“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” – A Quintessential Search for Truth and Nature-Elements

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Abstract
Much of Robert Frost’s poems begin in delight and end in wisdom with a sharp clarity of life’s problems and approaches. Unlike Wordsworth, who worshipped nature, Robert Frost presented man as the focal point in most of his poems; his treatment of nature was a mixed feeling – both a sense of awe and mysticism. Man, nature, and environment are the three issues that come under repeated scrutiny in most of his poems, where he explores the effect of man on his environment and vice-versa. His portrayal of the situation where human beings grapple their way out patiently in their disagreeable mood – makes it more relevant in today’s context. Robert Frost reveals man – the nature dichotomy, the interrelationship between them to strike tragic depths though not communicative but always at loggerheads. This poem under study stretches afar and meanders into a quintessential search for truth and problems confronting man pitted against nature. The main aim of this article is to unravel his ambivalent views of nature, human character, and the mutual interrelationship between them with a specific focus on the poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” which, expresses profound clarification on human experience against the backdrop of nature. What is Robert Frost’s understanding of nature? Why is man endlessly confronting with nature/surroundings? Does man’s inner strength have any role to play are some of the questions that seek to find out in this study. A detailed analysis of this poem reveals man’s quest for truth in the contemporary consumeristic culture, offering little space for man to be in harmony with nature. Robert Frost universalized this encounter with nature.

Keywords: Nature, environment, man-nature dichotomy, truth, consumer culture, Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening

“A poem begins with a lump in the throat, a homesickness. It is a reaching out towards expression, an effort to find fulfillment. A complete poem is one where an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found its words.”

- Robert Frost (Olsen, 2010)

Introduction
Man is a part of nature and vice-versa. Man and nature are intertwined so much so that man enjoys nature and finds himself in conflict with nature, especially in today’s fast-moving consumer culture-ridden world. Viewed in this backdrop, Robert Frost tries to convey the impact of man on the environment and the environment’s influence on man (Cook, 1974, p. 161). Much to everyone’s chagrin, man’s understanding of nature, in the recent past, has been far from satisfactory. Man’s insatiable greed to conquer the wealth of other’s resources, coupled with the brutal love towards industrialization, has only led to environmental degradation – global warming is a classic example in this regard. Visionary that he was, Robert Frost, through his poems, attempted to bring harmony between man and environment (Doyle, 1962, pp. 6-7).

For Robert Frost, a poem like love begins with amusement, as an impulse, a disturbing excitement to which the individual surrenders themselves. Starting the poem in delight (Harp, 2018, para. 2), it inclines to the notion, assumes direction with the first line laid down, runs a course of lucky events, and ends in clarification (resolution) of life in a momentary stage against confusion (Frost, 1949). His conception of poetry assumes swashbuckling proportions in that a new dimension looms large. Sometimes gnomic but not without the rumbustious associated with the treatment of themes in his poems’ originality and flow, which include The Road Not Taken, Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening, Mending Wall, Fire and Ice, among others (Keith, 2013). Entirely dissimilar to Wordsworth – Coleridge’s definition of poetry “…as a spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions and feeling recollected in tranquility” (Shulz, 1965, para.1) and negating Aristotle’s conceptualization of poetry, Frost embarks on his own set of emotions, arguing that each poem should be different from one another. The primary purpose of poetry is not only to give just delight but also wisdom (Keith, 2013, para.1).

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening is a poem written by Robert Frost, which is taken for detailed analysis in this study dealing with the quest made by man to find truths through nature and its elements. In most of his poems, Robert Frost depicts man’s inner strength pitted against nature (Thompson, 1942, pp. 214). By deploying the metaphor of nature in his poems, his poems had become the voice of New England besides being lyric (albeit not musical as lyrical poetry), narrative, dramatic, meditative, and sometimes written in a dialogical form with situations, questions, and answer situation, crisis, and outcome bolstered by the rhythm and music of the speaking voice which is only natural, ordinary and speech toner. Besides this, Robert Frost’s treatment of themes like death, journey, nature, responsibility, temptations, and man’s inner strength pulled apart by choices are relevant in today’s busy life of every individual. More than nature, his primary concern is human beings and their relationship to their surroundings.

