Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

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.

SUMMARY

The speaker thinks about who owns the woods that he or she is passing through, and is fairly sure of knowing the landowner. However, the owner's home is far away in the village, and thus he is physically incapable of seeing the speaker pause to watch the snow fall in the forest.

The speaker thinks his or her horse must find it strange to stop so far from any signs of civilization. Indeed, they are surrounded only by the forest and a frozen lake, on the longest night of the year.

The horse shakes the bells on its harness, as if asking if the speaker has made a mistake by stopping. The only other sound besides the ringing of these bells is that of the wind and falling snowflakes, which the speaker likens to the feathers of goose down.

The speaker finds the woods very alluring, drawn both to their darkness and how vast and all-encompassing they seem. However, the speaker has obligations to fulfill elsewhere. Thus, though he or she would like to stay and rest, the speaker knows there are many more miles to go before that will be possible.

THEMES

NATURE VS. SOCIETY

In "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening," the speaker describes stopping to watch the snow fall while riding a horse through the woods at night. While alone in the forest, the speaker reflects on the natural world and its implicit contrast with society. Though Frost's poem resists a definitive interpretation, the natural world it depicts is at once "lovely" and overwhelming. The fact that it seemingly lures the speaker to linger in the dark and cold suggests that nature is both a tempting and a threatening force, a realm that resists people's efforts to tame it while also offering respite from the demands of civilized life.

The poem presents the natural world as distinctly separate from human society. The poem begins with the speaker thinking about who owns the property he is passing through—"Whose woods these are I think I know"—yet it's clear that there's no one there to actually stop the speaker from trespassing. The owner's "house is in the village," meaning "he will not see" the speaker. While this owner may *think* the woods belong to him, he can't control who passes by "his" land any more than he can stop the woods from "fill[ing] up with snow." The land owner's absence and futility, in turn, suggest that the human impulse to dominate the natural world is misguided.

The complete lack of signs of civilization, meanwhile, further emphasizes the distance between society and nature. There are no farmhouses nearby, and the only sound apart from the "harness bells" of the speaker's horse is that of the wind. Though the speaker acknowledges that, at least conceptually, he or she stands on someone else's woods, the physical isolation indicates the impotence of conceptual structures like ownership in the first place. In other words, people can say they "own" land all they want, but that doesn't really mean anything when those people aren't around. Far from the sights and sounds of the village, the speaker stands alone "Between the woods and frozen lake" on the "darkest evening of the year." Together all these details again present nature as a cold and foreboding space distinct from society.

At the same time, however, the woods are "lovely" enough that they tempt the speaker to stay awhile, complicating the idea of nature as an entirely unwelcoming place for human beings. Indeed, though the setting seems gloomy, the speaker also recounts the "sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake." This language makes the setting seem calm and comforting. The speaker finds the wind "easy" or mellow and the snowflakes "downy," like the soft feathers that fill a blanket or pillow. Finally,

in the final stanza, the speaker definitively says, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep." This suggests the speaker's particular interest in the solitude that the woods offers.

Though the speaker knows that he or she "has promises to keep"—suggesting certain societal demands that pull the speaker to continue—the woods are a tempting place to stop and rest. For a moment, the speaker is able to pause for no reason other than to simply watch the falling snow. However raw and cold, then, nature also allows for the kind of quiet reflection people may struggle to find amidst the stimulation of society.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14
- Lines 15-16

SOCIAL OBLIGATION VS. PERSONAL DESIRE

Though the speaker is drawn to the woods and, the poem subtly suggests, would like to stay there longer to simply watch the falling snow, various responsibilities prevent any lingering. The speaker is torn between duty to others—those pesky "promises to keep"—and his or her wish to stay in the dark and lovely woods. The poem can thus be read as reflecting a broader conflict between social obligations and individualism.

This tension between responsibility and desire is clearest in the final stanza. Although "the woods are lovely," the speaker has other things to which he or she must attend. This suggests that the speaker is only passing through the woods on some sort of business—which, in turn, helps explain how unusual it is that the speaker has stopped to gaze at the forest filling with snow. Indeed, the fact that the speaker's horse must "think it queer"—even a "mistake"—that they're stopping implies that the speaker's world is typically guided by social interaction and regulations, making solitary, seemingly purposeless deeds especially odd. The speaker doesn't seem to be the kind of person who wastes time or reneges on his promises. However much the speaker might like to stay in the "dark and deep" woods, then, he or she must continue on, once again prioritizing responsibility to others and social convention.

Of course, the speaker seems to show some ambivalence toward these social obligations. The speaker subtly juxtaposes his or her interest in the woods with regret about his or her duties to others: the woods are lovely, "but I have promises to keep." The promises seem to be a troublesome reality that keeps the speaker from doing what he or she actually *wants* to do—that is, stay alone in the woods for a little while. Indeed, the specific language that the speaker uses to describe the woods suggests he or she isn't quite ready to leave. They are "lovely, dark and deep," implying the woods contain the possibility for respite from the comparatively bright and shallow world of human society. Social responsibilities thus inhibit the chance for meaningful reflection.

Additionally, the image of snow's "downy flake" suggests that the speaker is as attracted to the woods as one might be to a comfortable bed. In fact, the speaker seems wearied by travel and social obligation, and the woods seem to represent his or her wish to rest. But this wish cannot be realized because of the oppressive "miles to go," which must be traveled as a result of duty to others (i.e., in order to "keep" those "promises"). Thus, the final lines may suggest the speaker's weariness both toward the physical journey that remains and the social rules that drive that very journey forward in the first place.

