all relationships and become a hermit, but the horse reminds the driver of another presence-in-need and the driver is re minded that a world of relationships is crucial. Fourth, the driver is suicidal since it is the "darkest evening" of the year and wants to walk out into the snowy, dark and deep woods and perish. But the living and dependent horse calls him back with a shake of the harness bells. There are, of course, many more possible interpretations, for instance, the driver resists the siren song of the contemplative life in nature and chooses a life of responsibility and activity in culture. But whatever the interpretation, the question is, if reading after reading can be spun out, what is the point?

On the other hand it can be decided that if the poem can be read in almost any fashion it becomes meaningless. Adopting one interpretation then seems like the superior way in which to come to terms with "Stopping." The interpretation most likely to result is the one that best fits what the reader might think in a similar situation. Or, with research into Frost, one might adopt the reading that best fits with Frost's outlook and sensibilities even if it grates against one's own.

Problems, however, exist with either strategy. With the multiplication of interpretations, the poem turns into a runny and complicated mush. On the other hand, if only one "best" explanation is settled for, the poem turns into a thin broth fit only for fragile intestinal tracts. Instead of settling for either the overly processed concoction or decoction of Frost's poem, it might be better to distance ourselves a little bit, study *how* it is the poem lures the reader into (and here I switch metaphors) either using the poem like an old, nicked-up knife, employing it for almost any kind of job, even tasks for which it is ill-suited, or, conversely, seldom "using" it, as if the poem were some marble bust on a pedestal in an alcove. Frost wished that poems would be studied more as performances or processes and less used or regarded as finished objects. This means attempting to understand why the poem has the shape it does, and contains the words it contains, all for the purpose of finding out in what ways the poem best functions. This may be the preferable solution to dealing with an object that will serve us and it better by using it as neither a universal tool nor a fragile and expensive museum piece.

Within a horizon of rather traditional formal limitation based on the number four, that is, iambic tetrameter (four beats or pairs of syllables consisting of an unaccented syllable foil owed by an accented syllable) in four stanzas of four-lines each, Frost chiselled out for "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" an ingenious form of interlocking rhyme: the third unrhymed line of the first three stanzas provokes the subsequent stanza's rhymed sound. Further, Frost repeated the last two lines of the poem partially as a matter of form: "What it [the repetend or repeated lines] does is save me from a third line promising another stanza. ... I considered for a moment four of a kind in the last stanza but that would have made five including the third in the stanza before it. I considered for a moment winding up with a three line stanza. The repetend was the only logical way to end such a poem." What results is a satisfying presentation of traditional form with an individual variation demanded by the poem's own structure. Upon a foundation of tradition, Frost erected a canny interlocking rhyme scheme, upon which he attached a consistent and efficient way of solving a formal problem-so elegant is Frost's solution of the repetend for an ending, that its formal perfection is likely to go unnoticed even as it attracts us with its peaceful, sleeplike repetition. The four stanzas, the four lines per stanza with four beats in each line, and the four end-rhymes yield a kind of rational object, one made of straight lines that produces a kind of box-like or grid structure. Such a structure can remind one of conventionality, of a person who does the usual or the normal, as when someone says, "He's square," or "She's straight." Frost himself said that "Stopping" illustrated a "commitment to convention." Form, then, appears to be reinforcing content, the fourfold structure lending itself to the driver's decision to move on, to stop dreaming and get back to a world of responsibilities and practicality.

The first stanza sets a rather mischievous tone for the poem. First, worried that the owner of the woods might see him stopping, the driver seems gratified the owner lives in the village. Such meditations are common to an environment in which private property replaces unboundaried nature. Stopping is increasingly called "loitering," "trespassing," or it simply arouses suspicion so that stoppers are self-conscious about stopping. One must, as the police say, "Keep moving," if one is to remain above suspicion. But just when the driver has established his pleasure at being above suspicion, the second stanza establishes the horse's discomfort. It is not the woods that bothers the horse so much, the driver thinks, as the absence of a farmhouse on the "darkest evening of the year." This evening might be the winter solstice on December 22, the longest night of the year. With the scene being so dark and devoid of human presence, the reader might begin to share the horse's, and maybe the driver's, mild discomfort. The third stanza intensifies the solitude of the scene through attention to sound: the only sounds being the momentary shake of harness bells, and the ongoing "easy wind" and softly falling snow. Here the reader might be simultaneously pulled in by the increasing mystery or quiet of the natural scene and the endearing way in which the driver seems to understand or overinterpret his horse's shake. As abruptly as driver and horse seem to have stopped, however, the driver resolves to go and leave behind this at least somewhat alluring forest, even if the series of adjectives, "lovely, dark, and deep" convey a complex mix of attraction and fear. The reasons for leaving the woods the driver offers are those very unspecific "promises to keep" and "miles to go." It seems like the driver is reticent to give any more information. Fortunately or unfortunately, the driver's laconic reasons are all that readers have to go on. In the end, what Frost produces is a poem that seems to hover in the zone of perfection, a poem that explains nearly everything and nothing at the very same time. In an end that never ends, the very problem with this poem is its perfection, its quality of demanding more and more discussion about something for which discussion seems pointless. As unsatisfactory as it may seem, these woods can neither be penetrated nor left behind; it is simply time to go.