Literature Review
Robert Frost in his poems, brings out an array of themes like conflict, man-nature dichotomy, the woods symbolically representing the journey of one’s life, decision making, various shades of
human character, man’s complications, moods, and the inter-relationship between man and nature. Lawrence Thompson’s (1942) seminal book *Fire and Ice: The Art and Thought of Robert Frost* throws more light by comparing Robert Frost’s poetic theory with other contemporary ideas and approaches. He highlights the dualness used by Robert Frost as, for instance, in the prolific use of ‘love-hate’ extremes that encompass everyone’s life. For clarification, the primary resources for this study were taken from these two books, *The Complete Works of Robert Frost* (1949), and *In the Clearing* (1962), published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. Robert Frost’s use of the differing attitudes relating to man and nature can be traced to his own, personal life in New England.

Harp (2018) points out that the significant difference between Robert Frost and other poets lies in the fact that while others treated literature as didactic, moralistic, and wiser without necessarily adhering to all these principles. Robert Frost accomplishes these functions without much ease. Harriman (2023) believes that this poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is a grim reminder to everyone that amidst the busy schedule, everybody should take time to appreciate the beauty in life, conveyed very aptly in the concluding lines of the poem.

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. (Frost, 1949)

More than appreciation, it ought to be enjoyment because everyone is in relentless pursuit of accumulation of material wealth rather than living the moment of life. Briefly put, it can be said that man exists but does not live. He also says that the central theme of the poem is, “persistence in the face of adversity” (Harriman, 2023, para. 4).

Baldwin (2023), however, offers a diverse viewpoint from that of Harriman in that the central theme of this poem is the journey of life. Besides this, the other topics are Robert Frost’s favorite issues of dualness, opposites (pessimism vs optimism), life, death, commitment, and darkness (Baldwin, 2023, para. 3). Concerning literary techniques, Robert Frost uses repetition in the last stanza of this poem to emphasize the significance of carrying on the journey before the metaphorical sleeping. While the first ‘sleep’ refers to rest, the second ‘sleep’ refers to death (Baldwin, 2023).

Daniel Bal (2003) comments that Robert Frost was both a modernist and not a modernist. He uses simplified language, and at the same time, makes use of nature to bring out the mood of pessimism in all his poems (Bal, 2003, para.2). Bal (2003) suggests that Robert Frost was oscillating between tradition and modernity as most of his poems are vague and open-ended, like modernist poetry. From both sides, Robert Frost was a rebel. However, unlike other modernist poets, Robert Frost stuck to simplified poetry with traditional meter and rhyme (Bal, 2003, para.3).

**Analysis of the poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”**

Among many of Robert Frost’s poems, the popular ones are *Birches, Mending Wall, Nothing Gold Can Stay, The Road Not Taken*, and *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. The last poem became even more famous, because of the fact that a handwritten note containing the last four lines was found on the deathbed of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. For analysis, this
article looks into how Robert Frost deals with the life of man through the element of nature, his personal experience, and the richness of imagery sprinkled all over here.

