



Robert Frost

(1874-1963)

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening (1916,1923))

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.

#### ANALYSIS

“We know from the poet that he had just written the long poem, ‘New Hampshire,’ in one all-night unbroken stretch of composition, and that he then turned a page of his workbook and wrote this short poem without stopping. This fact has interesting implications. ‘New Hampshire’ is a discourse in the idiomatic

blank verse that is so peculiarly Frost's own style—the rhythms of natural speech matched to the strict but inconspicuous iambic pentameter, the beat always discernible but never formal. It is reasonable to suppose that after the hours spent in writing the long poem, in its loosened but never loose manner, he was ready, unconsciously, for a poem in a strict pattern. He had also obviously had in his head for some time the incident on which the short poem was to be based, as well as the use he wished to make of it. He committed himself, as he has said, to the four-stress iambic line and to the *aaba* rime-scheme, in the first stanza, which he wrote rapidly and did not revise....

'That went off so easily I was tempted into the added difficulty of picking up my 3 for my 1-2-4 to go on with in the second stanza. I was amused and scared at what that got me into,' Frost says.... It began with what was the actual experience of stopping at night by some dark woods in winter, and the fact that there were two horses. He remembered what he saw then, 'The steaming horses think it queer.' But the poem needs truth more than fact, and he cancels the line and begins again, 'The horse begins to think it queer,' but doesn't like the word 'begins,' needing in the allowed space a word that will particularize the horse, so writes 'The little horse must think it queer.' Now he runs into a grammatical difficulty, which must somehow be solved before he gets on into the poem he already feels sure of. 'I launched into the construction "My little horse must think it queer that we should stop." I didn't like omitting the "that" and I had no room for "should." I had the luck to get out of it with the infinitive.' This groping and warming-up has a kind of impatience, an urgency to get on with the poem, but not until all the parts are right. At this point the poet knew and did not know how the poem would end. He knew the feel, and the sense, and almost everything about the form—certainly enough to know when he got off the track.

Whether he revised the third line here or later we cannot know. But we can see in several places in this poem his changes toward particularization. The line 'Between a forest and a lake' is a notation, and 'Between the woods and frozen lake' is a finished line of poetry. 'A forest' is too big, too vague, but 'the woods' is definite, and bounded; you get lost in a forest, but you can walk through and out of the woods, and probably you know who owns it—Vermonters do, as he has said in the first stanza. 'A lake' has not the specific condition or picture of 'frozen lake.' This sort of revision, or what Frost calls, 'touching up,' is what makes a poem—this, plus the first inspiration. Either one, without the other, is unlikely to make a good poem.

The next stanza comes easier, because the rime-scheme has been determined, and one unexpected obstacle has been overcome. But once more there is a delay, as the poet makes a decision as to the 'he' or 'she'—and the more important and more interesting about the falling snow. In writing 'downy flake' for 'fall of flake' the gain is great not only for accuracy of feeling and fact, but also for the music of the lines. The simple alliteration in 'fall of flake' is canceled in favor of the word, one word, 'downy,' which blends with the vowel-chords a poet half-consciously makes and modulates as he goes. In this instance, it half-chimes with 'sounds' and adds a rounder, fuller, and yet quieter tone.

Now the carry-over rime is 'sweep,' a fortunate one, really, and important to the final solution of the rime-scheme. It is not too much to assume, knowing all we know about the circumstances of the writing of this poem—the all-night composition of 'New Hampshire,' and the sudden urge to catch and shape still another saved idea—that the darker, more confident, more rapid strokes of the pen show the poet's growing excitement. The end is in sight. The thing he believed could happen will happen, surely now, and he must hurry to get it onto the page. This is the real moment of power, and any poet's greatest satisfaction.

'The woods are lovely dark and deep / But I have promises to keep.' The first two lines of the last stanza come fast, and flow beautifully, the crest of the poem's emotion and its music. We cannot know whether he had held them in his head, or had swept up to and into them as he felt the destined pattern fulfilling itself. Then, with success in sight, there comes an awkward and unexpected stumble. He writes, 'That bid me give the reins a shake,' which may have been the fact and the action. But the rime is wrong. Not only has the rime been used in the previous stanza, but so has the image of the horse shaking his head and reins. Things are moving fast now, no doubt impatiently, but certainly with determination, shown in the heavy black lines of abrupt cancellation. He strikes out 'me give the reins a shake,' and writes above it, so the line will read, 'That bid me on, and there are miles,' and then the whole thing comes through! Of course! 'Miles to go...'

That's what it was supposed to be—the feeling of silence and dark, almost overpowering the man, but the necessity of going on. 'And miles to go before I sleep.' Then the triumph in the whole thing, the only right and perfect last line, solving the problem of the carried-over rime, keeping the half-tranced state, and the dark, and the solitude, and man's great effort to be responsible man...the repetition of that line.

'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' can be studied as perfected structure... It can be thought of as a picture: the whites, grays, and blacks of the masses and areas of lake, field, and woods, with the tiny figure of the man in the sleigh, and the horse. And it can be thought of as a statement of man's everlasting responsibility to man; though the dark and nothingness tempt him to surrender, he will not give in. It is interesting to compare this poem with two later pieces of Frost's, in which he uses the same image, 'Desert Places,' and 'Come In,' none alike, all on the first level of his poetry, and all three built on the image of the pull of wildness and lawlessness against man's conscious will and the promises he has made to be kept."