Source: Jhan Hochman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Steven Monte is a free-lance writer. In the following essay, Monte reminds us that a familiar poem is not necessarily a well-understood one, and he urges us to pause and reflect on the intricacies that give depth to Frost's famous poem.

With the exception of "The Road Not Taken," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is probably Frost's best-known poem. As with many well-known poems, we may feel that familiarity equals understanding or that a poem we have read or heard enough times can't surprise us anymore. This is especially the case with "Stopping by Woods," which is not only one of the most popular American poems, but is also one written in a clear and seemingly direct style. We might even say that we like the poem precisely because of its simplicity and effortless feel. But as with a person we've been-acquainted with for a long time but don't really know, a familiar poem may change when we encounter it in unfamiliar circumstances. Where once we saw only surface and clearly defined qualities, suddenly we see depths and ambiguity. For this to happen with a poem, we often only need to stop and reflect on our experience, like the speaker in Frost's poem. One of the messages of "Stopping by Woods" seems to be just that-pausing and reflecting on experience help us re-enter life with a new understanding and sense of direction. The plot of "Stopping by Woods" is straightforward: a man (we assume) narrates his experience of driving some sort of horse-drawn vehicle by privately owned woods on a snowy evening. He stops, and then contemplates how strange his halt must seem to the horse, given that it is cold and dark and there is no farmhouse in sight. The horse shakes his harness bell, an action that the man interprets as the animal asking "if there is some mistake." The man then listens to the wind and the snow and ends his account with some remarks on his experience, his responsibilities to the world, and the distance he needs to travel before he sleeps. The story could easily be true-it certainly aims to be "true to life"-but it is hard not to interpret it symbolically. Many readers over the years have felt that the man's journey toward sleep represents life's "journey" toward death, though Frost himself insisted that the last two lines were not an invocation of death. Another popular way of reading the poem is to understand the man's rejection of the woods as an acceptance of social duty and personal responsibility.

But "Stopping by Woods" is a much stranger poem than may appear at first. From the opening lines, we know that the story is being told from the speaker's point of view ("Whose woods these are I think I know"), but we may never bother to consider whom the man is addressing. The addressee of the poem can only be the man himself, who seems to be narrating the events as they occur to him, or thinking "aloud" to himself. This odd, subjective perspective is worth puzzling over, if only because it allows us to see just how self-conscious the man is. Why is he so concerned about being seen stopping by the woods? Is it simply because he fears he will be accused of trespassing on someone else's property? Perhaps he feels guilty that he has temporarily suspended his business and does not wish to be seen or see himself as someone who shirks responsibility. Or it could be that he feels guilty for indulging in a fantasy, for he is attracted to something he feels he should resist. It is hard to say what the woods represent for the man-rest, death, nature, beauty, solitude, oblivion-but it is clear that he feels he should not allow himself to give in to his desire to stay there. There is moreover a sexual dimension to his fantasy: the feminine woods ("lovely, dark and deep") are set against a world of men where promises must be kept-the world of property and business.

