

Questions

- Research the mythology behind fire.
- Summarize the relevant Canto in *Dante's Inferno*. How does it relate to the poem?
- Define desire and hate. Do you agree with Frost's view of these emotions?
- What is the overall effect of this simple language and economy of expression to the tone and meaning of the poem?
- Discuss the techniques used to make this poem so dramatically resonant?

STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING

OVERVIEW

This poem is about the musings of one man in conflict with himself in a scene of natural beauty. It uses landscape to draw emotion and content out of the speaker. Frost's imaginative landscape gives us an insight into one man's dilemma and human existence simultaneously.

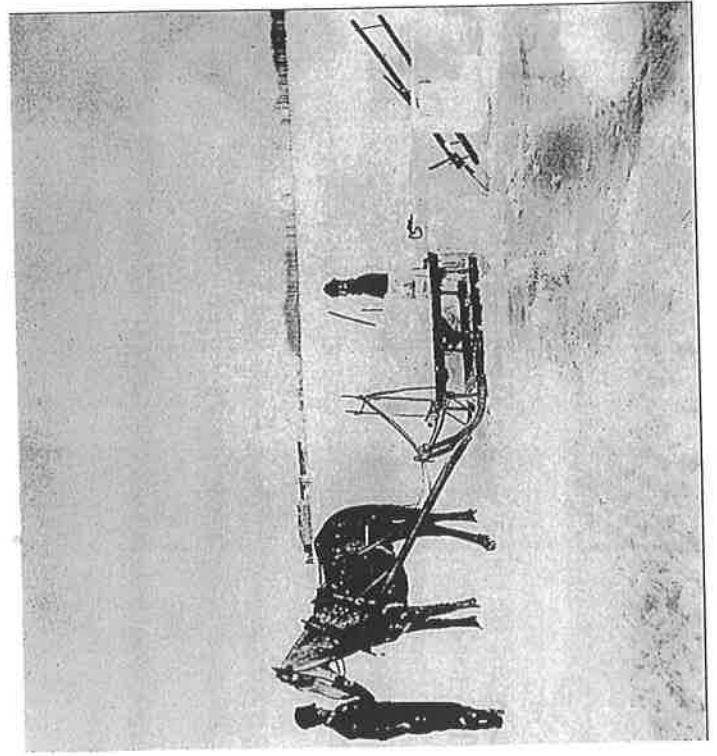
This interior monologue is a psychological analysis of a man's consideration of his place in the world. Frost places him in an environment where he can succumb to his thoughts. There are serious undertones in the poem and it is all the more intense when we learn it was based on a real incident. This poem was supposedly constructed around a memory that Frost had of an incident which occurred to him just before the Christmas of 1905. Frost meant to sell eggs 'in town' to raise money for his children's Christmas presents but was unsuccessful and on the way home in the cold and snow he let his frustrations out in tears.

Its simplicity of only short four-line stanzas, and simple rhyme scheme contrasts with our discovery of something far more complex. It is one of Frost's best known poems because it has a lyrical and musical quality which easily pleases. Frost disliked the way that many critics suggested that this was a 'death poem'. Some critics have suggested that while the general theme of the poem is man communing with nature to forget the problems of the world, another more morbid layer is that of contemplated suicide. However, there are certainly many images which develop this sense for the reader. Winter has long been symbolic of the end of life or death. Does this poem express the speaker's death wish?

Some themes to be considered in this poem are as follows:

- value of responsibility and stoicism
- strength of human will required to continue a struggle
- simplicity, beauty and spirituality found in rural life
- temptation lurking in human consciousness to abandon commitment to life.

The rhyme scheme of this poem merits comment as unusual and clever. The first three stanzas are linked by the repetition of rhyme of the third line of the previous stanza in the first line of the next one. The last stanza differs completely in its rhyme repetition of each line. This complex but also deceptively simple rhyme scheme allows the poet to display his virtuosity and delight in his poetic skill.



Commentary

Lines 1-2

The poem begins with a contradiction and uncertainty of interior monologue. Personal tone with repeated 'I'; 'think' shows the speaker is not sure of the facts but also that he is part of the community of the area; the owner of the woods doesn't live in them at all. The speaker would be embarrassed to be found here – recognition of official trespassing maybe. But can anyone really own nature? Here for all to enjoy, and he is enjoying it – alone. Colloquial 'though' shows it is a passing, casual thought about the owner, who is not around, not OF the wood – the suggestion that possession is not in the ownership of something but in the appreciation of it. Use of 'though' reinforces for the reader the contradictory nature within possession and physical ownership.

Lines 3-4

There is a tone of enjoyment in watching the woods and the snow without the owner's possessive presence' – 'his woods'; the suggestion in the choice of word 'stopping' that this halt is momentary – present continuous tense rather than, finality of 'stop' or 'stopped' gives the sense of a brief hiatus in a long journey. Alliteration of 'w' and 's' in these lines, gives a sense of calm and peace. The image created of the woods filling up with snow – almost snow from the ground up instead of the usual from the sky – provides us with a graphic description of the fullness of the woods and plenitude of nature. There is a sense of the snow falling thickly, creating an entirely new landscape to be explored.

Lines 5-8

This stanza is all one enjambment, creating a wholeness of the thought. Introduction of another living entity both reinforces and detracts from the speaker's isolation. 'little' horse gives the suggestion of how small he feels in these woods as a horse is not usually considered a small creature. 'queer' = odd, strange. Strong idea that this journey is not new, it has been made often, but never have they stopped for what seems nothing – no 'farmhouse near' – sense of their isolation. It is a new experience for both, this discovery about the woods, but an animal cannot appreciate what a human can. Mentioning the horse at this point gives a sense that the speaker almost wishes his horse could share in his wonder in the wintry landscape of snowy woods and icy lake.

