

A Picture within the Picture—Working through “Stopping by Woods on a Snow Evening”

Jie Fang

Foreign Languages College, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China

Email: fangjie2005@hotmail.com

Abstract—Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" begins with a seemingly simple incident, but ends by suggesting meanings far beyond anything specifically referred to in the narrative. A tentative analysis of this poem is implemented from the aspects of rhyme scheme, diction and image, which contribute to the depiction of a picture or an episode within the picture. That deepens the theme of human ambivalence and its conflicts.

Index Terms—Robert Frost, tentative analysis, rhyme scheme, diction, image

In Robert Frost, the American people found their poet, their singer, and their seer. In the ripeness of his years, Robert Frost was claimed as few artists have been during their lifetime: his government officially recognized his greatness as a man and poet, and critics hailed his poems as “modern classics”. He was four times winner of the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, recipient of the Medal of Honor from the American Congress and of many other high awards and a veritable shower of honorary degrees from colleges and universities in the United States and abroad. At eighty-six, he reached the highest point of recognition, when he was chosen as inaugural poet for President John Kennedy.

Frost is the poet of New England country and farm life. His poems are smooth, easy, and informal and as much like common speech as possible, but they are not as simple as they seem to be.

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is one of his poems which is thought to be a master lyric of English language. The poem appears very simple, but it has hidden meaning to it. The simple words and rhyme scheme give it an easy flow, which adds to the calmness of the poem. The rhythm (iambic tetrameter) and the rhyme scheme (aaba bccb ccdd dddd) give the poem a solid structure. As Frost's loveliest lyric, this poem is mainly a picture or an episode set within the picture.

The title “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is a label, which tells what we're going to see and then we see it—A man driving a horse pauses beside a forest to watch the snow falling on it; his horse seems to want to keep moving, and the man decides he ought to move on although the scene is pretty, and even inviting.

In the first line—“whose woods these are I think I know”—Frost gives “mood” more prominence or power by moving “mood” to the start of the sentence. In the second line, “His house is in the village though”, the word “though” implies something and it rhymes with the word that ends the first line.

The rhyme scheme (aaba bccb ccdd dddd) in this poem is peculiar, which lies in that through the whole stanza. Frost doesn't rhyme the next line with anything nearby but that the forth line rhymes with the first and the second, tying the stanza together. Because we have the word “snow” ends a three-line sentence that makes snow the object of our attention. The last two lines of the stanza are a natural, inevitable journey to the culminating word “snow”. We soon realize that this is where we had to go, all the time. This inevitability is underlined by the rhyme, where “know” and “though” build up a sound-expectancy to culminate in “snow”.

The speaker's self-consciousness is the most important element in the first stanza. As the stanza ends we learn something besides the speaker's embarrassment; we learn his motive for stopping: “To watch his woods fill up with snow.” “Frost's language here is plain. Saying “fill up”, instead of “to see it snow in his trees” or “to look at the snow falling on his forest”, contributes to the image or picture made by the poet; “his woods” becomes a container—empty or partly empty—which snow can fill.

As mentioned, “here” doesn't rhyme with anything around it. If we hold the sound of the word in our ears, however, we are rewarded when we read the first line of the second stanza. We experience the pleasure of completing something begun earlier, like the moment in a piece of the music when a theme (or a phrase or a chord) returns. Rhyme in this poem holds parts together, linking stanzas more firmly than many poems try to do. The third line of each stanza unrhymed to the lines near it, rhymes with three of the lines in the stanza following. The four stanzas together are like four groups of four dancers doing the same dance, with one member of each foursome holding hands with the group beyond it.

The second stanza, picking up the “here” rhyme, tells us that the little horse (“little” sound affectionate; this person seems to care about his horse's feelings) “must think it queer”. The poet picks the word “must” as we use it in speech. The doubtful “must” is chosen because he knows a human cannot mindread his horse. The speaker in the poem attributes doubts to his horse because he himself believes it weird or eccentric to stop one's horse for good reason out in the middle of nowhere to watch snow falling in the darkness. The man's uneasiness shows in his self-mockery: even his

horse must think he is crazy.

As this stanza continues, ostensibly telling what the horse must think queer, the poet gives us more information, and he gives us information in images that carry feeling on their backs. The road passes between the woods—which are like a container filled with snow—and the frozen lake. While “Frozen” adds cold to the poem, the line also increases the solitude of the scene: the lane runs between wood and lake only, no houses or factories here, no inns or filling stations, just these cold natural things, on “The darkest evening of the year.”

In the third stanza, the little horse does what horses do; he shudders or shakes, standing still in the cold night, and to the driver who still feels foolish pausing to gaze at snow in the woods, the horse’s jingling harness bells seem like the horse’s reproach. The jingling is another image—so far we’ve had images of sight (to watch), of touch (frozen lake), and of sound (bells)—and now the sound images multiply: “the sweep/ Of easy wind and downy flake.” Frost’s images often appeal to more than one sense. If “frozen” is an image of cold in “frozen lake”, it is an image of sight also, because we know what a frozen lake looks like. And the “sweep” is a swooshing sound, but it’s also (at least distantly) a visual broom moving. The “easy wind” is light and gentle—easy as “full of ease”, like the softness of “downy” that “easy” is parallel to. “Down” gives us pleasure, it means a good many things; among other it means goose feathers, soft (touch) and white (vision). It gives us two kinds of image at once, and perhaps also distantly gives us an image of the snow as a great white bird. It is also a rural image, connected with barnyard and countryside. Finally, the word “down” works its power on us one more reason: it reminds us of the direction in which, relentlessly, snow must fall.