John Holmes  
"Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'"  
*Preface to Poetry*  
Charles W. Cooper & John Holmes  
(Harcourt 1946)

"The haunting rhythms of 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' express the powerful fascination the woods have upon the lonely traveler, who, in the face of a long journey, descending night, and falling snow, pauses in the gathering gloom of the 'darkest evening of the year,' transfixed by the compelling invitation of the forest. The poem is about the spell of the woods—the traveler's own woods, we want to say, but they are alien enough and belong to someone else enough for him to sense the trespass of his intent gaze into them at the same time he recognizes their sway over him. His heightened awareness projects his concern for himself back to the representatives of civilization, the unseen owner of the woods and the horse in harness. Thus, the indifferent animal becomes, in his master's alerted imagination, the guardian who sounds the alarm which rings above the whispered invitation.

The poem *is* the counter-spell against the invitation, the act by which the traveler regains domination of his will. The intricately interlocked rhyme scheme (*aaba, bbcb, ccdc, dddd*) and the strict iambic tetrameter, while they imitate and suggest the hypnotic power of the forest, also form the basis of a protective charm against that power. The logic of the rhyme scheme, in which the divergent third line of one stanza becomes the organizing principle of the next, is an expression of the growing control and determination described in the syntax. Thus, the first line of the last quatrain finally *names* the nature of the spell and also provides the term which is answered in rhyme by the poet's decision to refuse the invitation. Seen in this light, the poem reveals what Frost means when he says that "every poem written regular is a symbol small or great of the way the will has to pitch into the commitments deeper and deeper to a rounded conclusion."

James M. Cox  
"Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing"  
*The Virginia Quarterly Review*  
XXXIII (1957) 378-94

"There is more than meets the eye in this lyric, perhaps the most famous and certainly one of the most controversial of Frost's poems. On the surface it is an unadorned narrative of a simple incident. Some readers stop there and they are rewarded with a memorable experience. Other readers find more, much more beneath the surface. In his essay, 'Robert Frost: The Way to the Poem,' John Ciardi demonstrates that 'Stopping by Woods' is, technically, a tour-de-force of poetical ingenuity and craftsmanship. Frost deliberately chose a difficult rhyme scheme. He decided to rhyme not just the usual two lines in each stanza but three. Furthermore, he set himself the task of picking up the unrhymed sound of the third line of each stanza and carrying it over to become the main rhyme in the next stanza. All this extra difficulty forced Frost to do his supreme best.

In picking up the loose rhyme and carrying it over to rhyme three more times in the next stanza, he created an endless chain-link form. Each stanza left a hook, so to speak, for the next stanza to hang on. In

stanza four the poet faced a problem: he had to find some way of ending an endless overlapping form. In a brilliant stroke he found his ending by making the whole fourth line the same as the third line, thus producing the powerful finality that imprints every reader.

Large meanings are packed into this small poem. Think a moment about the symbols Frost uses. What does the owner of the woods mentioned in the poem stand for? Probably for the village and village life at the very least and, more likely, for the social responsibilities of civilized life as opposed to the loneliness of the woods. The little horse, too, is a symbol, representing a kind of life that does not understand why a man should stop by a patch of woods to watch the snow come down. In contrast to the world of civilization symbolized by the owner, the little horse stands for the animal or brute world. The woods, the cold, the dark, the frozen lake, and the falling snow constitute a third symbol--the powerful attraction of all this lovely dark-and-deep, which may sensibly be interpreted as the attraction of beauty. Beauty is certainly one aspect of the scene and, therefore, one meaning of the symbol. But this explanation does not exhaust its meaning. Another interpretation is that the man feels an invitation from these woods to final surrender and rest. Some readers go even further and say that the attraction of the woods represents a wish, however momentary, to die.

Several things in the poem suggest that the man is on some kind of a journey, but Frost never tells us specifically what business the man is on. He may have intended to suggest any journey in life and, thereby, to leave the meaning on the broadest level. Attracted by the woods partway on his journey, the man has paused--perhaps to work out a mental conflict. He has 'promises to keep' at the end of his journey. One part of this sensitive, thinking man would like to give up the conflict and surrender. But another part is aware of social responsibilities. The thought of the 'lovely, dark and deep' lingers, but the man's final decision is to cast off the mood and continue his journey. He has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps. He repeats that thought and the performance--one of the most 'miraculous performances of English lyricism'--comes to its end.

James M. Reid  
*100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century*  
(Harcourt 1966)  
with Laurence Perrine

"The visible sign of the poet's preoccupation--the word is not too strong--is the recurrent image, particularly in his earlier work, of dark woods and trees. Often, as in the lyric with which we have begun, the world of the woods...a world offering perfect quiet and solitude, exists side by side with the realization that there is also another world, a world of people and social obligations. Both worlds have claims on the poet. He stops by woods on this 'darkest evening of the year' to watch them 'fill up with snow,' and lingers so long that his 'little horse' shakes his harness bells 'to ask if there is some mistake.' The poet is put in mind of the 'promises' he has to keep, of the miles he still must travel. We are not told, however, that the call of social responsibility proves stronger than the attraction of the woods, which are 'lovely' as well as 'dark and deep'; the poet and his horse have not moved on at the poem's end.

