



Going Gentle into that Good Night: The Seduction of Suicide in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

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There's an old joke that gets passed around between various English majors and professors of literature—he who laughs last has found another meaning. Of course, whether the joke is on the reader, who might be seeing giants where there are only windmills, or the writer, who may

have inadvertently created the giants when building windmills, remains to be seen. In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Robert Frost has created a poem that may very well live up to his assertion that it is his "best bid for remembrance" (qtd. In Greiner 233). Unfortunately, it seems the poem will be best remembered not for its elegant beauty and moving message, but for the *furor poeticus* it has stirred for decades as readers argue over what the woods might represent, and what exactly the speaker might be rejecting. The most vocal group of interpreters appears to be those who feel that "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is about a man who laments not being able to enjoy watching the woods fill with snow because he has too many obligation to fulfill, too much work to be done. So strongly do they feel their interpretation is the only correct one that a 1958 article by John Ciardi for *The Saturday Review*—in which he broached the death wish in Frost's poem—set off a flurry of outraged letters that flooded the editorial column for the next several weeks. However, despite certain factions' attempts to deny it or prove otherwise, in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Robert Frost explores the seduction of suicide and the eventual decision to continue living.

On the surface, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" concerns a traveler who is momentarily entranced by snow falling in the woods before continuing to travel along his path. And while this surface assessment is certainly adequate, it would be remiss to dismiss the poem as a quaint anecdote when there is much to indicate more profound interpretations. Specifically, that the woods represent the lure of suicide for the world-weary of depressed speaker, and in turning away from the woods, he is ultimately rejecting suicide and the easy escape it can appear to offer.

One of the initial indicators that this poem might hold darker meanings than simply a restful commune with nature lies in the setting and the language used to describe it. An important reference to setting, specifically location, comes in the second stanza, when we find out that the speaker is "Between the woods and frozen lake" (7). If the reader is going to interpret the woods as representing the lure of suicide and death, then this would mean the lake represents the choice to continue living, and the speaker is poised between the two paths. What is surprising, then, is the contrast between how the woods and the lake are described. While woods are described lovingly, Frost describes the lake as frozen, bringing to mind sharp and cold images. While a frozen lake might look pretty, it's not necessarily anywhere someone would want to be. But as unpleasant as the frozen lake may be compared to the woods, the speaker still decides to move away from the woods at the end of the poem, to possibly continue towards the frozen lake and continue living despite the hardships life presents.

The next line in "Stopping by Woods" provides further commentary on the setting. It's not merely night but, according to Frost, "The darkest evening of the year" (8). While others have seen this line as a reference to the winter solstice—the shortest day and longest night in the northern hemisphere—it seems more likely that "longest" would have been better in place of "darkest" to express that particular sentiment. Instead, the line seems to indicate the *depth* of the darkness. This isn't the longest evening of the year, it's the most dismal, the bleakest night. Furthermore, consider the darkness of the night as referring not to the physical night, but the speaker's state of mind—that this is his bleakest, most depressing night—and the reason for the woods' attraction becomes evident; the speaker has finally reached a point low enough for him to consider suicide.

Sleep has long been a popular euphemism for death, and even more specifically suicide, in literature. In the third act of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the depressed titular prince contemplates whether to continue living his harsh and unpleasant life or to succumb to his suicidal impulses: "To die: to sleep;/ No more; and by a sleep to say we end/The heart-ache" (III.i.60-2). So it should come as no surprise that a suicidal theme can be derived from a poem that closes with "And miles to go before I sleep" (16). And even earlier in the poem, Frost refers to the snow that fills the woods as "downy" (12), which is an accurate description of white, soft snow, but also brings to mind down comforters and pillows—the trappings of beds and of sleep. If the speaker only wanted to be a detached admirer of the woods, why make them out to be someplace he would want to actually settle into? "With the drowsy repetitiousness of rhymes in the last stanza, four in a row, it takes some optimism to be sure that [...] 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" (Poirier 898). The speaker doesn't seem to regret his inability to watch the woods, but rather regrets his inability to fully succumb to the woods, to suicide.

In fourth stanza of the poem, the speaker finally turns away from the woods to continue his journey. Understanding this stanza is integral to uncovering the death



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wish theme of the poem, as it is the section most rife with suicidal imagery. Aside from the aforementioned allusions to sleep, the fourth stanza

contains the line: "The woods are lovely, dark and deep" (13). This line is significant not only by itself, but by its similarity to lines in two other poems. In his essay, "The 'Death Wish' in 'Stopping by Woods'," James Armstrong points out the similarity of Frost's line to a line in Thomas L. Beddoes's 19th century poem "The Phantom-Wooer": "Young soul, put off your flesh, and come/ With me into the quiet tomb,/ Our bed is lovely, dark, and sweet" (11-13). "It is possible, of course, to dismiss this near-identity of line as mere coincidence," Armstrong says, "but it seems to me that to do so requires more audacity than to recognize the probability of a relationship" (445). The significance of linking the poems comes from the theme of "The Phantom-Wooer." That Beddoes's poem is about suicide is clear—it's explicitly stated that someone or something is urging the "lady fair" (1) of the poem to "die, oh! die" (10). Which would make Frost's emulation of Beddoes's line almost negligent if he did not intend his poem to explore the same or a similar theme to "The Phantom-Wooer." The second poem that Frost's line seems to echo is Henry Vaughan's "The Night," which calls God "A deep, but dazzling darkness" (49). William H. Shurr, in "Once More to the 'Woods': A New Point of Entry into Frost's Most Famous Poem," posits that it's near definite that Frost was exposed to Vaughan's poem before composing his own: "No fewer than three writers must have thrust Vaughan's lines upon [Frost]" (590). We have a line in Frost's poem that echoes a line in one poem about suicide, and another with religious and afterlife overtones. It seems difficult, then, not to conclude that Frost was trying to convey the same theme as the two poems from which he seemed to draw direct inspiration.