Note a deeper psychological/philosophical tone in lines 7-8; the poem becomes more dream-like. Ambiguity seen in the physical surroundings of enclosed woods contrasted with the wide open frozen lake. Image of enclosed vertical whiteness against the openness of the horizontal ice gives a three-dimensional world the speaker is caught in this time-span - in neither going forward nor backwards, but immobile, caught in the moment.

Winter solstice is the 'darkest evening of the year' - gives a more sombre tone to the scene. Suggestion of despondence about his failures, poetically making sense as winter is symbolic of a time of deep depression/old age/mortality - a time of symbolic death, of himself/ his dreams? Is this the heart of its meaning? Contrast in the ideas of winter in the northern hemisphere as a time around Christmas which should be full joy - no sense of joy in these two lines.

(Frost denied this was a poem about suicide but note the sense of darkness and hint of mysterious unknown in the imagery.)

Lines 9-10

'He' -referring back to previous stanza subject 'my little horse'. Reality intrudes with the noise of the 'harness bells'; personification of the horse - makes a companion of the horse asking if there has been 'some mistake'. Sounds image of the little bells shaking the poet out of his sombre daydream. Contrast is made between the tinkling of the bells which called him back to life and the silence of the woods around him.

Lines 11-12

Alliteration of 's' suggests the quietness around him; run-online of 'sweep of easy wind' gives sense of wind blowing gently, so a calm, comforting description - 'easy wind and downy flake'. Down = goose feathers, used in feather pillows and bed coverings suggest softness and comfort and warmth which contrasts with the actuality of snow. There is something seductive about the description of, 'easy wind' and, 'downy flake' - it calls the reader towards what would be a bitterly cold death. Ambiguity in this image is that the snow seems to offer rest and ease - it is an image of sinking into, being enveloped by the snow, symbolic of a lack of expectation, effort or exertion. There seems a fascination with the isolation and quietness and lack of being which confronts him.

The beauty of the natural world tempts the speaker to lie down and assuage his weariness in death. In the gentleness of the surroundings there is the lure of sleep. The regular rhyming adds a lullaby quality to the poem.

Line 13–14

The 'lovely, dark and deep' woods offer him comfort, fascinate him; these three adjectives describing the woods reflect his desire to experience the unknowable. Use of the word, 'But' to start a line startles the reader from the reverie and musicality of previous alliteration of 'd' and long vowels sounds. Speaker and reader are jerked back to reality and we know from this word that we will go in an opposite direction. Social obligations force him out of self-indulgent thoughts, reminding that life is not lived in isolation, however desirable that it may be at times. Note the practical tone to the line 14 – he is back in the real world, taking charge by use of first person subject pronoun again as in first line of poem.

Line 15–16

Repetition of the last two lines adds a sonorous effect, a hypnotic quality harkening back to the previous dreamlike state. Leaves the reader with the speaker's deeper desire to sleep even though he knows he must resume his adventure / journey / quest and knows it will be long and arduous – 'miles to go'. Repetition reinforces the idea of both how tired he is and how far he still has to go. Note the change in rhyme of this final stanza – denoting maybe a sense of triumph in his decision to go on.

Links to discovery

This is another poem that discovers the power of nature and the weakness of mankind, giving in to tiredness is easier than carrying on. What is the rest/sleep of this poem? Is it simply the end to his physical exertions, this particular journey? At its most simplistic, it may be so, but there are other implications. Its literal meaning – man, horse, woods, snow – is not as important as the process of discovery which the reader and the poet enjoy. The function of any poem is to enjoy fresh insight into a place, event, object or emotion. Frost here creates a time and place which has for him several meanings. It is a vision that is ambiguous, a scene which is so full of life but at the same time "filled" with emptiness. The poem balances the world of physical senses and the world of reality with the world of feeling. What is discovered here is the powerful attraction that death can hold, and which must be resisted.

So what does this poem show us of discovery?

This poem is an attempt by Frost to explore, and to discover the contradictions in life and poetry. This is why his poem uses imagery and ideas which are so full of apparent opposites. The speaker in the poem discovers a part of him that is entranced by, at its most simple level, a view of the forest that he has never experienced before. In this process he's discovering more about himself and how he feels about his life and his work. The universal ideas of this poem, like in many of Frost's poems, allow us to discover our own concerns about life and work.

Questions

- Why does Frost choose the word 'woods' in place of forest, copse, thicket, trees?
- Discuss why he doesn't want to be found there.
- Discuss the imagery of winter.
- How does Frost's use of techniques strengthen the poem?
- What kind of 'promises to keep' might he have?



ESSAY PRACTICE QUESTIONS

1. Discuss why is it fair to say that Frost does not really belong to the set of 'Modern' poets of his time. Why is his poetry not typical of the other poets of his century?
2. 'Poetry is the exploration of intense experience'. Discuss this statement with reference to the poems that you have studied.
3. Frost's poetry seems to take individuals and makes out of their specific situations, statements of universal significance. Discuss.
4. Discuss the major themes of Frost's work and evaluate the success of his poetic techniques.
5. How did Frost's preoccupation with nature and spirituality affect his work?
6. Write a speech to be given at your local library to HSC students about Frost's poetry and its value for study.

Exam Essay preparation: Find clear links (and list them) between the insights about discovery in the selected poems and those within your related text. Find and learn some quotes to use to justify your ideas, and prepare common ground between the poems and your text choice.