The dichotomy of the poet's obligations both to the woods and to a world of 'promises'--the latter filtering like a barely heard echo through the almost hypnotic state induced by the woods and falling snow--is what gives this poem its singular interest.... The artfulness of 'Stopping by Woods' consists in the way the two worlds are established and balanced. The poet is aware that the woods by which he is stopping belong to someone in the village; they are owned by the world of men. But at the same time they are his, the poet's woods, too, by virtue of what they mean to him in terms of emotion and private signification.

What appears to be 'simple' is shown to be not really simple, what appears to be innocent not really innocent.... The poet is fascinated and lulled by the empty wastes of white and black. The repetition of 'sleep' in the final two lines suggests that he may succumb to the influences that are at work. There is no reason to suppose that these influences are benignant. It is, after all, 'the darkest evening of the year,' and the poet is alone 'between the woods and frozen lake.' His one bond with the security and warmth of the 'outer' world, the 'little horse' who wants to be about his errand, is an unsure one. The ascription of 'lovely' to this scene of desolate woods, effacing snow, and black night complicates rather than alleviates

the mood when we consider how pervasive are the connotations of dangerous isolation and menacing death.”

John T. Ogilvie

“From Woods to Stars: A Pattern of Imagery in Robert Frost’s Poetry”  
*South Atlantic Quarterly* (Winter 1959)

“Throughout the poem—brief in actual time, but with the deceptive length of dream—we are being drawn into silence and sleep, yet always with the slightest contrary pull of having to go on. The very tentative tone of the opening line lets us into the mood without our quite sensing where it will lead, just as the ordinariness of ‘though’ at the end of the second line assures us that we are in this world. But by repeating the ‘o’ sound, ‘though’ also starts the series of rhymes that will soon get the better of traveler and reader. The impression of aloneness in the first two lines prepares for concentration on seeing the strange process not of snow falling, but of woods ‘filling up.’

The intimacy of ‘My little horse must think it queer’ reminds us again of the everyday man and his life back home, but ‘queer’ leads to an even lonelier scene, a kind of northern nowhere connected with the strangeness of the winter solstice, The darkest evening of the year. In this second stanza the unbroken curve of rhythm adds to the sense of moving imperceptibly into a spell-world, as we dimly note the linking of the rhymes with the first stanza. The pattern is catching on to the reader, pulling him into its drowsy current. The lone spaciousness and quiet of the third stanza is heightened by the ‘shake’ of bells, but ‘to ask,’ humorously taking the horse’s point of view, tells us that the driver is awake and sane.

The sounds he now attends to so closely are very like silence, images of regular movement and softness of touch. The transition to the world of sleep, almost reached in the next stanza—goes by diminution of consonantal sounds, from ‘gives...shake...ask...mistake’ (gutturals easily roughened to fit the alert movement of the horse) to the sibilant ‘sound’s ‘the sweep / Of easy wind’... ‘Sweep,’ by virtue of the morpheme ‘-eep,’ is closely associated with other words used for ‘hushed, diminishing’ actions: seep, sleep, peep, weep, creep. The quietness, concentration, and rocking motion of the last two lines of stanza three prepare perfectly for the hypnosis of the fourth. (Compare similar effects in ‘After Apple-Picking.’) ‘Lonely’ recalls the tender alluringness of ‘easy’ and ‘down’; ‘dark’ and ‘deep’ the strangeness of the time and the mystery of the slowly filling woods. The closing lines combine most beautifully the contrary pulls of the poem, with the repetitions, the settling down on one sleepy rhyme running against what is being said, and with the speaker echoing his prose sensible self in ‘I have promises’ and ‘miles to go’ while he almost seems to be nodding off...

‘Stopping by Woods’ shows both the process and the effect as the poet-traveler composes himself for sleep. The metaphorical implication is well hidden... The dark nowhere of the woods, the seen and heard movement of things, and the lullaby of inner speech are an invitation to sleep—and winter sleep is again close to easeful death. (‘Dark’ and ‘deep’ are typical Romantic adjectives.) All of these poetic suggestions are in the purest sense symbolic: we cannot say in other terms what they are ‘of,’ though we feel their power. There are critics who have gone much further in defining what Frost ‘meant’; but perhaps sleep is mystery enough. Frost’s poem is symbolic in the manner of Keats’s ‘To Autumn,’ where the over-meaning is equally vivid and equally unnamable. In contrast to ‘The Oven Bird’ and ‘Come In,’ the question of putting the mystery in words is not raised; indeed the invitation has been expressed more by song than speech. The rejection though outspoken is as instinctive as the felt attraction to the alluring darkness. From this and similar lyrics, Frost might be described as a poet of rejected invitations to voyage in the ‘definitely imagined regions’ that Keats and Yeats more readily enter.”