Ultimately, we don't know if the speaker satisfies his or her social duties or remains in the woods. On the one hand, the admittance of having "promises to keep" can be read as the speaker accepting that social obligations trump individual wishes. Yet it's also possible to read the final lines as the speaker's continued hesitation; perhaps the speaker is *thinking* about the miles left to go but not yet *doing anything* about it, instead remaining torn between the tiresome duties of society and the desire for individual freedom that is manifested in the woods.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-16

HESITATION AND CHOICE

Throughout the poem, the speaker seems to be stuck in a space in between society's obligations and nature's offer of solitude and reflection. Though the speaker reflects on the possibilities offered by each, he or she is ultimately never able to choose between them. In fact, the speaker's literal and figurative placement seems to suggest that choice itself might not even be *possible*, because societal rules and expectations restrict the speaker's free will. In other words, beyond exploring the competing pulls of responsibility and personal desire on the speaker, the poem also considers the nature—or mere possibility—of choice itself.

The speaker starts and ends the poem in a state of hesitation. In the first line, the speaker says, "Whose woods these are I think I know," a statement which wavers between a sure declaration ("I know") and doubt ("I think"). This may suggest that the central conflict of the poem will be the speaker's battle with uncertainty. The physical setting of the poem, in which a speaker stops partway through a journey, mirrors this irresolution, finding the speaker neither at a destination nor a point of departure but rather somewhere in between.

The speaker also notably pauses "between the woods and

frozen lake"—literally between two landmarks. On top of that, the speaker has stopped on the "darkest evening of the year." If we understand this to mean the Winter Solstice, then the poem also occurs directly between two seasons, autumn and winter. Thus, the speaker is physically poised on the brink between a number of options, suggesting the possibility of choice between physical worlds, and, later in the poem, between duty to others and a personal wish to rest in solitude.

However, it's unclear in the end if the speaker *chooses* to fulfill his or her "promises" or merely *accepts* the obligation to do so as an incontrovertible fact of life; that is, whether he or she actively *makes a choice* to continue or accepts that there is *no choice* at all. Though the speaker seems to indicate in the end that he or she will continue on and keep his or her promises, this doesn't seem to be a straightforward decision. In fact, it may not be a decision at all, but rather an embittered consent to the rules of societal life. The speaker may very well wish to stay in the "lovely" woods, but is ultimately unable to do so.

However, we can also read the final stanza as demonstrating that the speaker hasn't left the woods yet. Although he or she has obligations, there are "miles to go," and the dreamy repetition of the final lines could suggest that there are either too many miles left to travel, or even that the speaker is slipping into sleep—effectively refusing to make a choice (or implicitly choosing to stay, depending on your interpretation).

Thus, it is possible to read the entire poem as embodying a moment of hesitation, wavering between two poles but never leaning toward one or the other. This would further complicate the outcome of the poem, resisting a definitive reading and suggesting that the tensions between society and nature, and between obligation and individualism, are never black-and-white, but constantly in a murky state of flux.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 3
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 13-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Whose woods these are I think I know.

The poem's first line establishes several thematic ideas, as well as certain stylistic patterns that will feature throughout the poem. The speaker begins by wondering "whose woods" he or she is passing through. This demonstrates a concern with ownership and legal rights to land: the woods are not merely *the* woods but *someone's* woods. The fact that this is the first issue expressed in the poem also suggests that ownership holds a special significance in the speaker's world. That is, the speaker's preliminary observation directly connects the natural world to the societal one that governs property; already in this first line are seeds of the tension between nature and civilization.

However, the speaker isn't entirely sure of whose woods these are. "I think I know," says the speaker, which calls attention to a level of uncertainty and doubt in the speaker's understanding of the world. He or she does not definitively "know" whose woods these are, but believes he or she knows, which may suggest the speaker's dubious relation to the conventions of society or even the inability to commit to the economy that dictates landownership. In either case, this opening line also establishes a tone of hesitancy that will echo throughout the rest of the poem.

The first line also exhibits the poem's meter. The entire work is written in iambic tetrameter, meaning four iambs, or unstressed-stressed beats, make up an eight-syllable line:

Whose woods | these are | I think | I know.

This pattern is consistent throughout the entire poem, a formal rigor which seems to suggest that the content within is crystalline, perfectly captured and elegantly articulated; this interestingly contrasts with the hesitancy of the line. The speaker seems to be exhibiting certainty about their uncertainty.

The meter also gives the poem a highly musical quality, which is bolstered by Frost's use of devices such as alliteration, consonance, and assonance. "Whose woods" utilizes alliteration in the repetition of the /w/ sound, as well as assonance in the internal /oo/ sound of each word. Alliteration is again evident in the /th/ of "these" and "think." Consonance is also present in the /s/ in "whose," "woods," and "these." All of these features combine to give the line a melodic sound that flows easily off the tongue and reinforces the imagery. For instance, the /w/ sounds in the first two words seem to evoke the whooshing of tree branches or snow in the wind, helping to locate the reader in the forest of the poem.

Lastly, the line is end-stopped: it stands as its own complete thought and does not continue on to the next line. Often, such lines end with punctuation to signal their completion, as is the case with this line. This adds to the sense that the line is declarative and assured, even as it grapples with uncertainty.