Whatever depths "Stopping by Woods" possesses, it gives us the impression of simplicity. How does the poem manage this? Most obviously, its language remains conversational throughout and it generally avoids twisting around the word order of spoken speech. "Stopping by Woods" also contains only one word with more than two syllables. When the poem does alter the expected word order, as in "Whose woods these are I think I know," the sound and the sense of the line help us forget that there is anything odd going on. We don't feel the line should read "I think I know whose woods these are" because we get the sense that the speaker is expressing the thought as it occurs to him: he is especially concerned with remembering who owns the woods, and he expresses his uncertainty by following his first thought with the phrase "I think I know." The insistent rhythms of the poem--every line except one is exceptionally regular in beating oot "ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum"-and the frequent rhymes add to the illusion of simplicity. Caught in the flow of the poem, we tend not to notice that the lines "Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year" neither follow logically from the lines that come before them nor form a complete sentence on their own. Once again, we might feel that we are listening to the thoughts of the speaker. He is situating himself in place ("Between the woods and frozen lake") and time ("The darkest evening of the year"), where "darkest" may imply the "longest" evening of the year, December 22, the winter solstice. By calling the evening "darkest," the man suggests that he has reached a low point or a moment of crisis.

Another reason why "Stopping by Woods" seems simple is that it is structured around many familiar oppositions. A complete list of these oppositions would be unusually long for such a short poem: man and nature, masculine and feminine, emptiness and fullness, business and pleasure, movement and stopping, society and solitude, life and death, activity and sleep, and so on. Such familiar distinctions may make us feel at home in the poem, but they may also be disturbing. The categories either seem too fixed (should we only associate men with activity and business?) or too fluid (which is empty, life or death?). Oppositions also help determine the poem's organization: "Stopping by Woods" constantly alternates between inner thoughts and descriptions of the world outside. Even within its descriptive mode, the poem shifts from the visual details of the first stanza ("He will not see... To watch his woods") to the sounds of the third stanza ("harness bells... The only other sound's the sweep"). Meanwhile the second and the fourth stanzas are more reflective. In the second stanza, the man imagines what the horse is thinking. The details of "the woods and frozen lake" may be in the man's line of vision, but they may also be his way of placing the scene on a mental map, just as "darkest evening" may place the day on a mental calendar. The fourth stanza is even more subjective in its description of the woods as "lovely, dark and deep." All of this inward and outward movement and the poem's oppositions make us feel that the man is being pulled in different directions and needs to make a decision.

But before looking at the decision the man makes in the last stanza, it is worthwhile to stop and examine some of the odd features of his descriptions. Why is his horse "little"? Why is the wind "easy" and the flake "downy"? It is not enough to say "because they *are* little, easy, and downy," or even "because they appear that way to the man," for we would still be left wondering why he chose to describe these things and not others. A somewhat more inventive if unkind explanation is that Frost needed to fill up his lines with these adjectives in order to keep the poem's rhythm insistent. But perhaps we can do better. By calling the horse "little," Frost gives us a sense of the smallness of the figures in the landscape. We furthermore sense that the man is not rich and is probably fond of his animal. "Easy" and "downy" may in their own way hint at what the man is feeling. Part of the attraction of the scene seems to lie in its promise of ease and softness, its contrast to the hard world of men.

The description of the woods in the final stanza leads into the strangest and most memorable section of the poem. Why does this last stanza haunt us? It begins innocently enough and even sounds like a cliché: "The woods are lovely." But the vagueness of the description, the pulse of the line, and the repetition of sounds ("dark and deep") suggest that we are entering a kind of dreamworld. The drowsy repetition of "And miles to go before I sleep" completes this effect, and we sense that the poem is enacting what the man is feeling. The poem's close feels satisfying because it deviates from, and then reinforces, patterns that the poem has established earlier. The first three stanzas have rhymes in the first, second, and fourth lines. The third line then rhymes with the first line of the following stanza, helping us feel that all four stanzas connect like links in a chain. But the established rhythms and rhymes are disrupted in the final stanza. The line "But I have promises to keep" is not as rhythmically insistent as the other lines of the poem. It also contains the poem's only three-syllable word, "promises." Just as the man attempts to shake off his dreamy attraction to the woods, we are brought up short with this jarring line. The last two lines then feel like a fade out, not simply because of the repetition, but due to the return of the rhythm and the absence of a new linking word: all four lines of this stanza rhyme.

