

A Critical Analysis of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Ashik Istiak

Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' depicts the theme of obsession and the success of that obsessed mind to get rid of its obsession thinking about the promises which the speaker must keep. Here the most important part lies in the symbolism of 'conscience' by the 'little horse'. This conscience compels the badly obsessed mind to think and in its success the mind thinks and realizes the pointlessness of being obsessed. Frost presents the speaker of the poem as a horse rider who is tempted to stay longer stopping by a lovely scenario of a snowy evening. But his little horse' understanding of the futility to stay there and shaking of its body, shakes the mind of the traveler and he realizes the pull of obligations and the considerable distance yet to be travelled. This stopping resembles the theme of obsession as an obsessed mind stops thinking of anything else without the desired object and the realization of the mind in the last stanza suggests the success of it to get rid of the obsession.

In the very first stanza Frost talks about 'woods' which may be an area where there are many trees but the area does not belong to the narrator or the speaker of the poem. He, on his way, suddenly stops in a woody area of someone else whom the speaker knows. Even the speaker knows that his stopping in that area will be unknown to the actual owner, who lives in the village. Frost begins-

“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.”

The last line describes the cause of stopping in this area and, that is, to watch the beauty, the magnificence of the woods' filling up with snow. These four lines, therefore, express a totally obsessed mind and the reason of obsession is the term 'beauty' which is very common in the case of obsession. The poet may want to exemplify the thousands of people who pass their whole life hankering after beauty or rather subjectivity. These kinds of people do not make a quest for objectivity which is the beauty in itself as the realm of objective beauty is far away from their thinking. They cannot be a true seeker of knowledge which lies in objectivity. An obsessed mind never understands that its obsession is mere subjectivity and it is totally pointless. This obsessed mind, therefore, stops thinking practically just like the traveler in this poem stops in an area where he should not stop and stare at the beauty of that place. The obsessed mind cannot understand the danger which he might encounter stopping there. This mind is only emotional which always is mastered by its senses.

This can also be interpreted in a somewhat different way. It is considered that human mind always possesses the intention to touch or glut something which is prohibited. Anything that is prohibited seems a matter of supreme interest to mankind. Here the speaker stops in a place which is not his own and of another people known to him. He thinks that there is no harm in stopping here because the master of that place will not see him. So, the speaker gets into a

prohibited area and gluts the beauty of woods filling up with snow. This beauty of the lovely snowy evening can be interpreted as the intention of human mind to consider everything beautiful which is but of others object. The house of a friend seems more beautiful or the wife of a neighbor seems more attractive. Here also the traveler stops in a place of others belonging thinking that it is very beautiful. It is like the myth of Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve used to have all the blessings being in heaven but they finally show their characters by eating the forbidden fruit. The obsession of Adam and Eve regarding the forbidden apple can be compared to the obsession of the speaker of this poem as in both cases the human mind is involved in doing something prohibited: Adam and Eve eat the forbidden apple and the speaker here stops in a place where he should not be. The universal human nature of curiosity comes here as the main object.

In the second stanza Frost introduces the 'little horse' to symbolize the conscience. This little horse is anxious for his master who has stopped in a place where there is no farmhouse near. And the last two lines give a description of the evening and the surroundings of the place. Frost says-

“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.”