Reuben A. Brower

*The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention*  
(Oxford 1963)

“As in ‘Desert Places’ the seasonal phase is winter, the diurnal phase is night, but...the scene, we are reminded four times over, is a wood. Woods, especially when as here they are ‘lovely, dark and deep,’ are much more seductive to Frost than is a field, the ‘blank whiteness of benighted snow’ in ‘Desert Places’ or the frozen swamp in ‘The Wood-Pile.’ In fact, the woods are not...merely ‘lovely, dark, and deep.’ Rather,

as Frost in all the editions he supervised intended, they are 'lovely, [i.e.] dark and deep'; the loveliness thereby partakes of the depth and darkness which make the woods so ominous.

The recognition of the power of Nature, especially of snow, to obliterate the limits and boundaries of things and of his own being is, in large part, a function here of some furtive impulse toward extinction, an impulse no more predominate in Frost than it is in Nature.... If Wallace Stevens in his poem 'The Creations of Sound' has Frost in mind when he remarks that the poems of 'X' 'do not make the visible a little hard / To see,' that is because Stevens failed to catch the characteristic strangeness of performances like 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.' And if he has Frost in mind when, in the same poem, he speaks of 'X' as 'a man / Too exactly himself,' it is because he would not see that Frost's emphasis on the dramatic and on the contestation of voices in poetry was a clue more to a need for self-possession than to an arrogant superfluity of it.

That need is in many ways the subject of 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.' As its opening words suggest—'Whose woods these are I think I know'—it is a poem concerned with ownership and also with someone who cannot be or does not choose to be very emphatic even about owning himself. He does not want or expect to be seen. And his reason, aside from being on someone else's property, is that it would apparently be out of character for him to be there, communing alone with a woods fast filling up with snow. He is, after all, a man of business who has promised his time, his future to other people. It would appear that he is not only a scheduled man but a fairly convivial one. He knows who owns which parcels of land, or thinks he does, and his language has a sort of pleasant neighborliness, as in the phrase 'stopping by.' It is no wonder that his little horse would think his actions 'queer' or that he would let the horse, instead of himself, take responsibility for the judgment. He is in danger of losing himself; and his language by the end of the third stanza begins to carry hints of a seductive luxuriousness unlike anything preceding it—'Easy wind and downy flake...lovely, dark and deep.'

Even before the somnolent repetition of the last two lines, he is ready to drop off. His opening question about who owns the woods becomes, because of the very absence from the poem of any man 'too exactly himself,' a question of whether the woods are to 'own' him. With the drowsy repetitiousness of rhymes in the last stanza, four in a row, it takes some optimism to be sure that (thanks mostly to his little horse, who makes the only assertive sound in the poem) he will be able to keep his promises. At issue, of course, is really whether or not he will be able to 'keep' his life."

Richard Poirier  
*Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*  
(Oxford 1977)

"With respect to his most anthologized poem, 'Stopping By Woods....' which he called 'my best bid for remembrance,' such 'feats' are seen in its rhyme scheme, with the third unrhyming line in each of the first three stanzas becoming the rhyme word of each succeeding stanza until the last one, all of whose end words rhyme and whose final couplet consists of a repeated 'And miles to go before I sleep'...

Discussion of this poem has usually concerned itself with matters of 'content' or meaning (What do the woods represent? Is this a poem in which suicide is contemplated?). Frost, accordingly, as he continued to read it in public made fun of efforts to draw out or fix its meaning as something large and impressive, something to do with man's existential loneliness or other ultimate matters. Perhaps because of these efforts, and on at least one occasion—his last appearance in 1962 at the Ford Forum in Boston—he told his audience that the thing which had given him most pleasure in composing the poem was the effortless sound of that couplet about the horse and what it does when stopped by the woods: 'He gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake.'

We might guess that he held these lines up for admiration because they are probably the hardest ones in the poem out of which to make anything significant: regular in their iambic rhythm and suggesting nothing more than they assert, they establish a sound against which the 'other sound' of the following lines can, by contrast, make itself heard. Frost's fondness for this couplet suggests that however much he cared about the 'larger' issues or questions which 'Stopping By Woods...' raises and provokes, he wanted to direct his readers away from solemnly debating them; instead he invited them simply to be pleased with how he had

put it. He was to say later on about Edwin Arlington Robinson something which could more naturally have been said about himself--that his life as a poet was 'a revel in the felicities of language.' 'Stopping By Woods...' can be appreciated only by removing it from its pedestal and noting how it is a miniature revel in such felicities."

William H. Pritchard  
*Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*  
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"The concepts of indeterminacy, correspondence, and complementarity are useful for developing a sense of Frost's poems and of their modernity. As illustration, a single poem will have to serve, a famous one. 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' stages its play of opposites at typically Frostian borders between night and day, storm and hearth, nature and culture, individual and group, freedom and responsibility. It works them, not 'out' to resolution but in permanent suspension as complementary counters in *mens animi*, the feeling thought of active mind. The poem...unsettles certitude even in so small a matter as the disposition of accents in the opening line: 'Whose woods these are I think I know.' The monosyllabic tetrameter declares itself as it declares. Yet the 'sound of sense' is uncertain. As an expression of doubtful guessing, 'think' opposes 'know,' with its air of certitude. The line might be read to emphasize doubt (Whose woods these are I think I know) or confident knowledge (Whose woods these are I think I know)....