One of the more interesting aspects of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is its interlocking rhyme scheme, where the third lines of the first three stanzas do not rhyme with the first, second and fourth lines of their own stanzas, but rather the first, second and fourth lines of the following stanzas—aaba, bbcb, ccdc. The exception is the fourth stanza, whose third line matches the entire fourth stanza as well as the third line of the third stanza—dddd. This lends the poem a feeling of movement, culminating in the linking of the third and fourth stanzas. As William Pritchard says in "On 'Stopping by Woods'": "the contraction [of 'sound's'] effortlessly carries us along into 'the sweep/ Of easy wind' so that we arrive at the end almost without knowing it" (896). While the movement of the piece is evident in the first three stanzas, as Pritchard points out, it's strongest in moving from the third to the fourth, which is significant when one realizes that, ironically, the rhyme movement intensifies just before it stops in the very stanza where the speaker has decided to move on. This means that interpreting the rhyme scheme as being a fluid movement throughout the poem seems almost counterproductive to the story that's being told. A different way to look at the rhyme scheme is to look at the unmatched third line of each stanza as almost tugging at the speaker, a pang of rational thought attempting to break its way into his suicidal reverie. On the third line of the third stanza, rational has won out, going so far as to merge with the fourth line of the third stanza and exert full control over the fourth, final stanza—the spell has been broken. In his essay "Robert Frost and the Edge of the Clearing," James M. Cox call the poem to "a counter-spell against the invitation [of the woods], the act by which the traveler regains domination of his will" (151). The non-rhyming lines in the first three stanzas work to try and draw the speaker back from the woods, and the lure of suicide that they represent.

Yvor Winters, in his essay "Robert Frost: Or, the Spiritual Drifter as Poet," criticizes Frost on everything from his use of language in poetry to Frost as a person. Yet even in the middle of some impressively vitriolic condemnations of Frost, Winters manages inadvertently to make a statement that is applicable to the suicide aspect of "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." "[Frost cuts himself off from] any really profound understanding of the human experience [...] the result in the symbolic lyrics is a disturbing dislocation between the descriptive surface, which is frequently lovely, and the ultimate meaning, which is usually sentimental and unacceptable" (899). Winters is correct—the descriptive surface of the poem is indeed lovely and perfectly contrasts the sad revelation that the speaker looks at death almost lovingly and eagerly. This dislocation between language and meaning works for the poem, not against it as Winters implies. It also shows that Frost does understand the human experience, understands the stark beauty that the release of suicide can represent for the desolate and desperate people of the world.

Winters calling Frost's poem's messages unacceptable is also quite telling. After all, suicide was taboo when Frost penned the poem in 1923, and it is by and large still taboo today. The second and third stanzas of the poem tackle the social expectations and set up the fourth stanza's rejection of the woods. "My little horse must think it queer/ To stop without a farmhouse near" (5-6) and "He gives his harness bells a shake/ To ask if there is some mistake" (9-10). Through the horse, the speaker reveals his own reservations about entering the woods. Perhaps the speaker ultimately turns away from the fear of the social stigma that surrounds suicide, fear that he'd be unable to escape the trappings of polite society and what they find unacceptable, even in death.

Robert Frost has, in several public forums, said in no uncertain terms that "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is not about a death wish. James Armstrong says that we are free—but not bound—to accept Frost's word as the final one:

Many a poet has publicly refused to admit in his work the presence of an intention or meaning that to any discerning reader is clearly there [...] It may be that he resents having his thoughts and feelings pried at by morbid admirers who are not satisfied with the exceptional frankness about himself with which he has already complemented them in his work. (Armstrong 440)

But is Armstrong's statement about "many a poet" applicable to Frost and the death wish in "Stopping by Woods"? The answer seems to be yes. As Donald J. Greiner points out, Frost has already publicly lied about this particular poem. "[Frost] claimed time and again that he wrote his most famous lyric [, "And miles to go before I sleep" (15),] with one stroke of his pen" (Greiner 232). The reality is that rough drafts have proven that the original third line of the fourth stanza was, "That bid me give the reins a shake" (Greiner 232). Although there is no shame in needing to revise poetry, Frost still felt compelled to fabricate a more impressive story of the poem's conception. Which then begs the question, why would Frost feel the compulsion to lie? Biographers and essayists have painted Frost as a man almost obsessed with achieving notoriety for his poetry. While most biographies are to be taken with a grain of salt, the vast amount of unrelated sources all claiming this trait to Frost seems to indicate that there must be at least some truth to it, especially considering some accounts come from Frost himself. Philip L. Gerber, in discussing Frost's animosity towards other successful poet contemporaries, recounts a story where Frost mused about his own death and how it might affect his fame: "Ever since childhood he had pictured [his death] somewhat romantically as arriving at the perfect moment to cap his career with enormous effect" (186). Combine this with the public outrage that greeted John Ciardi's death with interpretation—one Frost fan told Ciardi to "Get your big clumsy feet off that miracle" (Hepburn 376)—and the reason for the image-conscious Frost's denial of the death wish in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" becomes clear. Frost knew what actors across America learn every day—that getting work through typecasting beats not getting work at all. Frost seemed quite willing to downplay the darker aspects of his poetry in order to hold on to his popularity as America's gentle farmer-poet. But as anyone who has read Frost's "Acquainted With the Night," "Home Burial," and of course "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" knows, Frost's work is capable of being just as dark as it is lovely and deep.

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