LINES 2-4

His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

The next lines complicate the idea of land ownership established in the first line, as the speaker reflects on the fact that the owner of the woods is far away "in the village"—and

therefore will not see the speaker stopping "to watch his woods fill up with snow." This implies that, although someone theoretically "owns" the woods, this ownership doesn't necessarily confer control or oversight over those woods. That is, the owner is unable to see the speaker trespassing on his land, suggesting the futility of trying to own or assert authority over the natural world in the first place when that world is, in reality, far too vast to control. In fact, owning land may be nothing more than a symbolic gesture, when you consider that the speaker is able to access private land just as inconsequentially as he could public land.

These lines also advance many of the stylistic aspects present in the first line. Again, alliteration is prevalent in phrases such as "his house," "see me stopping," and "watch his woods." Additionally, the iambic tetrameter is consistently maintained:

His house | is in | the vil- | lage though;

Furthermore, in these ensuing lines the overall formal structure of the poem becomes more apparent. Frost uses an AABA rhyme scheme, in which the first, second, and fourth line of each quatrain rhyme, while the third line is unrhymed (this rhyme will, however, be carried into subsequent stanzas). In the case of these lines, "know," "though," and "snow" rhyme. The meter and rhyme scheme create a sort of sing-song rhythm, which flows easily and allows readers to focus on the content of the poem.

Line 2 is another example of an end-stopped line, completed with a semicolon rather than a period. However, the third and fourth lines feature enjambment. "He will not see me stopping here" seems like an independent observation, but the sentence continues with: "To watch his woods fill up with snow." That is, not only will the owner not see the speaker, he specifically won't see the speaker watching the snow fall.

It is worth noting, however, that this example of enjambment is not particularly unusual. Though broken in the middle, each line still ends in such a way that our ability to make sense of the language is not disrupted. In other words, Frost manages to use enjambment in a way that still furthers the feeling of formal precision and clarity that characterizes this poem. The poem continues to read smoothly, allowing for the kind of quiet thematic reflection that occupies the speaker as well.

LINES 5-6

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near

In lines 5 and 6, Frost uses anthropomorphism to explore the clash of societal norms and conventions suggested by the speaker's actions. "My little horse must think it queer," says the speaker, giving the horse the human ability to think something is "queer" (meaning strange or unnatural). The speaker's choice to stop in the woods and watch the snow fall is so out of the ordinary, it seems, that even the speaker's *horse* must find it strange! In fact, they have stopped so far from any markers of civilization that there isn't even "a farmhouse near." This is unusual to the horse, which seems to be used to the physical world of society that is embodied by things like buildings and homes. These lines thus make it very clear that the speaker is far from civilization, and that this is not the kind of place where the speaker typically stops.

In this stanza, we also become aware of the overall formal structure of the poem. The words "queer" and "near" rhyme with the preceding "here" that appears in the line 3. Thus, the rhyme scheme is a chain rhyme, in which a rhyme from each quatrain is carried into the next to create an interlocking or "chained" structure. This is often referred to as a Rubaiyat form.

Again, this interlocking rhyme structure demonstrates a formal precision that makes the poem feel compact and polished—not simply rhyming, but rhyming in such a way that each stanza is linked to the others. This suggests that the content of the poem is also interlocked and unified, as if the entire poem is one perfectly encapsulated moment. It's no wonder the speaker seems to want to linger in this space of gentle reflection a little longer.

LINES 7-8

Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

Lines 7 and 8 offer some of the most salient examples of the poem's use of imagery. Though we know the setting is woods filling with snow, much of the description up to this point has been negative, depicting what is *not* there—the owner, a farmhouse—as opposed to revealing what is actually present. Now, however, the speaker describes being positioned "between the woods and frozen lake" on "the darkest evening of the year." The speaker paints a picture of the natural world as a cold, dark, and foreboding place.

The imagery of these lines is bolstered by their enjambment. "Between the woods and frozen lake" carries over from the preceding line and then flows over into the following. These lines together help establish the rather unwelcoming imagery of the woods; where lines 5 and 6 underscore how isolated the speaker is, these lines establish how potentially *threatening* that isolation may be: it's so cold that the lake has frozen, and the night will be long and dark. This image will be softened in the following stanzas, yet lines 7 and 8 nevertheless hint at the immense power of the natural world.

Additionally, these lines locate the speaker *between* many things—between the woods and frozen lake, and possibly between the seasons, if we understand "darkest evening of the year" to mean the Winter Solstice. Thus, not only is the speaker removed from society, he or she seems to be in a sort of limbo, a space that is characterized by being in the middle, but not

actually part, of anything. These lines seem to place the speaker at a crossroads of sorts, underscoring the poem's concern with the ideas of hesitancy, choice, and free will.

Finally, the meter and rhyme scheme continue smoothly here, keeping up the poem's easy rhythm and allowing readers to focus on the imagery described.

LINES 9-10

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.

These lines again rely on anthropomorphism as the horse shakes his harness bells "to ask if there is some mistake." This is not meant to be taken literally, but rather is the speaker's interpretation of the horse's seeming confusion. That the speaker's only companion is an animal seems to further underscore just how isolated the speaker must be out here in the woods. The speaker's clear bond with the horse again suggests that the two frequently travel together. Meanwhile, the horse's perception of a "mistake" echoes the "queer" feeling it got in line 5, reiterating the apparent strangeness of the speaker's actions; stopping on trips clearly isn't something the speaker is wont to do.