One of Frost's characteristic devices is to set up and undermine a case of the pathetic fallacy in such a way that both construction and collapse stay actively in play. In 'Stopping by Woods,' the undermining nearly precedes the setting up. 'Must' gives the game away, as the speaker (exercising indeterminacy) interferes with the reality he observes, imposing his thoughts and feelings on it. 'Darkest' contributes to the pattern. Is the evening, say, the winter solstice, literally darkest? Could it be, given the way that snow concentrates light? Or is 'darkest' a judgment the speaker projects? In the next stanza, the speaker's 'reading into' Nature intensifies to the point where harness bells 'actually' speak. Then, as if to emphasize that such speaking is a human addition to a speechless scene, we hear that the only other sound is the 'sweep' of light wind on softly falling snow.

Those two categories of evidence, the self-consciously imposed and therefore suspect yet understandable human one, and the apparently indifferent yet comfortingly beautiful natural one, seem to produce the description of the woods as 'lovely' and 'dark and deep,' a place of both (dangerous) attraction and (self-protective) threat. The oppositions are emphasized by Frost's intended punctuation—a comma after 'lovely'; none after 'dark,' and the double doubleness of attraction and threat complicates the blunt 'But' that begins the next line. Which woods, if any, is being rejected? How far does recalling that one has 'promises to keep' go toward keeping them in fact?

The poem's formal qualities, while not obviously 'experimental,' also contribute to its balancing act. The closing repetition emphasizes the speaker's commitment to his responsibilities. It also emphasizes the repetitive tedium that makes the woods an attractive alternative to those responsibilities. This leaves open the question of just how much arguing is left to be done before any action is taken. The rhyme scheme contributes to the play. Its linked pattern seems completed and resolved in the final stanza, underlining the effect of closure: *aaba, bbcb, ccde, dddd*. But is a repeated word a rhyme? Is the resolution excessive; does the repeated line work as a sign of forced closure?

None of this is resolved; it is kept in complementary suspension. Similarly, the poem is clearly a made thing, an object or artifact, as its formal regularities attest; it is also an event in continuous process, as its present participial title announces and as the present tense employed throughout suggests. At the same time, the poem has a narrative thrust that tempts us to see the speaker move on (even though he does not), just as too much insistence on the poem as stranded in the present tense falsely makes it out as static."

Guy Rotella  
"Comparing Conceptions: Frost and Eddington, Heisenberg and Bohr"  
*On Frost: The Best from American Literature*  
eds. Edwin H. Cady and Louis J. Budd

(Duke 1991)

“The ‘dark forest; in the tradition of ‘The Choice of the Two Paths’ and the ‘forest dark’ of Longfellow’s translation of the *Inferno* also foreshadow the imagery of the famous Frost poem published in *New Hampshire* (1923), the last stanza of which begins: ‘The woods are lovely; dark and deep.’ In spurning the word ‘forest’ for ‘woods,’ a term that is perhaps more appropriate for New England, Frost was, whether he knew it or not, following Charles Eliot Norton, whose translation of the *Inferno* reads ‘dark wood’ and who glosses the opening of Dante’s poem: ‘The dark wood is the forest of the world of sense, ‘the erroneous wood of this life’...that is, the wood in which man loses his way.’ In ‘the darkest evening of the year,’ the New England poet finds himself standing before a scene he finds attractive enough to make him linger. Frost’s poem employs, significantly; the present tense. Dante’s poem (through Longfellow) employs the past tense. It is as if Frost were casually remembering some familiar engraving that hung on a schoolroom wall in Lawrence as he was growing up in the 1880s, and the poet slides into the picture.

He enters, so to speak, the mind of the figure who speaks the poem, a figure whose body is slowly turned into the scene, head fully away from the foreground, bulking small, holding the reins steadily and loosely. The horse and team are planted, though poised to move. And so begins the poet’s dramatization of this rural and parochial tableau. ‘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.’ And then, having entered the human being, he witnesses the natural drift of that human being’s thoughts to the brain of his ‘little horse,’ who thinks it ‘queer’ that the rider has decided to stop here. And then, in an equally easy transition, the teamster returns to himself, remembering that he has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps. Duties, responsibilities—many must have them, we think, as echolalia closes the poem, all other thoughts already turning away from the illustration on the schoolroom wall. And even as the ‘little horse’ has been rid of the man’s intrusion, so too must the rider’s mind be freed of the poet’s incursion. The poet’s last line resonates, dismissing the reader from his, the poet’s, dreamy mind and that mind’s preoccupations, and returning to the poet’s inside reading of the still-life drama that goes on forever within its frame hanging on the classroom wall. The ways in which Frost’s poem ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ converses with Longfellow’s translation of Dante are evident from other shared echoes and images. What Frost ‘fetched’ here (as in ‘The Road Not Taken’) were the motifs of risk and decision characterizing both ‘The Choice of the Two Paths’ and Dante’s *Inferno*.”

George Montiero  
*Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*  
(U Kentucky 1988)

“The duality of the narrator’s response to the woods is caught in the contrast between the relaxed, conversational idiom of the first three lines (note the gentle emphasis given to ‘think,’ the briskly colloquial ‘though’) and the dream-like descriptive detail and hypnotic verbal music (‘watch...woods,’ ‘his...fill...with’) of the last. Clearing and wilderness, law and freedom, civilization and Nature, fact and dream: These oppositions reverberate throughout American writing. And they are registered here in Frost’s own quietly ironic contrast between the road along which the narrator travels, connecting marketplace to marketplace, promoting community and culture--and the white silence of the woods, where none of the ordinary limitations of the world seem to apply. In a minor key, they are caught also in the implicit comparison between the owner of these woods, who apparently regards them as a purely financial investment (he lives in the village) and the narrator who sees them, at least potentially, as a spiritual one.