### Nature and Elements – the poem as a Frostian pastoral

Unlike Wordsworth, for whom poetry was all in all – mother and teacher worshipping nature to all sundry elements of life, Robert Frost’s treatment of nature narrows down to New England countryside and landscapes with dense woods, winter, and snowfall. His visualization of nature is inhospitable, wherein he portrays man as quite a lonely being in the snow-borne forest after darkness, possibly due to the awareness of the temptingly mysterious view of the natural world and the reluctant commitment of the poet to a sterner, more realistic view as expressed in the line “miles to go.” Robert Frost, airing his voice through the mouth of a traveler, has a long way to go before death, and along the way, he cannot even waste a moment in lethargic thoughts (Baldwin, 2023, para.5). Nature, according to Robert Frost, serves only as a background where human drama is passed – the central human experience, the enchantments that invite every human to surrender themselves to oblivion - and the spectacle enacted against this backdrop serves as a poetic expression for him to express a clarification of experience (Barry, 2016, pp. 811-15). Remarkable for its utter simplicity of language and diction, the ordinary and the non-rhetorical language used, the poem demonstrates the capacity to make functional, the depth of the dark woods from the outside. Significant for its rich use of imagery, the poem willfully expresses the inner conflict inside every human being amidst many pending problems that humans encounter in everyday life. Unable to find solace, people in this busy, commodified, postmodern world often seek refuge in a dreamy, meditative world. Through this poem, Robert Frost brings to the fore the man-nature dichotomy to strike fundamental depths wherein there is an absence of communication between members in the same family, and they continue to be at loggerheads.

Robert Frost uses nature as a background for poetic occasions to express the clarification of human experience, which is discernible in this poem. Here, the poet brings out an incident, which might be an experience that happened to the poet or the one that had come to the poet’s mind. He uses the rural traveler (who is the actor/protagonist) whose brief soliloquy describes the circumstances under which he has stopped his horse-drawn cart to enjoy despite cold and loneliness as exemplified in the first paragraph of this 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. …” (Famous Quotes, 2023, para. 1)

Robert Frost ponders about human’s insular temperament, the accompanying dilemma in everyday life, and, their tendency to get lost amidst an inhospitable nature, dispelling a sense of negativity to the readers. By doing this, he penetrates the dark under-surface of American life, synonymous with the American dream, an achievement-oriented life in a competitive environment. Robert Frost was, in a way, quite prophetic in that what he commented on American life was a precursor to every society, even in third-world countries, which have severe backlash in a post-liberalized (a situation of free trade in which the developing countries are forced to throw open its market by liberalizing its rules that hitherto prevented outsiders from entering into the local markets), globalized, privatized, corporate world after the signing of trade agreements with all nations. Originally from a New England farming community, Robert Frost universalizes this through
eulogizing nature and farming methods. One cannot ignore that, America during the early
twentieth century was infected with a busy schedule. The daily routine of ordinary Americans was
marked by fighting their way out patiently in a very despicable manner. He is spellbound by
nature’s bounty – snowfall, woods, and village but simultaneously very pessimistic in that he feels
that this is just a momentary show - only to distract humans from doing their daily chores.

Unlike other poets, the romantics William Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Keats, Robert Frost
did not consider himself a nature poet as many of his poems have fewer humans as characters.
Still, quite paradoxically, he exploits nature to the hilt and is very close to it. In Robert Frost’s
poems, such overwhelming ambivalence in dealing with nature makes the reader question this
innate nature. Hence, effusing divergent views of nature in different lyrics, sometimes one cannot
help containing the fact that Robert Frost is very complicated and confused. While portraying
nature as a highly hostile element in one verse, in another, nature is relatively subdued, indifferent,
and still benevolent. Even here, the description of nature is focusing on frost, dark, deep, snow-
flakes as something unpleasant. But in continuing one’s journey, this hostile condition, has to be
confronted and won over to reach the final destination. His rustic locale might have influenced on
his attention to nature as the poet was deeply rooted in the region’s (New England) way of life,
thinking, and tradition. He gives the poem a local habitation and a New England name. Robert
Frost’s vivid description of the locale, the brooding presence of the landscape, serves as a very
effective method of evoking northern New England where the solitary backcountry houses stand
in melancholy aloofness at the edge of the solemn woods. Robert Frost correlates nature, man, and
environment and spins a web wherein man respects the other two for a meaningful coexistence.

Perhaps there is quite another possibility that meditation is one of the means to achieve
one’s goal, as meditation is considered an escapist way of avoiding adventure, and hardships in
life as put forth by Baldwin (2023, para. 5-8). But, here in this poem, nature can be seen as an
alternative to lead a meditative life. Life in the countryside influenced the images Robert Frost
used in his writing (Bal, 2003, para.7).