Furthermore, the fact that it isn't the speaker but the *horse*—an animal—that expresses concern about lingering in woods intensifies the extent to which both the speaker and horse seem bound by certain societal rules that are actually unnatural. One could argue that the horse should feel more at home in nature, yet it thinks this is a "mistake." Though the horse is obviously domesticated, as signaled by the shaking of its "harness bells," this subtly emphasizes the pull of convention and civilization, while also suggesting that such convention is nothing more than a social construct.

Additionally, the almost ubiquitous consonance of /s/ and /sh/ sounds in these lines helps evoke the scene: "He gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake." This /s/ sound could serve both to conjure the light tinkling of harness bells, as well as the more predominant sound that will appear in the following lines: the wind. Thus, the wind, even before it is named, permeates the description of the horse ringing its bells, implying its prevalence and power.

LINES 11-12

The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

Lines 11 and 12 again feature prominent alliteration and consonance. The /s/ sound from the preceding lines returns in "The only other sound's the sweep," which further evokes the whooshing of the "easy wind." Again, the poem relies on its sonic devices to conjure the imagery of the natural world.

The enjambment in these lines also contributes to that imagery. Line 11 itself seems to "sweep" into line 12, subtly helping the reader experience the wind as the speaker does. This emphasis on "sweeping" also suggests that the speaker sees the wind as capable of leveling or wiping away the world around him or her.

This ability to erase the rest of the world isn't necessarily a bad thing, and the language of the final line of this stanza complicates the idea of nature as something hostile toward human beings. The speaker describes the "easy wind and downy flake," which suggests that he or she finds the wind mellow or tranquil and that the snowflakes are as soft as the down feathers of a pillow or bed. In fact, far from seeing a sort of threatening desolation in the natural world, the speaker seems to find the wind and woods as appealing as one might find a bed. It is possible to read these lines as evidence that the speaker wishes to rest, even to the sleep, and that the woods embody that possibility.

Thus while in prior lines the isolation of the woods seemed a bit scary, now the poem suggests that such quiet and stillness actually make the woods a nice place to escape from the chaos of society.

LINES 13-16

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.

In the final quatrain, the thematic and stylistic features of the poem come to a climax, as the rhyme scheme completes and the speaker reveals his or her personal feeling toward the woods as well as the duties that must keep the speaker moving. "Deep," "keep," and "sleep" each rhyme with the "sweep" of wind from the preceding stanza. The fact that the culminating stanza rhymes entirely with "sweep" could suggest the power of the wind and that it has literally "swept" up the speaker in its charm, leading to the closure of the entire poem. Furthermore, every line in this stanza is end-stopped with a comma or period, adding to the sense of finality and conclusiveness.

Indeed, the speaker does definitively show a liking for the woods here, calling them "lovely, dark and deep." The punctuation of this line, namely the lack of an Oxford comma, provides for multiple readings. The woods may be lovely, dark, *and* deep—three separate attributes that describe the woods; or they may be lovely *as a result of* being "dark and deep"—in this reading, dark and deep are adjectives that modify "lovely" rather than "woods." The difference in meaning here is extremely subtle, yet is still a difference. In the latter reading, there is slightly more emphasis on the darkness and deepness of the woods being what *makes* the woods lovely. And if this is how the speaker conceives of loveliness, then the speaker probably desires a break from the brighter, louder world of society.

However, the speaker has "promises to keep." This line helps ground our understanding of the speaker, suggesting that he or

she has not come to the woods simply to take in the beauty of nature, but rather is just passing through, perhaps on some sort of business. In any case, the speaker is someone apparently used to (or resigned to) fulfilling certain duties to others. That is, although the "promises" appear to be a hindrance to the speaker's wish to linger in the "lovely" woods, the speaker also suggests that those promises will ultimately trump his or her personal desires. "The woods are lovely," but in the end the speaker's sense of responsibility is more potent.

The final lines advance the argument that the speaker's primary concern is rest, perhaps both literally as well as rest from the wearying social norms that push him or her forward. The doubling of "And miles to go before I sleep" can be considered a form of epizeuxis, in which two phrases are repeated in close succession. This repetition serves multiple purposes.

First, it implies that the speaker's individual wish is to go to sleep, but that he or she can't do so here. Secondly, it doubles the feeling of oppressive distance that remains for the speaker to travel, making the miles seem almost endless. Lastly, the lines also seem to suggest that the very "promises" the speaker must fulfill are tiresome. In fact, the speaker's foreboding look toward the "miles to go" before he or she sleeps may also signal a resentment on the speaker's part toward the social rules that infringe upon his or her ability to pursue personal desires (in this moment, simply to linger in the woods for a bit).

The repetition of the final lines also has a dreamlike, sleepy quality, as if the speaker is actually drifting off to sleep as he or she thinks about the many miles that remain. In fact, while the formal structure of the final stanza suggests conclusion, the ending resists a definitive, well, ending. It's ultimately unclear whether the speaker continues on to fulfill his or her promises or merely stays in the woods, wavering between obligation and personal desire without making a choice.

SYMBOLS

WOODS

The woods in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" may represent not only the natural world that stands in opposition to the world of society and culture, but also the allure of individualism and, even further, the possible allure of death.

