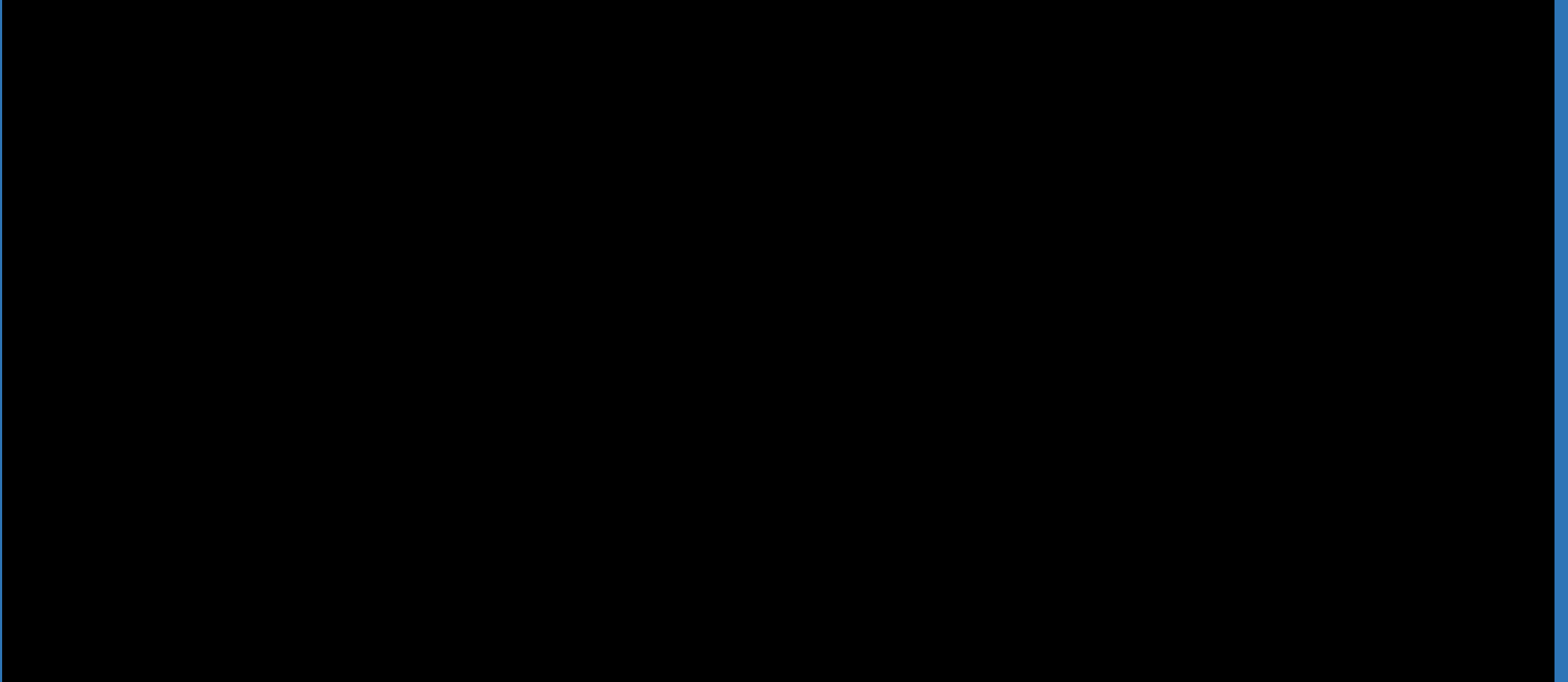


Analysis on
*Stopping by woods on
a snowy evening*
By Robert Frost



Setting the mood and tone



Close your eyes and *hear the harness shake*

Biographical Note:

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Born in San Francisco, March 26th.

- **His childhood was unhappy due to the drinking and gambling habits of his father, William Frost, who died when Frost was 11, plunging the family into poverty.**
- **In 1895, he married Elinor White and moved to 1912 to England to focus on his poetry.**
- **He formed a close relationship with a British poet Edward Thomas, whom he learnt died in 1917, two years after he return to America in 1915.**
- **Frost suffered a series of deaths and devastating events in his lifetime.**
- **Frost and Elinor had 6 children; a daughter died in infancy, a son of cholera before he was four, a daughter aged 29 died shortly after giving birth and his only surviving son committed suicide at the age of 38.**
- **He also had to commit his daughter into a mental institution as well as his sister.**
- **In 1924, Frost received the Pulitzer Prize for his poetry. He is the only American poet to have received honorary doctorates from both Oxford and Cambridge.**

GENERAL COMMENT:

- Deceptively simple poem. It has a poignant haunting quality to it that is almost difficult to define.
- There are two interpretations:
- On the ONE hand, it says exactly what it appears to say, that a man is riding his horse on a cold winter's evening – December 21st – stops during a steady snowfall to stare at a beautiful wood. He would like to go on admiring the deep silence of the wood as it is slowly covered by the snow, but he has a long way to go, and promises to keep before he can go to bed. So he must press on.