Search for Truth
Robert Frost, in his seminal work, The Figure a Poem Makes, opines that poetry is an unending
experience by searching and reaching out toward expressions and an effort to find fulfillment
(perhaps in life). Unlike his other poems, this essay reveals his perception of the understanding of
a poem by the readers. As said earlier in the introductory part, Robert Frost advocates uniqueness,
separate identity for each poem, and the function of poetry is to propel both delight and wisdom.
While searching for truth, Robert Frost believes, it can be located in nature and that humans have
everything to learn from nature. Hence, his passion for the continued use of the rustic atmosphere
and pastoral life reverberates in most of his poems.

The poem Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening was written in 1923, “highlighting the
importance of perseverance” and is a lesson for everyone to stay calm amidst daunting challenges
(Harriman, 2023, para.7). Whatever may be his concern for the protection of nature, his
predominant emphasis is on man’s life, and his inner strength, and he uses nature as background
to bring out his activities. By making use of the rural scenarios, the poet dwells in the whirlpool
of conflicts – the opposites that operate within humans as, for instance, in the internal battle taking
place inside a person’s mind, and the man-nature competition in this commodified, corporatized
world. Nature is for all living beings, but man’s insatiable greed for the indiscriminate acquisition
of wealth lands themselves into trouble with nature. Environmental destruction is rampant nowadays. Robert Frost uncovers this bizarre truth in his poems through literary techniques like conflicts, dialogue, doubleness, irony, and opposites, to name a few, via the metaphor of nature.

Robert Frost’s American upbringing finds a profound echo in Frost’s sense of the ‘drama-in-speech,’ which is related in turn to his deep commitment to oppositions, the temperamental bias seen in his love of irony and ‘doubleness.’ Reginald Cook has this to comment on Robert Frost “all truth is a dialogue, that the big thing is conflicting good, not good and evil.” Robert Frost “loves a world of conflicts, clear to the limit” (Cook, 1958, p.161). Cook further says that Frost espouses the effect of man on the environment and vice-versa. Most of his poems indulge in an elusive search for something that is lost, and the trajectory in his poems starts with an initial delight which consists in the surprise of remembering something which he had known or seen in the past but which he was unaware of until now. Robert Frost’s fresh engagement creates an emotional crisis – a lump in the throat in which he is compelled to find release from that crisis, and the resolution or the outcome is what the readers discover in his poem.

Robert Frost’s characters in his other poems – man and woman are not peasants but simply the people who jet up in the American sense, who will be heard for themselves and not for a social class. Such notion of conflicting tension between nature and American life was emblematic in this poem, too, and Frost was all too aware of in his life and to which his pragmatism was a conscious answer (Barry, 2016 & Keith, 2013). *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening* primarily focuses on the constant, ever-growing tensions between the opposing elements, which Robert Frost saw as the essence of human condition. The poem’s format is quite similar to that of a dramatic lyric, which breaks into the middle of the incident so that there is a drama-in-miniature revealed with settings, stage management (lighting), actors, and properties in full completion. Serious doubts arise about whether this poem could be autobiographical or a fantasy. However, the events described in the poem might be an experience that happened to the poet or one that occurred in the mind of the poet as possible.

Revisiting the poem – notably in the second and third paragraphs.

“My little horse must think it queer
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 is the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake………”