On the one hand, the woods seem to epitomize a certain freedom for the speaker. In the woods, as in lines 1 and 4, the speaker can move easily and freely, without the owner noticing. The woods offer the speaker a kind of radical freedom that is unencumbered by the normal rules or regulations of society (such as rules of ownership that would make the speaker's actions into trespassing). In so doing, the woods also symbolize that freedom from those rules of society, represented by the "village" in which the owner lives.

At the same time, that "freedom" offered by the woods can also be viewed in darker terms. In spite of the speaker's apparent reverence for the woods, the woods are also described in somewhat morbid terms. Lines 7 and 8 note the woods' frigidity and darkness, while line 13 calls them "dark and deep." All of these terms gesture toward desolation and nothingness, the opposite of life and vitality. And yet, the speaker still seems to be drawn toward the woods, calling the wind "easy" and likening the snow to the "downy" qualities of a bed in line 12. The wish to sleep in the "dark and deep" woods, of course, would eventually be fatal. Thus, the speaker's interest in the woods as a place to rest and "sleep" may be read as the woods' larger symbolism as a place of ultimate rest, or death, which offer the ultimate escape from the burdens of life and society (those wearily repeated "miles to go"). Ultimately, social bonds ("promises to keep") and sense of responsibility (the "miles to go") keep the speaker from succumbing to that fatal dream of rest, but nonetheless in the speaker's internal struggle against the attractions of the woods, the poem captures the way that all people sometimes long for an escape from the wearying responsibilities of life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Whose woods these"
- **Line 4:** "To watch his woods fill up with snow."
- **Lines 7-8:** "Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year."
- **Line 13:** "The woods are lovely, dark and deep,"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs frequently throughout the poem. It creates a musical quality that, paired with the poem's meter and rhyme scheme, makes the poem feel extremely polished. For example, line 1 features both /wh/ and /w/ alliteration as well as /th/ alliteration. These recurring sounds, paired with the perfect iambic tetrameter, cause the line "Whose woods these are I think I know" to flow easily off the tongue, with the melodiousness of a song.

More importantly, however, the alliteration often has a sonic effect that helps evoke the actual sounds of the scene. The /w/ and /wh/ sounds in "Whose woods" and "watch his woods" in lines 1 and 4 conjure the whooshing of the wind and the rustling of tree branches. Additionally, the /s/ and /sh/ sounds in "see me stopping," "snow," and "sound's the sweep" in lines 3, 4, and 11 evoke a similar sound, and especially recall the hissing of wind and falling snow. Even before the images of snow and wind are actually described in the poem, there is a sense in the

musical quality of the lines that wind is blowing through the trees and that snow is lightly falling; it is both a cold, dreary sound and a tranquil, quiet one that contributes to the poem's general ambience.

One other notable use of alliteration is in "dark and deep" in line 13. Here, the repeating /d/ sound serves both to stress the importance of these two adjectives and their relationship to one another; the darkness and deepness both contribute to the "lovely" qualities of the woods. The /d/ sound also has a certain weightiness, like the toll of a bell. This gives the phrase "dark and deep" a more profound or even ominous feeling, as if the woods ring with the heavy knell of death or finality.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "W," "w," "th," "th"
- **Line 2:** "H," "h," "th," "th"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "w," "w"
- **Line 9:** "H," "h," "h"
- **Line 11:** "o," "o," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "O"
- **Line 13:** "d," "d"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance in the poem serves both to bolster the sense of formal precision and evoke the sounds of the poem's setting. One frequently recurring consonant sound is /s/. This is technically an instance of sibilance, a more specific type of consonance, but its presence is worth noting as a device that helps the poem feel unified by a common sonic thread.

Another notable use of consonance occurs in lines 3 and 4, where /t/ and /p/ sounds repeat in "not see me stopping" and "watch his woods fill up." Both of these sounds have an abrupt quality, which serves to make the language feel halting, like the speaker who has stopped in the woods to watch the snow fall. Thus, the consonance emphasizes the speaker's physical actions.

Harsh or abrupt sounds also occur in lines 13 and 14. Both /d/, /k/, and /p/ consonance appears in "The woods are lovely, dark and deep, / But I have promises to keep." As discussed in the section on alliteration, the /d/ sound evokes a certain heaviness, both suggesting the finality of rest that draws the speaker as well as the oppressiveness of that finality, as if the woods are capable of both blanketing and smothering the speaker. The /p/ and /k/ sounds, meanwhile, seem to interrupt the speaker's enchantment, causing a musical rupture. Though the woods are "lovely," the consonance of "dark and deep" and "promises to keep" serve to disrupt the reverie of the poem, reminding the speaker and reader of the obligations that must compel the speaker out of the woods.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Wh," "s," "w," "s," "th," "s," "th"
- **Line 2:** "H," "s," "h," "s," "s," "th," "th"
- **Line 3:** "H," "w," "t," "s," "t"
- **Line 4:** "w," "t," "s," "w," "s," "p," "th," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s," "s," "th"
- **Line 6:** "s," "th," "s"
- **Line 7:** "w," "n," "w," "s," "n," "k"
- **Line 8:** "k," "ning"
- **Line 9:** "H," "s," "h," "s," "h," "ss," "s," "sh," "k"
- **Line 10:** "T," "sk," "s," "s," "ist," "k"
- **Line 11:** "d's," "sw"
- **Line 12:** "s," "d," "d," "d"
- **Line 13:** "d," "d," "k," "d," "p"
- **Line 14:** "p," "k," "p"

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The speaker's horse is anthropomorphised twice in the poem, and in both cases this serves as a reflection on the peculiarity or abnormality of the speaker's decision to stop in the woods.