The speaker in "Stopping by Woods" "wakes up" to a knowledge of what he must do. He apparently decides to return to the real world and cease his dreaming. He is leaving nature and returning to society, and in so doing makes us feel that there is some irony in the poem's title: he was only "stopping by" nature, as if on a social call. At the beginning of the poem he was unsure ("I think I know"); at the end he has gained some kind of knowledge. We can think of the experience he has by the woods as either a temporary diversion or a recurring moment in his life that helps him go on. In this straight reading of the poem, the man's experience, though forcing him to confront the fact of death and the difficulties of life, consoles him (and the reader) in the end. But if this moment is, or has the potential to be, a recurrent moment in life, the poem may not be as consoling as we first thought. In this dark reading of the poem, we can't be sure whether the man has come to a decision or merely postponed it. He never actually says he has moved on and, if anything, he seems on his way to sleep. Even supposing he does continue on his journey, it is not clear that the road ahead represents a more appealing alternative to the woods. Real life may seem emptier now, and all those familiar oppositions that help us make sense of our lives are open to question. If we equate stopping by woods with reading a poem, we will confront a similar dilemma. As the man's experience should suggest, however, it is not a question of choosing between alternatives so much as it is becoming aware of new possibilities. In looking closely at a poem, we don't cancel our first experience of reading so much as we enrich it and make it more strange.

Source: Steven Monte, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Bleau shares his story of meeting Frost and speaking with him about "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Robert Frost revealed his favorite poem to me. Furthermore, he gave me a glimpse into his personal life that exposed the mettle of the man. I cherish the memory of that conversation, and vividly recall his description of the circumstances leading to the composition of his favorite work.

We were in my hometown-Brunswick, Maine. It was the fall of 1947, and Bowdoin College was presenting its annual literary institute for students and the public. Mr. Frost had lectured there the previous season; and being well received, he was invited for a return engagement. I attended the great poet's prior lecture and wasn't about to miss his encore-even though I was quartered 110 miles north at the University of Maine. At the appointed time, I was seated and eagerly awaiting his entrance-armed with a book of his poems and unaware of what was about to occur. He came on strong with a simple eloquence that blended with his stature, bushy white hair, matching eyebrows, and well-seasoned features. His topics ranged from meter to the meticulous selection of a word and its varying interpretations. He then read a few of his poems to accentuate his message.

At the conclusion of the presentation, Mr. Frost asked if anyone had questions. I promptly raised my hand. There were three other questioners, and their inquiries were answered before he acknowledged me. I asked, "Mr. Frost, what is your favorite poem?" He quickly replied, "They're all my favorites. It's difficult to single out one over another!"

"But, Mr. Frost," I persisted, "surely there must be one or two of your poems which have a special meaning to you-that recall some incident perhaps." He then astonished me by declaring the session concluded; whereupon, he turned to me and said, "Young man, you may come up to the podium if you like." I was there in an instant.

We were alone except for one man who was serving as Mr. Frost's host. He remained in the background shadows of the stage. The poet leaned casually against the lectern-beckoning me to come closer. We were side by side leaning on the lectern as he leafed the pages of the book.

"You know-in answer to your question-there is one poem which comes readily to mind; and I guess I'd have to call it my favorite," he droned in a pensive manner. "I'd have to say 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is that poem. Do you recall in the lecture I pointed out the importance of the line 'The darkest evening of the year'?" I acknowledged that I did, and he continued his thoughtful recollection of a time many years before. "Well-the darkest evening of the year is on December twenty-second-which is the shortest day of the year-just before Christmas."

I wish I could have recorded the words as he reflectively meted out his story, but this is essentially what he said.

The family was living on a farm. It was a bleak time both weather-wise and financially. Times were hard, and Christmas was coming. It wasn't going to be a very good Christmas unless he did something. So-he hitched up the wagon filled with produce from the farm and started the long trek into town.

When he finally arrived, there was no market for his goods. Times were hard for everybody. After exhausting every possibility, he finally accepted the fact that there would be no sale. There would be no exchange for him to get a few simple presents for his children's Christmas.

As he headed home, evening descended. It had started to snow, and his heart grew heavier with each step of the horse in the gradually increasing accumulation. He had dropped the reins and given the horse its head. It knew the way. The horse was going more slowly as they approached home. It was sensing his despair. There is an unspoken communication between a man and his horse, you know.

Around the next bend in the. road, near the woods, they would come into view of the house. He knew the family was anxiously awaiting him. How could he face them? What could he possibly say or do to spare them the disappointment he felt? They entered the sweep of the bend. The horse slowed down and then stopped. It knew what he had to do. He had to cry, and he did. I recall the very words he spoke. "I just sat there and bawled like a baby"-until there were no more tears.

