

“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.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (1923)

On a dark winter evening, the narrator stops his sleigh to watch the snow falling in the woods. At first he worries that the owner of the property will be upset by his presence, but then he remembers that the owner lives in town, and he is free to enjoy the beauty of the falling snow. The sleigh horse is confused by his master's behavior — stopping far away from any farmhouse — and shakes his harness bells in impatience. After a few more moments, the narrator reluctantly continues on his way.

Analysis

In terms of text, this poem is remarkably simple: in sixteen lines, there is not a single three-syllable word and only sixteen two-syllable words. In terms of rhythmic scheme and form, however, the poem is surprisingly complex. The poem is made up of four stanzas, each with four stressed syllables in iambic meter. Within an individual stanza, the first, second, and fourth lines rhyme (for example, "know," "though," and "snow" of the first stanza), while the third line rhymes with the first, second, and fourth lines of the following stanza (for example, "here" of the first stanza rhymes with "queer," "near," and "year" of the second stanza).

One of Frost's most famous works, this poem is often touted as an example of his life work. As such, the poem is often analyzed to the minutest detail, far beyond what Frost himself intended for the short and simple piece. In reference to analyses of the work, Frost once said that he was annoyed by those "pressing it for more than it should be pressed for. It

means enough without its being pressed...I don't say that somebody shouldn't press it, but I don't want to be there."

The poem was inspired by a particularly difficult winter in New Hampshire when Frost was returning home after an unsuccessful trip at the market. Realizing that he did not have enough to buy Christmas presents for his children, Frost was overwhelmed with depression and stopped his horse at a bend in the road in order to cry. After a few minutes, the horse shook the bells on its harness, and Frost was cheered enough to continue home.

The narrator in the poem does not seem to suffer from the same financial and emotional burdens as Frost did, but there is still an overwhelming sense of the narrator's unavoidable responsibilities. He would prefer to watch the snow falling in the woods, even with his horse's impatience, but he has "promises to keep," obligations that he cannot ignore even if he wants to. It is unclear what these specific obligations are, but Frost does suggest that the narrator is particularly attracted to the woods because there is "not a farmhouse near." He is able to enjoy complete isolation.

Frost's decision to repeat the final line could be read in several ways. On one hand, it reiterates the idea that the narrator has responsibilities that he is reluctant to fulfill. The repetition serves as a reminder, even a mantra, 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 repeated line could be a signal that the narrator is slowly falling asleep. Within this interpretation, the poem could end with the narrator's death, perhaps as a result of hypothermia from staying in the frozen woods for too long.

The narrator's "promises to keep" can also be seen as a reference to traditional American duties for a farmer in New England. In a time and a place where hard work is valued above all things, the act of watching snow fall in the woods may be viewed as a particularly trivial indulgence. Even the narrator is aware that his behavior is not appropriate: he projects his insecurities onto his horse by admitting that even a work animal would "think it queer."