In the first case, in lines 5 and 6, the speaker says his or her "horse must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse near." A horse, of course, cannot think something "queer" or strange, but in depicting it as doing so, the speaker stresses how unusual his or her actions are. The horse, it seems, is so used to civilization that to stop without any signs of it nearby must feel unnatural.

The same holds true when the horse shakes its bells "to ask if there is some mistake." It is notable that the horse, an animal, thinks lingering in the woods is "a mistake," since this implies societal norms are strong enough to make even an *animal* feel uncomfortable in its natural environment. In other words, one might think that the horse would be more comfortable in the woods than in society, yet this is not the case. The horse's domestication—evidenced by its confusion at being in the woods—is subtly hinted at as being itself strange or unnatural.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "My little horse must think it queer / To stop without a farmhouse near "
- **Lines 9-10:** "He gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake. "

IMAGERY

Essentially all of the imagery in the poem centers on the natural world. While the speaker nods toward "farmhouse[s]" and "the village," he or she only describes the "woods" as they "fill up with snow." This suggests that the natural world is more important to the speaker of this poem than the societal or man-made one.

The imagery also helps locate the speaker physically, situated "Between the woods and the frozen lake," and paints a picture of a fairly cold and dark place: "the darkest evening of the year." This imagery also reflects the poem's consideration of choice and hesitation, situating the speaker in a space between two landmarks and between autumn and winter even as he or she is in the midst of a more philosophical hesitation between nature and society.

Another significant image is the "sweep" in line 11. Though this technically refers to the "easy wind," the placement of sweep at the end of the line conjures multiple images. For one, it evokes a sweep of land, or a vast, curving space that extends around the speaker. Additionally, it suggesting the sweeping or wiping ability of the snow and wind, as if the landscape itself is getting blown away. All of these images serve to depict a world that is both wide and potentially free as well as desolate and ruined.

However, the imagery shifts in the latter part of the poem, conjuring a more pleasant perception of the woods and snow. In line 12, the speaker describes the "easy wind and downy flake," an image of snow and wind that seems as comforting and tranquil as a soft bed. In fact, by the end, the image of the "dark and deep" becomes an enticing image, not a perilous void but an appealing and restful place.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "his woods fill up with snow."
- **Lines 7-8:** "Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year."
- **Line 11:** "The only other sound's the sweep "
- **Line 12:** "Of easy wind and downy flake."
- **Line 13:** "woods are lovely, dark and deep, "

EPIZEUXIS

The repetition of the final lines can be considered a moment of epizeuxis and serves multiple purposes. First, it implies that the speaker's wish is to go to sleep, but that he or she cannot do so in the woods. Secondly, it makes the distance that remains for the speaker to travel feel oppressive, as if the "miles to go" are endless. There is an added gravity to the miles left to go and their wearying effect on the speaker. Lastly, the repetition also has a dreamlike, sleepy quality, as if the speaker is actually drifting off to sleep or being enchanted by a lullaby as he or she thinks about the many miles that remain.

This repetition also gives the poem a sense of formal completion. Not only does every word in the final stanza rhyme, but the choice to have the final two lines be identical suggests that the poems culminate in the reality of the miles left to go. That is, although the poem embodies one singular moment of hesitation in the woods, the ultimate reality is the distance that still remains beyond the poem.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep."

END-STOPPED LINE

The poem frequently uses end-stopped lines to contribute to the feeling of formal precision and control. The most prominent examples are the first two lines and the final four. Bookending the poem in end-stopped lines gives the entire work a feeling of wholeness. Furthermore, the conclusiveness of each end-stopped line makes the speaker seem most assured in those instances. However, the content of each line actually complicates the end-stopping, generating tension. For example, though the first line, "Whose woods these are I think I know," feels definitively end-stopped, the actual claim within the line is fairly uncertain. The speaker *thinks* he knows something, but isn't sure. The same is true in the final lines, when although each line is end-stopped and feels conclusive, the ultimate outcome of the poem is unclear. That is, we do not know if the speaker continues on his journey or not, thus challenging the declarative nature of these lines.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Whose woods these are I think I know. / His house is in the village though; "
- **Lines 13-16:** "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."

ENJAMBMENT

Though "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" features enjambment through much of its middle section, the line breaks often still fall in syntactically natural sections of each line. For instance, "He will not see me stopping here," is a self-sufficient phrase, even if the line continues, "To watch his woods fill up with snow." This apparent logicality in the enjambment contributes to the feeling of formal precision and control. The line breaks don't ever drastically subvert the reading of a line, which makes the poem feel controlled and straightforward, even if this isn't the case.