The horse shook its harness. The bells jingled. They sounded cheerier. He was ready to face his family. It would be a poor Christmas, but Christmas is a time of love. They had an abundance of love, and it would see them through that Christmas and the rest of those hard times. Not a word was spoken, but the horse knew he was ready and resumed the journey homeward. The poem was composed some time later, he related. How much later I do not know, but he confided that these were the circumstances which eventually inspired what he acknowledged to be his favorite poem.

Source: N. Arthur Bleau,"Robert Frost's Favorite Poem," in *Frost: Centennial Essay III,* edited by Jac Tharpe, Uni versity Press of Mississippi, 1978 pp. 174-176.

Adaptations

An audio record titled "Robert Frost Reads the Poems of Robert Frost" was released in 1957 by Decca.

A video titled *Robert Frost,*part of the Poetry America Series, is available through AIMS Media.

Robert Frost, a videocassette from volume 3 of the Voices and Visions Series, is available from Mystic Fire Video.

A 1958 interview with Robert Frost is available on video cassette from Zenger.

Topics for Further Study

Write a short story about the owner of the woods finding this poem's speaker. Why is he out in the woods, instead of at his house in the village? Would he be angry? Would he befriend the poem's speaker')

Describe the horse's life: why is he so uneasy about being out in the woods, with no farmhouse around? What does he do day after day, if this is so unsettling?

Why is this poem's last line repeated? What does this tell you about what has gone on before?

Compare and Contrast

1923: The Soviet Union came into existence, expanding the Communist empire established by the Russian revolution of 1917.

1945: With the defeat of the Axis powers in World War II, the Soviet Union became one of the world's two superpowers, along with the United States.

1990: The Soviet Union disbanded after member nations demanded independence.

Today: Most former Soviet Union countries belong to the Commonwealth of Independent States: civil wars over property rights of ethnic factions break out frequently.

1923: Approximately 42 percent of the land in the United States was farmland; approximately 30 percent of the population lived on farms, down from 41 percent at the turn of the century.

1940: 46.8 percent of U.S. acreage was farmland; 23.2 percent of the population lived on farms.

1960: 49.5 percent of U.S. acreage was farmland; 8.7 percent of the population lived on farms.

1980: 44.8 percent of U.S. acreage was farmland: 2.7 percent of the population lived on farms.

Today: Machinery and bioengineering make it possible to grow greater amounts of produce in smaller spaces with fewer employees.

What Do I Read Next?

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* is an American classic and was one of Frost's favorite books, which he reread often throughout his lifetime. Like this poem, it deals with a time the author left society for the New England forest, except that in Thoreau's case it was not for a few minutes but for a few years. New editions have consistently been published since the first printing in 1854.

To explore the directions that more experimental poets such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams were taking poetry into in the] 920s, see Stanley K. Coffman's *Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry.* Published in 1951 and reprinted in 1972, this book scarcely mentions Frost, but gives theoretical and biographical information about his peers that makes Frost's individualism come into focus.

In *Robert Frost Himself,* Stanley Burnshaw draws on personal reflections of conversations, documents, letters, and the author's poems to present his biography. Much of this is thorough and interesting, although sometimes Burnshaw goes a little too far to rescue Frost's image from remarks made by the poets official biographer, Lawrence Thompson. Published in 1986.

Cleanth Brooks was one of this century's most respected literary critics and theorists. His 1939 book *Modern Poetry and the Tradition,* revised in 1967, explains the complexity of Frost's poetry and places it in the context of the poets who preceded him and his peers.

Further Study

Cramer, Jefrey S., *Robert Frost Among His Poems,* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Inc., 1996.

Cramer gives a brief but thorough background of almost every poem Frost has written. An indispensable guide.

Johnson, Paul, *Modern Times: The World from the Twenties to the Eighties.* New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1983.

Not as fun or interesting to read as Geoffrey Perrett's book listed below, but full of more factual information.

Perrett, Geoffrey, *Americans in the Twenties,* New York: Touchstone Books, 1983.

This book is filled with fascinating anecdotes that bring the decade alive. All aspects of life are covered.

Suchard, Alan, et. al., *Modern American Poetry, 1865-1950,* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989.

The author paints a portrait of Frost as a bitter and brilliant man, quite the opposite of the impression one gets of him from his poetry.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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