This contrast between what might be termed, rather reductively perhaps, ‘realistic’ and ‘romantic’ attitudes is then sustained through the next two stanzas: the commonsensical response is now playfully attributed to the narrator’s horse which, like any practical being, wants to get on down the road to food and shelter. The narrator himself, however, continues to be lured by the mysteries of the forest just as the Romantic poets were lured by the mysteries of otherness, sleep and death. And, as before, the contrast is a product of tone and texture as much as dramatic intimation: the poem communicates its debate in how it says things as much as in what it says. So, the harsh gutturals and abrupt movement of lines like, ‘He gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake,’ give verbal shape to the matter-of-fact attitude attributed to the horse, just as the soothing sibilants and gently rocking motion of the lines that follow this (‘The only other sound’s the sweep / Of easy wind and downy flake’) offer a tonal equivalent of the strange, seductive world into which the narrator is tempted to move. ‘Everything that is written,’ Frost once



said, 'is as good as it is dramatic'; and in a poem like this the words of the poem become actors in the drama.

The final stanza of 'Stopping by Woods' does not resolve its tensions; on the contrary, it rehearses them in particularly memorable language.... Having paid tribute to the dangerous seductiveness of the woods, the narrator seems to be trying to shake himself back into commonsense reality by invoking his 'promises' or mundane responsibilities. The last line is repeated, however; and while at first it seems little more than a literal reference to the journey he has to complete (and so a way of telling himself to continue on down the road), the repetition gives it particular resonance. This could, after all, be a metaphorical reference to the brief span of human life and the compulsion this puts the narrator under to take risks and explore the truth while he can.

Only a few 'miles' to go before 'I sleep in death': such a chilling *memento mori* perhaps justifies stopping by the woods in the first place and considering the spiritual quest implicit in the vision they offer. Perhaps: the point is that neither narrator nor reader can be sure. 'The poem is the act of having the thought,' Frost insisted; it is process rather than product, it invites us to share in the experiences of seeing, feeling, and thinking, not simply to look at their results. So the most a piece like 'Stopping by Woods' will offer--and it is a great deal--is an imaginative resolution of its tensions: the sense that its conflicts and irresolutions have been given appropriate dramatic expression, revelation and equipoise."

Richard Gray  
*American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*  
(Longman Group UK 1990)

"Like 'The Road Not Taken,' it suggests vast thematic implications through a lucid narrative.... The most amazing thing about this work is that three of the fifteen lines (the last line repeats the previous one) are transformations from other poems. 'He gives his harness bells a shake' comes from Scott's 'The Rover' (in Palgrave): 'He gave the bridle-reins a shake.' 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep' comes from Thomas Lovell Beddoes' 'The Phantom Wooer': 'Our bed is lovely, dark, and sweet.' The concluding 'And miles to go before I sleep' comes from Keats' 'Keen Fitful Gusts': 'And I have many miles on foot to fare.' Though these three lines are variations from other poets, Frost, writing in the tradition of English verse, makes them original and new, and integrates them perfectly into his own poem.

The theme of 'Stopping by Woods'--despite Frost's disclaimer--is the temptation of death, even suicide, symbolized by the woods that are filling up with snow on the darkest evening of the year. The speaker is powerfully drawn to these woods and--like Hans Castorp in the 'Snow' chapter of Mann's *Magic Mountain*--wants to lie down and let the snow cover and bury him. The third quatrain, with its drowsy, dream-like line: 'Of easy wind and downy flake,' opposes the horse's instinctive urge for home with the man's subconscious desire for death in the dark, snowy woods. The speaker says, 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep,' but he resists their morbid attraction."

Jeffrey Meyers  
*Robert Frost: A Biography*  
(Copyright by Jeffrey Meyers 1996)

"A parody of Frost...would use the doggerel of the greeting card. The trap is the poem, which snaps back at us and catches our fingers with the slow revelation of its betraying our sing-along into wisdom. Frost said it with less venom: 'A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom.' This leaves out the turmoil, contradictions, and anguish of the process, the middle of the journey.... And even this poem, we now know, cannot be trusted. 'Whose woods these are I think I know.' He does know, so why the hesitancy? Certainly, by the end of the line, he has a pretty good guess. No, the subject is not the ownership of the woods, the legal name of their proprietor, it is the fear of naming the woods, of the anthropomorphic heresy or the hubris of possession by owners and poets.

The next line, generally read as an intoned filler for the rhymes, and also praised for the regionality of that 'though' as being very American, is a daring, superfluous, and muted parenthesis. 'His house is in the village though.' Why not? Why shouldn't he live in the woods? What is he scared of? Of possession, of the darkness of the world in the woods, from his safe world of light and known, named things. He's lucky, the

frightened poem says while I'm out here in the dark evening with the first flakes of snow beginning to blur my vision and causing my horse to shudder, shake its reins, and ask why we have stopped. The poem darkens with terror in every homily."