An exception to this occurs in the 11th and 12th lines, which break after "sweep." In this case, the enjambment causes "sweep" to gain significance. "The only other sound's the sweep" suggests first the sweep of land, or the vastness of the woods, is a prominent sound, even though the actual meaning is the sweep of the "easy wind." Additionally, this suggests that the wind itself is notable for its ability to "sweep" or wipe away and erase.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-12

SIBILANCE

Like alliteration and consonance, sibilance (a more specific form of consonance) serves both to bolster the sense of formal precision and evoke the sounds of the poem's setting. /S/ sounds appear prominently in lines 1, 2, and 9-13 of the poem, though the sounds appear in other lines as well. The preponderance of /S/ sounds evokes the hiss of wind and a sort of hushing or silencing sound, suggesting the quietness of the scene and the muffling effect of the wind and the snowfall. The sound reinforces the poem's use of imagery because it causes the sound of snow and wind to permeate the poem even when the speaker is not directly describing the natural world. That is, the reader can almost always *hear* the wind and snow, even when the speaker does not discuss it. Thus, the reader, too, can feel its prevalence.

The quietness suggested by the sibilance also underscores how isolated and far from civilization the speaker is. Again, this suggests nature as a place that allows for the sort of thoughtful, peaceful reflection that is perhaps impossible amidst the sights and sounds of society.

Additionally, in lines 9-13, the /s/ sound takes on the sound of the horse's "harness bells." While the noise evokes the tinkling of bells, it also suggests a blurring between the bells and the wind, as if one is infecting the other. In fact, the speaker says the only sounds are the bells and the "easy wind," which is mirrored in their presence as the strongest sounds in the poem's actual language itself. Thus, the bells, which represent the sounds of creations of society, are subsumed by the more powerful sounds of nature.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 2:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 3:** "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 5:** "s"
- **Line 6:** "s," "s"
- **Line 7:** "s"
- **Line 8:** "s"
- **Line 9:** "s," "s," "ss," "s"
- **Line 10:** "a," "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 11:** "s," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "s"
- **Line 13:** "s"
- **Line 14:** "ses"
- **Line 15:** "s," "s"
- **Line 16:** "s," "s"

VOCABULARY

Queer (Line 5) - "Strange" or "unnatural." In this case, the horse thinks it strange to "stop without a farmhouse near," suggesting both the horse and speaker are used to being surrounded by markers of civilization, and that spending time in nature is uncommon to the point of feeling wrong.

Darkest evening (Line 8) - This likely means the Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year. Therefore, the poem occurs just as autumn is ending and winter is beginning. The "darkest evening" may also mean simply that the night has never been so intense, giving the scene an added heft and mysteriousness.

Sweep (Line 11) - "Sweep" in this case has multiple related meanings. On the one hand, since the speaker refers to it as a sound, it can mean a sweeping sound, such as that of a broom or brush, suggesting the wind has a cleansing or removing force. Furthermore, it can also be a description of the actual movement of the wind, moving swiftly and widely through the woods. However, it can also mean the sweep of the land, such as the way the woods themselves extend away from the speaker.

Easy wind (Line 12) - "Easy" in this case means calm, serene, or tranquil. The wind itself seems to be free of worries and to cause the speaker to feel the same way.

Downy flake (Line 12) - "Downy" refers to the "down" feathers of birds which are used to fill pillows, blankets, and jackets. Down is both warm and soft, which is an interesting way to describe the "flake[s]" of snow, as snow is by its nature cold. This word choice suggests that the snow is fluffy, comforting, and comfortable.

Deep (Line 13) - Extending far in, usually from an outer edge. The woods are thus a vast space. "Deep" in this sense could also mean deep as in intensely felt, profound, or difficult to understand. If this is the case, the speaker seems drawn to the woods because they seem to encapsulate something that feels profound but is not easily accessible.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem features four quatrains written in a Rubaiyat stanza form. A Rubaiyat features a chain rhyme scheme, in which one rhyme from a stanza carries over into the next, creating an interlocking structure. A Rubaiyat has no specified length, but in the case of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," the poem has four stanzas of four lines each, with each line made up of four iambic feet or beats.

This precise, interlocking structure contributes to a sense of carefully constructed unity in the poem. In conjunction with the

perfect meter and rhyme, the form helps achieve a pristine tightness in the poem that allows it to be read easily, almost seamlessly, like a song or even lullaby. Such a feel is fitting: just as a lullaby often offers a gentle tune that hides something more complicated or darker beneath (think about the lyrics to Rock-a-bye Baby, for instance), "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" seems initially to be about the promise of freedom or rest offered by the woods, but on a closer read might also suggest the freedom or rest that can be found in death.

METER

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" features perfect iambic tetrameter. For instance, line 1 reads:

Whose **woods** | these **are** | I **think** | I **know**

The entire poem follows this unstressed-**stressed** metric pattern, which gives every line a controlled, precise feeling. The meter contributes to the feeling that the poem is meticulously crafted and perfectly whole. There is a very musical feeling to the iambic tetrameter, as if the entire poem could be sung or incanted. This helps the reader focus on the thematic content of the poem, without ever tripping over awkward lines. This especially feels evident in the final repeating lines, which seem almost like the chorus of a lullaby.

This perhaps reflects the calm of the speaker and the serenity of the natural world in which the speaker has stopped. At the same time, however, it makes the poem feel simpler than it really is; though the rhythm is smooth and untroubled for the most part, Frost is exploring nuanced ideas that are more complicated than the simple, straightforward meter would suggest.

