

## **MODEL CRITICISM - READER RESPONSE TO ROBERT FROST**

This is an example of *one* approach to the criticism portion of your portfolio. Your criticisms must include:

1. Basic meaning
2. Questions and answers about possible deeper meanings
3. Literary elements (with brief definitions for clarity) throughout the poem and how they impact the poem.

**Robert Frost**

### **Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**

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 was some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
of easy wind and downy flake.

These 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.

Each time I read this I experience that silent moment on the sleigh - In the woods with Mr. Frost. In fact, last night it was snowing lightly and I paused for a second- and outside of tinnitus, there was absolute silence. I thought of this poem, particularly the first stanza. The consonance (repetition of an internal consonant sound) demonstrated by the frequent “s” sounds allows me to hear the flakes as they brush against my cheeks, and assonance (repetition of a vowel sound) of the long “o” in “know”, “though”, and “snow” seem soft and inquisitive.

Its rhyme scheme (a, a, b, a, b, b, c, b, etc.) is relatively simple yet unique and its tetrameter (four feet per line) rhythm feels natural, flowing like a light hearted folk song. Frost shows his mastery of craft by having deep meanings implied within this light sounding format. Each line is packed with several possible interpretations, some of which are as follows:

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

He thinks he knows? Why not tell the reader whose he thinks it is? Well, if the guy's name were Mr. Smith or Johnson, it could severely injure the rhythm of the poem. Deeper than that, though, the very act of naming the woods could steal the natural feel of them, as well as some of the mystery in the poem. While this message is being conveyed, the narrator also "thinks" he knows whose woods these are.

His hesitancy to name the wood's owner also sneaks in the feeling of fear, that perhaps the person whose property it is may be a rather mean, ornery fellow who might shoot you for looking at his place. Or maybe it means the opposite—perhaps God's woods? That idea might be supported by the next line-, which *could* be referring to a church:

### **His house is in the village, though;**

The use of the word "though" is interesting beyond the simple rhythm and rhyme. It implies that whomever it is that owns these woods is nowhere nearby, which conveys that there is little risk of being caught- or that the owner is simply is not there to enjoy snow wafting about his property. This adds to the tone of solitude in the poem. The next two lines support these ideas:

### **He will not see me stopping here to watch his woods fill up with snow.**

These lines seem to (on the surface) quash the idea that he may have been referring to God owning the woods - unless he feels that God is not with him, which could support the sense of deep fear. Perhaps he senses an evil presence (or temptation) in the woods. Another interpretation may be that as he travels along this road of life, he will reach God at the end of it, which happens to be where the village is on this microcosmic sleigh-ride. This may also imply that the overall theme of the poem is addressing death, and the contemplation of it.

The lines (on the surface) more simply imply that the narrator feels that he is getting away with something, and it is as simple as that. The repeating "w" in "will", "watch", and "woods" gives me a sense of whispering, implying secrecy.

### **My little horse must think it queer**

The narrator being pulled by a "little" horse adds to his humble (perhaps vulnerable?) nature, rather than riding a stallion or a specific breed of horse. The idea of him thinking of what his horse must think acknowledges that he believes his horse to be a sovereign being with free thoughts, exemplifying his deep respect for nature by placing himself on a similar cognitive level with the horse.

### **To stop without a farmhouse near Between the woods and frozen lake**

This gives us a sense of place, that not only are there some woods here, but there seem to be woods, a pond and possibly farmland stretched out around the narrator, with an emphasis on the absence of people. This adds to the nature-focus as well as the fear aspect (being absolutely alone) once again. The fact that he is between woods and a lake may symbolize choices that he has in life. On one side, the boring, cold flatness of a frozen lake lacks variety and intrigue. The woods, on the other hand, are "lovely dark and deep" as he states later in the poem.

### **The darkest evening of the year.**

This tells me “mid-winter” as well as the fact that the possibility of becoming lost is very real. “Dark” is a powerful, ominous word. I also have to wonder how far he can see with no lights around on such a dark evening.

The long “e” rhymes in “queer”, “near”, “year” seem to tend me to keep on rhyming “fear” although it’s not in the poem itself. In this line assonant “e” sound (long and short) heightens this eerie feeling.

### **He gives his harness bells a shake**

#### **To ask if there was some mistake.**

This further personifies the horse, suggesting that perhaps the little horse himself may be afraid, impatient, or confused. This line also implies that he feels that the horse knows him the same way that he knows it.

The frequency of consonant “s” sounds here sets us up with nice whispery thoughts for the next two lines in the stanza:

### **The only other sound’s the sweep of easy wind and downy flake.**

This brings the narrator (and the reader) back to the quietude and reality of the setting of the poem. With even the underlying sense of fear and desolation, the narrator still appreciates the pure, beautiful snowscape before him. It also gives a sense of a dream-like state “easy wind and downy flake”- ahhh... like pillows on a cozy bed—or beautiful snow that is prettier than it is cold. This romanticizes the winter and fails to acknowledge the dangers of being alone way from warmth. These lines further enhance the concept that these woods are tempting him to wander from his path in life between lat frozen lake and the dark woods. This is further mirrored in the next line:

### **These woods are lovely, dark, and deep,**

This line declares the dichotomy (two sidedness) of theme within this poem- the woods are lovely while being dangerous and unknown. There is a sense of pacification in staring off into the dark, snowy woods. The narrator may be being enchanted by the darkness in the woods. He is mesmerized, being seduced into possibly wandering off into the woods in his dream-like state.

### **But I have promises to keep**

He breaks free of the spellbinding effects of the woods and chooses to join mankind once again, and continue forward on the road. By recalling his worldly obligations, he regains his focus and decides to leave the scene. In the next two lines the feeling is conveyed that he doesn’t necessarily enjoy having to fulfill his humanly obligations (it sound as though he’s dragging his feet, Like a kid who has to stop a football game with his friends because it is supper time).

### **And miles to go before I sleep.**

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The repetition and the distant sounding destination lead the reader to think that he is moving on only because he has to survive, sounding tired and old. Perhaps “sleep” is referring to the “Big Sleep”—death, which is better found at the end of the road than in the dark and deep woods to his side.

If interpreted that way, this may stretch the tone to be one of hope. Rather than get stuck in these woods and die, he’d rather be a part of humanity and have longevity. By escaping the frightening endless woods, he has overcome the evil or temptation within them.

Riding on a sleigh in the middle of nowhere in a dark snowstorm is not the pleasant, serene image that I had when I first started this paper, but the words themselves have opened up that idea to me. Something else struck me after reviewing it several times. Robert Frost *never* mentions the cold. Surely he had to be chilly out in the snow, but perhaps that is the point. Coldness is associated with death, and the absence of it suggests inner warmth and life. The poem had to be a triumph poem in order for him to be able to maintain his warmth while surrounded by miles of dark, frozen countryside.

Overall, the poem seems to address the concept of temptation. Temptation to leave the path of normal life and face whatever the darkness holds in store for us. Frost had us pause with him on that dark and snowy night to show us that we need to recognize what is off to the sides of the paths of our lives, but that the world ahead is worth heading towards.

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