

## Robert Frost's "Woods": The Temptation of "What If"

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Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is an apt vehicle for appreciating the care and deliberateness with which he wrote. It is one of his most frequently anthologized poems: this gives it a familiarity within which one can explore its intricacies freely.

### The Poem\*

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                   10  
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,                   15  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.                   16

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\* The text, originally collected in *New Hampshire* (Holt, 1923), is taken from Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems, Complete and Unabridged*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (Owl Book/Holt, 1979), 224-225.

## The Exploration

Rhythmically, the poem is unvaried iambic tetrameter: there is not one non-iambic foot in the poem.

The rhyme scheme is:

a  
a  
b  
a  
  
b  
b  
c  
b  
  
c  
c  
d  
c  
  
d  
d  
d  
d

In each of the four stanzas, the first, second, and fourth lines rhyme, but the third line (except in the fourth stanza) is intra-stanzaically unrhymed. That unrhymed third line provides the dominant rhyme of the next stanza. This interlaces the stanzas in a way that one could call *quarta rima* (a variation of Dantesque *terza rima*). Only the fourth and final stanza has four rhymed lines.

The formal characteristics of the poem are regular in a way that lulls the reader. That must be kept in mind in what follows.

### Stanza 1

The predominance of the “w” sound in lines 1 and 4, together with the triple rhyme on the “o” sound, makes one hear in the background of one’s consciousness the word “whoa.” That word/sound conveys a feeling of stopping, and it prepares one for the appearance of the speaker’s horse in the first line of the second stanza.

The two adjoining locutions “I think” and “I know” (1) introduce an emphasis on the mind, on thinking and knowledge, as a particularly important part of who the “I” of the poem is, and—by implication—an important part of who any human is.

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\* There may be an additional pun on the word “woe,” as a suggestion of the woeful mood that has overtaken the speaker.

The tone of the first two lines is interrogatory (questioning), but that interrogatory tone is conveyed with casualness and ordinariness, as the afterthought “though” (2) conveys.

The speaker’s first word is “Whose.” With this word, the speaker raises the issue of belongingness, which starts one wondering what belongs to whom, what belongs to anyone, what is rightfully one’s own. This entails the further issue of the extent to which ownership confers responsibility. The speaker seems to be perplexed that a person would live so far away (“in the village,” 2) from what is owned. Therefore, one is led to ask whether the distance of the owner of the woods from the owned woods suggests an abrogation of responsibility (closeness).

The furtiveness of the speaker’s concern about being seen by the owner of the woods (3) suggests that the speaker feels like a trespasser. In this way, the notion of trespassing becomes the tacit backdrop of the speaker’s thoughts. Trespassing can be mental as well as physical. Trespassing means stepping beyond the defined boundaries of territories, either of the world or of the mind. After all, every human life is defined, enclosed, by boundaries or limits, bound by limiting responsibilities. It is not surprising, then, that humans tend—at one time or another—to wonder what *would* happen if they could leave those bounding responsibilities behind them. In other words, every human is tempted by the lure of what *would* be if one could be released from one’s obligatory burdens.

The woods before which the speaker pauses represent that temptation. Indeed, the doubling of the word “woods” in the first and last lines of the stanza makes those “woods,” as it were, the boundary of the first stanza. In that word “woods,” there is an echo of the other word “*woulds*” that encompasses the possibilities (the “would-bes” or “what ifs”) that one might be tempted to try. The speaker’s thoughts here express a moment in which the speaker engages in an implicit thought-experiment (a psychic try-out) of succumbing to the lure of abdication of responsibility.

Already, however, the result of this thought-experiment is suggested by the pun on “know” in the first line: inside it echoes the word “no.” This implies that such thought-experiments must remain simply that, because one cannot simply abandon one’s responsibilities.

In addition, one must take notice that the speaker stops, not to watch the snow fall, but rather to watch the woods fill up with it. This indicates that the speaker is a person who is fascinated, not by the ordinary, but by the unusual or strange. The speaker’s fascination with the unusual makes the speaker feel unique, isolated, and alone. That aloneness is emphasized by the first person triplet “I-I-me” (1, 1, 3) and the opposed third person triplet “His-He-his” (2, 3, 4).

Finally, the smooth, natural, unvarying iambic rhythm, which will be maintained to the end of the poem, provides a background of regularity and smoothness, almost of sleepiness and dreaminess.