Indeed, the precision of the piece is belied by an internal uncertainty and hesitation that plays out in the speaker wavering between the woods and the promises he has to keep. This creates a tension between the assuredness of the form and meter and the dubiousness of the speaker's actions.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a chain rhyme, in which one rhyme from each stanza is carried into the next, creating an interlocking structure. In this case, the first, second, and fourth line of every stanza rhyme, while the third doesn't. This third line, however, rhymes with the first, second, and fourth lines of the *following* stanza, and so on. Then, in the final stanza, the lines resolve into one continuing rhyme. This results in the following scheme:

AABA BCBB CDCC DDDD

Every rhyme in the poem is perfect, contributing to the feeling of precision of craft the dominates the entire poem. As with the regular, steady meter, the sturdy and consistent rhymes make the poem read very easily—and seem somewhat simpler than it actually is. Though it may appear almost like a lullaby or nursery rhyme, Frost is exploring deep metaphysical ideas of nature, freedom, and responsibility within these clear, precise lines.

The only deviation from this scheme, in the strictest sense, is the repetition of the final two lines, which causes the final two rhymes to be identical words: "sleep." This choice to use the same word twice for the final rhyme places a special significance on the idea of "sleep," suggesting its thematic centrality to the poem and the speaker. In other words, rhyming "sleep" with itself suggests just how deeply tired the speaker is.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is anonymous and does not have a specified gender. He or she seems to be some sort of traveler or businessperson passing through the woods en route to uphold certain "promises" he or she has made.

The speaker is aware of the fact that he or she may be trespassing, thus signaling an understanding of the societal rules that govern the world of which the speaker is a part. Even the speaker's horse seems to find lingering in the woods to be an unusual action, which suggests that the narrator is not one to dally or waste time, and instead is likely someone from an urban environment. However, the speaker also seems to find some freedom in the woods, aware that the landowner cannot actually "see" them stopping there. Indeed, the speaker describes the wind and snowfall in calm, pleasant language, indicating an affection for the natural world and its opportunity for respite from the demands of society.

While at first the speaker seems to want nothing more than to watch the "woods fill up with snow," it slowly becomes apparent that the speaker has a more significant wish wrapped up in the physical act of lingering in the woods: the speaker seems torn between his or her obligations to others and an individual wish to stay and rest among nature. Ultimately, it is unclear if the speaker continues on or lingers; from beginning to end, the speaker remains positioned at a sort of crossroads between the worlds of nature and that of society.

SETTING

As the title makes clear, the poem is set in the "woods on a snowy evening." In fact, it's the "darkest evening of the year," which suggests that this might be the winter solstice. The speaker watches the snow fall, far from any farmhouses or other signs of human life; as such, it's safe to assume that the speaker is pretty isolated and far out into the woods. More specifically, the speaker is "between the woods and frozen lake." The setting is also mostly silent, with the exception of the sound of wind and snowfall. Finally, the woods are expansive, as

evidenced in the description "dark and deep."

Together, these details establish the speaker's relative isolation as well as the fact that the speaker seems to exist in an "in between" space: the speaker is between the woods and the lake, between nature and civilization, and between the decision to stay and linger or to move on and fulfill certain "promises."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Frost wrote "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" while working on the long poem "New Hampshire," both of which would later be published in 1923 in a collection of the same name. *New Hampshire* would become a watershed publication in Frost's career, winning him the Pulitzer Prize and containing other famous poems like "Fire and Ice" and "Nothing Gold Can Stay." These works all maintained naturalistic and philosophical themes while relying heavily on traditional meter and verse forms.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," like much of Frost's work, focuses on rural life and the natural world, especially that of New England, where Frost mainly lived. However, while a poem like "New Hampshire" is a celebration of Frost's home state and the people within, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" represents a different vein in Frost's work: poetry as a meditation on a moment or object.

In some ways, this bridge between concrete subject matter and more philosophical writing could be seen as a bridge between 19th century realism and the early modernism of the 20th century. Certainly, connections can be drawn between modernist works such as Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," published two years earlier in 1921, and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Many modernists championed Frost, such as Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound, and their work in Imagism (a literary movement focused on creating sharp, clear images for the reader) likely had some influence on "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

Yet Frost's work was also very attuned to traditional and classical poetry, and in this way resisted the explosion of free verse that would come to dominate modernist poetry. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is written in Rubaiyat form, made famous in the English-speaking world by Edward FitzGerald's translation of the 12th-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam. The poem also nods towards Dante's use of terza rima, another form of interlocking chain rhyme.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" was written just several years after the conclusion of World War I, which had forced Frost to move from England, where he briefly lived, back to the United States. Though his poetry never overtly dealt with the war, the devastating conflict cast a huge shadow over much of modern literature and art at the time. Poets found themselves grappling with the place of the individual in a world that perhaps lacked meaning or God. Such questions can be seen indirectly in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," whether it is the speaker's meditation on solitude or the more foreboding and ominous symbol of despair that may be suggested in the powerful draw of the woods.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Academy of American Poets Essay on Robert Frost — Read an essay on "Sincerity and Invention" in Frost's work, which includes a discussion of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." (https://web.archive.org/web/20100615183936/http://poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/20444)
- "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" read by Robert Frost — Watch Frost read the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfOxdZfo0gs)
- Other Poets and Critics on "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" — Read excerpts from other analyses of the poem. (http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/woods.htm)
- Biography of Robert Frost — Read the Poetry Foundation's biography of Robert Frost and analysis of his life's work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)
- Encyclopedia Entry on Robert Frost — Read the Encyclopedia Brittanica entry on Frost's life and work. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Frost)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- After Apple-Picking
- Fire and Ice
- Mending Wall
- Nothing Gold Can Stay
- Out, Out—
- The Road Not Taken

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