Robert Frost depicts the character in the poem as a rural traveler whose brief soliloquy describes circumstances under which they have stopped their horse-drawn cart to enjoy, despite the cold and loneliness, the strange beauty of white snowflakes falling against a background of dark trees. Words like deep, and dark, appearing in the last paragraph of this poem, symbolizes the quintessential search for eternity where the quest becomes a non-ending one. Hence, he endorses that due to many inexplicable reasons, the journey should not stop – it should continue in its march.
forever – common sense, which seem to occur even to the traveler’s little horse. Deploying the metaphor of horse, wind, dark woods, frozen lake, and other things to name, Robert Frost is determined not to give up in the elusive search for truth – what is the truth, and whose truth is one to find out? But the spell of the moment described above in this poem is pretty iconic that the traveler is reluctant to leave, regardless of the harsh winter night and the cold storm. He is bound to move on by realizing duties and distances – those promises he must keep and the miles (symbolically referring to time in man’s life) to go before he completes his journey. Hence, the emotional tension wrought by the recognition of the fresh, beautiful snow-crossed wood is resolved when the traveler becomes aware of the promises to keep and the miles to go. Robert Frost, quite convincingly, fashions an anthropomorphic reference in the third stanza, attributing human responsibility to animals and inanimate beings described as reflecting human emotions. His main concern rests on the inner strength and worth of the individual (Thomson, 2016, p. 214) while exploring the journey towards the truth.

One can find a dual degree of reference suggested in the poem’s resolution – the particular and the general, the personal/individual, and the universal – the former leading to the latter. Since the poem is entirely open-ended, the character can be anyone in search of anything – be it the traveller or a holidaymaker traveling for fun, a voyager in exploration or simply a trekker out and out to kill time – for everyone, the goal has to be achieved, and promises must be fulfilled in their lives. Somewhere in the midway, the momentary little drama enacted in this poem leads the reader, by way of an extended metaphor, to have an insight into a more credible drama – the drama of life itself and the events/incidents ordained in the poem is only an instrument to convey a profound human truth – a means to achieve one’s ends.

What is the truth that every human being is confronted with in their everyday life, as it can signify other senses/values to other people? One ought to be aware that Robert Frost offers more than possible implications for such words as promise, miles, and sleep. Besides this, the reader can locate a distinct similarity or parallel (analogy) between the specific experience of the rural traveler and the general expertise of any individual whose life is so frequently described as a journey: a peregrination that might include pleasure and hardships, duties, responsibilities and distances (Poirier, 1990, p 78.). For instance, the line “the coldest evening of the year” indicates a tragic insinuation (on the second plane of reference). Regardless of the moments in every human’s life and irrespective of the dark and cold, everyone is accustomed to procrastinating quite irrationally in their day-to-day progress because of the accompanying thrill and excitement that overflow on such occasions. Man’s reluctance to leave, their obstinate passion for sticking to their ground to proceed further, expresses the endless hunger for holding and making permanent a dark moment of pleasurable discovery in a transient experience.

Still, man’s curiosity to propel fast forward and away from other and inevitable commitments in their life has posited a cul-de-sac situation where tensions multiply, and complications develop. But there are the promises each one has made to each other and to others or which others have made for others. Promises, can unearth two kinds – first are those promises that every individual makes for themselves, and the other are those their ancestors have made for all of us. Hence, there are the miles that one must cover through different kinds of experience – spiritual or material – before everyone yields to that final and inexorable, preordained destination – sleep in death. By and large, the edifice of the poem is built on a contradiction of tones – the
awareness of the temptingly mysterious view of the natural world and the reluctant pledge to a sterner, more realistic view – “miles to go.”

Conclusion
Possessing a rare surface simplicity, the poem *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*, rides with lucidity behind its underlying meaning and gets credit for its utter clarity of language and diction in dispelling its notions on nature, truth, duties, responsibilities, and eternity. The poem is condensed and takes the reader to new depths, which, are a sight to behold. By creating a dramatic method of a lyricist, the poem exudes an aura of a dramatic lyric in the contextual framework with a question-and-answer type. While attempting to elucidate the inner and outer psyche of a human through nature and his eternal quest for truth, Robert Frost uses sound effects to enhance its meaning, and the usage of words like deep, rough, gives, shake, and ask to bear a fitting testimony. Exercising ordinary speech tone – the sound of the talking voice - Robert Frost intentionally avoids embroidered complexity and is relatively untouched by the modern tendency to dislocate language into meaning. He portrays nature as benevolent and an eye-opener to truth and beauty.

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