Derek Walcott  
"The Road Taken"  
*Homage to Robert Frost*  
eds. Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Walcott  
(Farrar, Strauss 1996)

"Much commentary on 'Stopping by Woods' has suggested that the poem expresses a complicated desire for self-annihilation. The idea is well handled by Richard Poirier in *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*: 'The recognition of the power of Nature, especially of snow, to obliterate the limits and boundaries of things and of his own being is, in large part, a function here of some furtive impulse toward extinction, an impulse no more predominate in Frost than in Nature' (181)....

During Frost's own lifetime, however, the matter was often handled much less sensitively. Indeed, critics sometimes set his teeth on edge with intimations about personal themes in the poem, as if it expressed a wish quite literally for suicide or marked some especially dark passage in the poet's life. Louis Mertins quotes him in conversation (and similar remarks may be found in transcripts of a number of Frost's public readings): 'I suppose people think I lie awake nights worrying about what people like [John] Ciardi of the *Saturday Review* write and publish about me [in 1958]... Now Ciardi is a nice fellow—one of those bold, brassy fellows who go ahead and say all sorts of things. He makes my 'Stopping By Woods' out a death poem. Well, it would be like this if it were. I'd say, 'This is all very lovely, but I must be getting on to heaven.' There'd be no absurdity in that. That's all right, but it's hardly a death poem. Just as if I should say here tonight, 'This is all very well, but I must be getting on to Phoenix, Arizona, to lecture there.' [Mertins 371]

As does Eliot, Frost often couples suggestions of private sorrows and griefs with statements about their irrelevance.... He speaks out of fidelity to his belief that the emotions that give rise to a poem are in some way alienated by it in the result, and his alternative reading of 'Stopping by Woods' is worth dwelling on as a roundabout contribution to the theory of personality and motive in poetry. Frost directs our attention not to the poem's theme or content but to its form: the interlocking pattern of rhyme among the stanzas. He once remarked to an audience at Bread Loaf, again discouraging biographical or thematic readings of the poem: 'If I were reading it for someone else, I'd begin to wonder what he's up to. See. Not what he means but what he's up to' (Cook 81). The emphasis is on the performance of the writer and on the act of writing....

Frost relinquishes the pattern he carried through the first three stanzas.... This relinquishment is...built into the design itself: the only way not to break the pattern would have been to rhyme the penultimate line of the poem with the first, thereby creating a symmetrical, circular rhyme scheme. Frost chose not to keep this particular promise, with the result that the progress of the poem illustrates one form of the lassitude that it apparently resigns itself to being a stay against—to put the matter somewhat paradoxically....

In putting content above form, expressive theories of poetry necessarily assume a stable opposition of message to vehicle, in which the former remains uncontaminated by the latter.... In Frost's...grammar the sentence must always read: a poem is expressed, which captures the mixture of external and internal motives he finds in himself and in writing. No pure governing intention precedes a poem to be embodied in it. We must speak instead of a 'succession' of intention."

Mark Richardson  
*The Ordeal of Robert Frost: The Poet and His Poetics*  
(U Illinois 1997)

"The poem as a whole, of course, encodes many of the tensions between popular and elite poetry. For example, it appears in an anthology of children's writing alongside Amy Lowell's 'Crescent Moon,' Joyce Kilmer's 'Trees,' and Edward Lear's 'Owl and the Pussy-Cat.' Pritchard situates it among a number of poems that 'have...repelled or embarrassed more highbrow sensibilities,' which suggests the question:

'haven't these poems ["The Pasture," "Stopping by Woods," "Birches," "Mending Wall"] been so much exclaimed over by people whose poetic taste is dubious or hardly existent, that on these grounds alone Frost is to be distrusted?' The views represented--and the representations of the poem itself, affiliated with the work of Dickinson, Longfellow, Dante, and the Romantics--range from emphasis on its gentility to its Modernist ambiguity. Nevertheless, more than one critic underscores its threat to individualism, its 'dangerous prospect of boundarilessness,' which suggests the masculine conception of poetic selfhood with which the poem is commonly framed....

His speaker's desire to merge with the lovely, snow-clad woods suggests a desire to merge with the mother (Mother Nature)... Having removed the traces of religiosity encoded in the refrain 'down to sleep,' a child's nighttime prayer to God, Frost's speaker nevertheless evinces his prayerful attitude in 'the woods are lovely, dark and deep,' as well as in the hymn-like regularity of the stanzas.... 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is a feminine poem with close connections to its popular antecedents.

Once again we can trace the emotional resonance of Frost's poem back to the concrete situation that helped engender it. Shortly before Christmas of 1905, Frost had made an unsuccessful trip into town to sell eggs in order to raise money for his children's Christmas presents. 'Alone in the driving snow, the memory of his years of hopeful but frustrated struggle welled up, and he let his long-pent feelings out in tears.' The intensity of this tearful moment translates into the affective content that permeates but never overwhelms 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.' The fact that the poem would be written seventeen years after the moment that it reflected testifies to the deep suffering that this experience engendered; too painful to be dwelt upon, it would be only with time and distance that the emotions of that awful moment could be balanced, in a 'momentary stay against confusion,' by the comforting restraint of formal expression.