By the end of the third stanza, the poem has erected a dramatic conflict, like a story or a play. The conflict lives in the mind of the speaker, who thinks it queer to pause where he pauses; at the same time it is the speaker who stops to gaze into the “lovely” beauty of wood, exercising the other side of his feeling. He is “of two minds about it” in the old expression. In the final stanza, mind 1 writes the first line and mind 2 answers with the second, third and fourth; the mind with the most lines has the last word.

In our daily lives, we are often ambivalent—of two minds, sometimes of three or four—about what we do. Often two desires are in conflict; the woods are lovely, but I have duties. Human beings are ambivalent by nature: we often find ourselves headed in two directions at the same time. In our deepest selves we are never one-hundred percent “anything”, neither loving nor hating, and if we tell ourselves we are pure, we fool ourselves.

This poem expresses human ambivalence and its conflicts, it embodies with honest clarity true human ambivalence. It acts out a particular ambivalence with so much clarity that the poem in the reader’s mind can stand for other conflicts.

Many people find further complexities in this poem. Some readers have found this poem suicidal and claimed that it contains a wish to die. People have often tended to look for a death wish in Frost because in his life time Frost spoke about suicidal feelings. But I would boldly argue that should we therefore consider that the speaker takes the woods as a symbol for death and longs for the darkness of his own death? Not therefore, at any rate, for then we would be leaping from life to poem as if it were always possible to make equations between the facts of the life and the facts of the poem.

First, we have the statement of attraction: “These woods are lovely, dark and deep.” The word “lovely” has the word “love” in it, as “downy” inclined “down”. So the woods pertain somehow to love. “Dark” and “deep” go together, not just for their alliteration. The woods are dark in this evening, filling up with snow that by definition is white; and they are deep, like a vessel with room for the filling. The woods are mysterious, perhaps a place suitable for hiding, and his sensation of mystery has an attraction like the attraction people feel for each other; so the woods are “lovely”. “Dark and deep” work together as a double adjective, explaining the kind of “lovely”. How differently the line would be if Frost had punctuated it differently and used a comma after “dark”. “The woods are lovely, dark and deep”—makes a different sound, and even a different meaning: the extra comma makes the three adjectives enumerate separate qualities of the wood; in the line as Frost wrote it, instead, we have a rush of feeling. The three adjectives in this line reinforce one another; not only do they present two different aspects of nature, but they also reveal the Speaker’s contradictory attitude toward nature.

The attraction of the beauty of nature makes the speaker stop in his journey. He finally turns away from it, with a certain weariness and yet with quiet determination, to face the needs and demands of life. This stresses the central conflict of the poem between man’s enjoyment of nature’s beauty and his responsibilities in society. Apparently the feeling in this poem are universal, and all of us find in ourselves on occasion a desire to abandon the track of duty, the track of the everyday, and to embrace the peace of nothingness. “The peace of nothingness” does not necessarily mean death. It may be a feeling that for some people apparently sounds suicidal—and for others merely sleepy. If all of us sometimes desire what we might call peace or oblivion, such feeling is not entirely different from the desire to die. Perhaps sleep—“death’s second self” as Shakespeare called it—will satisfy the desire. The speaker in this poem expresses a taste for darkness that resembles the wish to die but does not duplicate it to find a death wish in this poem is only an exaggeration, in my opinion.

There is one force appearing in each stanza. The first three forces—the relation between the speaker and the woods owner’s world, the relation between him and the horse’s animal world, and that between him and nature. The easy wind is still breezing and downy flake is falling, but this has nothing to do with what the speaker is thinking. The phenomenon of Nature is out of people’s control. The speaker feels the darkest evening is calling forth him: enter the woods, let himself covered by the downy snow. It is so easy and beautiful. But another force indicated in the forth stanza makes him conscious and is waiting for the speaker’s decision. He is attracted by the beautiful scene, but

suddenly he is brought back into the reality by what so called enlightenment. So the force may be social obligation, personal promise, or it is only a kind of reminding that one can not live on passion.

While the word “sleep” reminds us of its literal and symbolic interpretation—many critics think that it could mean death. I’d like to interpret it as “the peace of nothingness” which I mean it brings together more sides of peace.

Looking back through the whole poem, we may find that this poem begins with a seemingly simple incident, but ends by suggesting meaning far beyond anything specifically referred to in the narrative. This corresponds to Frost’s own idea that a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom. He consciously created an image of simplicity through both his poetry and his public appearance; Frost---a gentle poet of nature and rural life---depicted a picture or an episode within the picture.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bloom, Harold (edit). (1980). *Modern Critical View: Robert Frost*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- [2] Fan, Dai. (2002). Functional Stylistic Analysis on a Poem. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*. No.1, Serial No.154.
- [3] Mednick, Fred. (2002). *An Introduction to American Literature: from Newcomers to Naturalists*. Henan: Henan University Press.
- [4] Salman, Phillips. (1998). On Preparing to Teach About Frost. *Foreign Language Teaching*. No. 1, Serial No. 74.
- [5] Widdowson, H.G. (1975). *Stylistics & the Teaching of Literature*. London: Longman.

Jie Fang was born in Shandong, China in 1970. She received her M.A. degree in linguistics from Zhejiang University, China in 1999.

She is currently an associate professor in Foreign Languages College, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China. Her Research interests include Pragmatics, English teaching Methodology and American Literature.