- Then there is a more disturbing meaning. The woods symbolise death and that the poet was half in love with death, almost suicidal – “the woods are lovely, dark and deep” – like a grave. The poet seems tempted to lie down in the cold snow, and to become a part of this dead, wintry night, and might have done so, but for the promises or commitments that he has to honour. (Based on his biographical details, we have learnt he has suffered many deaths of his immediate family, his son had committed suicide and two members of his family were institutionalised. It is safe to assume that Frost could have suffered from some form of depression.)

FORM: (rhythm and rhyme)

- Poem reads like a song. It has an iambic rhythm (soft-loud, soft-loud) pulsing the along like the steps of his “little horse”. It is written in short 8-syllable line (tetrameters)
- The rhyme is tight – 4 rhyme sounds in a 16-line poem:
aaba bbcb ccdc dddd.
- The rhythm and rhyme contribute to the soft, dream-like quality of the lines. It almost reads like a lullaby, soothing somebody to sleep, conveying the longing of the poet himself to go to sleep.

Tone:

The tone of the first two lines of stanza 3 is light, brisk, suiting the movement of the horse as it shakes its head. Then the tone becomes more pensive and dreamy, almost sleepy, as the poet describes the sound of the wind as it sweeps the snowflakes upon the woods.

Diction:

There are words that could be associated with a grave, death, funeral or dying. The words “stopping”, “fill up”, “frozen”, “darkest”, “bells”, “mistake”, “dark and deep” and “sleep”.

The line contains an inverted word order. The line should read: *I think I know whose woods these are*. The poet needed to get the word “know” at the end for rhyming purposes. The inversion however, makes the line memorable as it also focuses on the mystery of the woods.

Whose woods these are I think I know.

Owner of woods lives in the village

His house is in the village though;

He will not see him stopping in the woods, trespassing on his
property

He will not see me stopping here

Figuratively: this absent owner could represent God, the creative force that produced all woods. The poet might consider God an absent owner, one who “will not see” what is going on in the place that belongs to him – implying God might not care.

To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it **queer**

strange

To stop without a farmhouse near
They are far from human habitation that the horse finds it strange that they would
stop in such an isolated place. Frost often wrote on the theme of isolation
Between the woods and frozen lake

The **darkest evening** of the year.

December 21st – considered the darkest/longest evening in the year in the Northern Hemisphere. But it could also mean that depression or emotional stress are turning into the “darkest evening” for the poet. The poem was written between his first collection in 1913 and his second collection in 1923, in which time his best friend died in 1917, much pain and suffering happened during this time.

horse

He gives his harness bells a shake

Horse shakes its head, cause his harness bell to jingle.

The rhythm of these 2 lines are slightly faster to match the movement of horse and the jingle of the harness

To ask if there is some mistake.

It is as if the horse is asking if the rider has made a mistake stopping there. This action also suggests a level of companionship which could serve part of the speaker's choice to continue on his journey.

The only other sound's the sweep

Wind not threatening – easy to lay
down and sleep

Of easy wind and downy flake.

The rhythm slows down these 2 lines – long vowel sounds as if the poet would rather sleep in the soft nothingness of the snow than continue

“downy flake” – metaphor – comparing the flakes of the snow with soft down feathers that are used to stuff pillows. A pillow is for resting – an invitation to sleep.

At first we think that the speaker is admiring the woods but the juxtaposing of the adjectives “dark and deep” with “lovely” gives it a haunting quality.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.

Commitments. Although he would like to stay, he can't as he has obligations or responsibilities

But I have promises to keep,

Gives us a reason why he cannot succumb to death

“dark” – symbolic of death. “deep” symbolic of grave as it is also “dark”.
Speaker seems tempted to lie down in snow and let it become his grave.

And miles to go before I sleep,

And miles to go before I sleep.

Long journey ahead, not just to his immediate destination but to life.

The repetition in the last 2 lines, supports the dreamy, song-like quality of the poem and suggests that the rhythmic plodding of the horse's hooves has begun again as the speaker continues his journey.

References:

Sparknotes *Robert Frost*
Blue Series Worldscapes

Also see:
Youtube