'Stopping by Woods' provides a doorway into an understanding of the poet's great popularity with 'ordinary' readers. Jarrell observes, 'ordinary readers think Frost the greatest poet alive, and love some of his best poems almost as much as they love some of his worst ones. He seems to them a sensible, tender, humorous poet who knows all about trees and farms and folks in New England.' This view clashes with that of 'intellectuals,' who have 'neglected or depreciated' him: 'The reader of Eliot or Auden usually dismisses Frost as something inconsequentially good that he knew all about long ago.'

Karen L. Kilcup  
*Robert Frost and Feminine Literary Tradition*  
(U Michigan 1998) 45, 46-47

"Poets have the whole phonetic structures of their languages to work with when they compose. Some poetic devices such as meter and rhyme are so well represented in the general vocabulary as to need little comment, but subtler effects that poets presumably put into their work, and that readers or listeners get 'by feel,' may benefit from a closer, and perhaps more specialized, analysis. Two examples that show particularly well how a poet slows the reader down at the appropriate spots, especially one reading aloud, are cited below. One is from Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,' the other from Theodore Roethke's 'The Bat'....

What happens in the poem happens in the last two lines of this stanza, leading to 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep,' where the speaker is about to fall face-first into the snow. Start with 'only,' with tense vowel followed by nasal and liquid. 'Sound's' begins with a sibilant fricative, followed by a diphthong, followed by a consonant cluster *ndz*, nasal, stop, and fricative. In the last line, 'easy' has a tense vowel and fricative, and 'downy' a diphthong followed by a nasal....

Add to these effects those of alliteration ('only other,' 'sound's [...] sweep') and assonance ('sound's [...] downy,' 'sweep [...] easy'), and the poem, which has been moving along at a fairly brisk pace, stops attentive readers--especially those reading aloud--and squeezes them through a dense sieve of sound. Then we are almost ready to fall into the snow with the speaker. In each of these rather different poems the poet has made conscious use of poetic devices... They also take advantage of other characteristics of language that, regrettably, may not be so readily understood because only certain specialists have the language needed to interpret them."

Thomas C. Harrison

“This is an elegant poem. It is by no means the most psychologically rich poem Frost ever wrote, yet in its starkness and clarity we as readers only benefit. Perhaps the first thing we notice is that the poem is an interior monologue. The first line establishes the tone of a person musing quietly to himself on the situation before him: ‘Whose woods these are I think I know.’ He pauses here on ‘the darkest evening of the year,’ the point in time poised between the day and the night, between consciousness and unconsciousness, between waking and sleeping, between life and oblivion. There is a slight lack of surety in the speaker saying to himself, ‘I think I know,’ thus again signifying the meeting ground between what he knows and what he does not. These antinomies, his lack of certainty, and the muted sense of passion provide the tension by which the poem operates.

The reader will notice along with this that the first line consists entirely of monosyllables. Typically, monosyllabic lines are difficult to scan, yet Frost, having written the poem almost entirely in monosyllables demonstrates by this his technical prowess, as the poem scans in perfect iambic tetrameter. And so, any lack of certainty we might first suspect is smoothed over by this regular rhythm. Frost, likewise, stabilizes the poem by the rhyme scheme of *aba/ bcb/ cdc/ ddd*, without a single forced rhyme. This combination of regular rhythms and rhymes produces a pleasant hypnotic effect, which only increases as the poem progresses. Richard Gray has marked this in explaining how the poem moves from a more conversational tone to the charming effect that characterizes the ending. The language does indeed demonstrate this change: we move from the colloquial ‘His house is in the village though’ to the poetic ‘Of easy wind and downy flake / The woods are lovely, dark and deep.’

If there is any generalization that is apt to describe Frost’s poetics, it is that his characters are almost always of two minds. John Ogilvie has noted the slight contrast between the speaker’s public obligations and his private will. The speaker, we may assume, is ‘half in love with easeful death.’ Yet, though the poem is an interior monologue, the speaker does not look inward; rather, he focuses on recreating in his imagination the sense of his surroundings. Indeed, he seems much more conscious of his surroundings than he is of the inner-workings of his mind (which, at least for the reader remain nearly as inscrutable as the dark woods). In such a way, the speaker by implication hints that the outer-wilderness corresponds to his inner one. This is of course most evident in the final refrain in which the outward journey becomes a symbol for his inner journey, but it is furthered by the concentration on his perception of his surroundings; in other words, by opening his mind to the surroundings rather than sealing it off in self-referential language, he becomes what he beholds...

Richard Poirier has marked that ‘woods’ is mentioned four times in the poem. Along with this the reader will note that ‘I’ is mentioned five times. These two realities, the subjective and the objective, are merged over the course of the poem. Such that, while the speaker focuses almost exclusively on the physical fact of his surroundings, he is at the same time articulating his own mental landscape, which seems ever-intent ‘to fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget.’ There is in the end the uncertainty in choosing between his death impulse and his desire to continue on the road of life. Which wins in the end, I think I know, but it scarcely matters; the speaker has had his solitary vision; whether he stays or goes, the woods will go with him and the reader, who are now well-acquainted with the coming night.”

Clint Stevens  
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Michael Hollister (2015)