## Stanza 2

The second stanza opens on a note of closeness and intimacy (“My little”), but it is directed toward the speaker’s horse, for which the speaker feels affection. This beast is a creature of reliable habits and patterns.

The horse is drawing a carriage (cf. stanza 3, 9), and the speaker’s comment indicates that he or she usually rides around in that carriage from farmhouse to farmhouse, so

usually that the horse would be disoriented (“think it queer”) by stopping somewhere other than one of the farmhouses on the customary route.

In addition, the reference to its being “evening” (8) suggests that the speaker’s carriage rounds are frequently made after dark. This makes one wonder what the speaker does for a living. Perhaps the speaker is a physician who often is called out at all hours to tend to patients. Or perhaps the speaker is a priest or minister. There is not enough evidence to determine which, if either, the speaker might be. Nevertheless, the suggestion is strong that whatever the speaker does involves service to others, being responsible for others.

The interlinking of rhyme and the regularity of rhythm from the first to the second stanza pull one along, draw one forward, without one’s noticing it. This is like drifting off to sleep while trying to stay awake.

Its being “the darkest evening of the year” (8) has at least a double significance. First, this suggests that the date is on or about December 21, the winter solstice, the longest evening of the year, the evening with the maximum period of darkness. Second, the darkness of the evening adumbrates the darkness of the woods (cf. stanza 4) and mirrors the darkness of the speaker’s soul that is drawn to that enticing darkness of the woods. This darkness, whether psychic or sylvan, represents uncertainty questioning, wonderment.

Furthermore, this is the time of the year when some beasts and many growing things are in hibernation. However, for humans, there is no season of dormancy: humans are “on call” all the time, all year long, all life long.

Finally, the triple rhyme of the “-ear” sound suggests the organ of hearing, and this prepares the way for the emphasis on sound in stanza 3.

### Stanza 3

The third stanza is dominated by “s” sounds, which is at least triply evocative: (1) evocative of being called; (2) evocative of serpentine hissing (which in turn evokes the temptation in the Garden); and (3) evocative of wind blowing through branches and other foliage. In addition, it is the sound that one makes as one is falling asleep.

The loud sound of the jingling harness bells contrasts with the hushed sound of the wind blowing and snowflakes falling. Indeed, the sound of the bells makes one feel the surrounding hush even more.

The triple rhyme of the “-ake” sound is a pun on the word “ache.” This suggests that the speaker feels an ache, in the sense of a fatigue and in the sense of a longing, which he or she cannot quite put into words. The final line of the stanza suggests that the tiredness eventuates in a longing for ease and softness, for freedom from toil and responsibility.

Finally, the three “d” sounds of the last two lines of stanza 3 are echoed in the three “d” sounds of the first line of stanza 4.

### Stanza 4

The woods, the possibilities (*woulds*) are “lovely” (i.e., “easy” and “downy”). Therefore, they are attractive and alluring. However, their loveliness is “dark,” which makes it seem uncertain, possibly threatening, yet somehow beautiful. The loveliness is

also “deep,” which makes it seem unlimited, possibly unending, yet somehow profound.

Nevertheless, however alluring that enticing open-endedness may be, however alluring that escape from responsibility may be, the speaker must resist it, because he or she has responsibilities (“promises to keep”). Those promises, or some of those promises, must be kept on this night. In addition, the promises that the speaker must keep are the miles that he or she has to traverse before sleeping. That the speaker says “before I sleep” suggests that he or she is feeling sleepy right then. Since sleeping is a psychic escape mechanism, the prospect of sleep also represents the prospect of escape from life’s burdensome responsibilities. Furthermore, since sleep is the image of death, the speaker’s commitment to fulfilling the responsibilities of that cold night extends to fulfilling responsibility through all the nights between then and the speaker’s death.

The repetition of the final clause makes one feel both the speaker’s sleepiness and the speaker’s determination to resist that sleepiness. The speaker may be tempted to abrogate his or her burdensome responsibilities, but the speaker decides—with difficulty—to shoulder those responsibilities, to go on with his or her life of dutiful service.

Finally, the repetition of the final clause prevents an interlocking rhyme (“oh” sound: a) that would loop back to the first stanza in a kind of unending rhyming circularity. Instead, there is a finality, a rhyming recognition that there is no going back to alternate possibilities, but instead there must be a dedicated moving forward to the end, to the sleep, that is mirrored in the termination of the quarta rima pattern.