So, the place is a distant place from the society, village, and responsibility as there is no farmhouse near and the evening which seems fascinating to the speaker, is the 'darkest' evening of the year. The place is “[b]etween woods and frozen lake”. So, to rest in a place like this will surely be dangerous. But to the horse rider of this poem all these 'darkest evening', 'frozen lake' seem untouchable as he is obsessed with the seductive beauty of the place. His little horse in fact seems conscious about the danger of this place and it is surely not obsessed like its master. This little horse can be interpreted as the 'conscience'. A patient thinking about the symbolism of a man on his horse will more easily lead to the depth of the interpretation of conscience. If humans are considered as a traveler in his life, their conscience should be the vehicle of them to travel all through the life. Only conscience makes human to think about right and wrong, selfishness and promises. Every human has to face his conscience to make a decision whether it is right or wrong. Sometimes human fails to think practically and logically, and gets penetrated by the outburst of his desire. In these situations, only his conscience can show a human a path to overcome his faulty thinking and compel him to act logically. Here Frost through the symbolism of 'little horse' shows the conscience in its business to remind his physical master about the faulty decision to rest in a place of danger. All the negative imageries such as 'frozen lake', 'darkest evening' clarify the danger of this place. These negative images make the reader think how the place can be seemed lovely. Again the universal human nature is shown up in its color. Every evil thing has a seductive and beautiful look to mesmerize the people. Here the place has the same kind of look to attract the rider. That is why the horse rider is also in no hurry to think that there is no farmhouse near and it will be dangerous to stop there. But his conscience being

aware thinks it 'queer' to stop in a place like that. So, the battle of conscience is begun in this stanza to take its physical entity to the right path.

In the third stanza Frost presents how the conscience compels human mind to make it aware of the possible danger and what the physical entity has to do. Here the little horse shakes its body to make his master think about the mistake of him. Frost writes-

“He gives his harness bells a shake

To ask if there is some mistake.

The only other sounds the sweep

Of easy wind and downy flake.”

When the conscience fails to show its master his fault in an easy way, it compels hard to raise its voice inside him. Here the horse shakes its body and this shaking is very significant as this is the last thing a conscience can do to make the human mind realize. By this shaking the horse has tried its best to shake the whole thinking of its master and make his master rethink which unquestionably suggests that the conscience is in its utmost attempt to take the human mind to the way it should be. The last two lines of this stanza again remind the reader about the danger of this place as there remain the sounds of snowfall. This snowfall though seems easy and nice, has a dreadful freezing effect in its surrounding. In this freezing area, the rider will die if he stays longer. Thus Frost suggests the violence in innocence. The snowfall's violent and destructive look is disguised in its lovely innocent appearance. The conscience is nothing but trying to show this truth.

Both these second and the third stanzas can be interpreted in Freudian Psychology. If the stopping of the rider is interpreted as an impulsive nature of the 'Id', the 'little horse' should be the 'ego' which makes a barrier between them. Ego tries to control the impulse of the id and behaves logically and practically where id is illogical. When the desire or impulse of 'id' gets stronger, the 'ego' tries harder. And this harder attempt is the shaking of the body of the horse. So, it can be said that the battle between 'id' and 'ego' takes place in these two stanzas.

Finally, in the last stanza depicts the 'realization' of the human mind that he is in the wrong path and he remembers what he really needs to do. The 'ego' wins the battle to make the rider realize and get rid of its obsession. Frost says-

“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.”

The obsessed mind finally realizes that the woods or his desired objects are lovely but they are also ‘dark’ and ‘deep’. The darkness and depth clearly suggests the evil here and the rider is no more to be mesmerized by the evil beauty. He remembers his promises which he has to keep. These promises can be the promises to himself to make his life worthy, or promises to the family or may be the state. In a nutshell, it can be his ‘responsibilities’ which he says ‘his promises’. In this stopping here he had almost forgotten them but at last he remembers them by the attempt of his horse or the conscience. He knows that he has yet to travel a long way before he sleeps. As he must sleep someday, he must go on travelling as long as he possesses his strength. If his ‘sleeping’ is considered as ‘his death’, the idea seems more clear. He has to go on living life before he dies and he has to make his promises kept meanwhile. He has to pass through all the obstacles and falsehood in his way to make his life worthy before he dies. He must fulfill his goal before he dies. So, he is not to be obsessed when the youth in its full strength prevails in him. He will be doing his job as long as he lives and as long as the blood in him is in its full swing.

Thus Frost finishes a masterful presentation of obsession and freedom from obsession. The poem presents not just a traveler being mesmerized rather it presents the universal human character. And here lies the significance of the journey of human life.