The Conflict between Temptations and Expectations in Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

On the surface, Robert Frost’s poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is a descriptive poem that enchants the reader with beautiful images. The poem tells the short story of a person who stops and observes his peaceful surroundings while making his way to an unknown final destination on a winter night. The speaker has his horse beside him as he takes in the feeling and visuals of the lake and the woods that he stands between. The serenity urges him to stay, but he knows that it isn’t the right time to stop and he needs to keep moving. Digging deeper into the poem, its true meaning has been interpreted differently by many. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*’s most accurate meaning is to be tempted by death in a life where obligations keep one alive or from taking one’s own life. In other words, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is a beautiful illusion for contemplating suicide.

*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* was written by American poet Robert Frost in his house in Shaftsbury, Vermont during June of 1922. Robert Frost is one of America’s most well-known poets, with *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* being one of his most popular poems. In “The Ghoul-Haunted Woodland of Robert Frost,” Lloyd N. Dendinger gives some background of the origins of *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. Dendinger writes, “But on another occasion he said somewhat more directly that ‘poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom.’ And his description of the writing of ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ reinforces this bardic definition of the poet and of the inspirational nature of the creative process. That poem, Frost Tells us, just came after ‘he had been working all night on his long poem ‘New
Hampshire.” He went outside to look at the sun and it came to him. ‘I always thought,’ he explains, ‘it was the product of autointoxication coming from tiredness’.” (Dendinger, 87). The poem has been subject to many interpretations and analyses. If read passively, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*’s meaning can be completely overlooked. George F. Bagby, Jr. comments in his essay “Frost’s Synecdochism”, “The poem, with its familiar lines, has been the object of a remarkable amount of critical interpretation, reader after reader seeking to define the numerous levels of meanings embedded in the poem’s apparent simplicity,” (Bagby, 386). Bagby goes on to explain that Frost’s vocabulary is inviting and tempting. Bagby notes that *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, although it seems simple, draws the reader into a whole visual experience. Bagby elaborates, “The poem in its entirety contains no surface difficulties, no obscurities of language or syntax, no esoteric allusions, virtually no figurative language, no ‘symbolism prepense.’ Yet every reader senses meaning beyond the obvious and literal- precisely because the very things of the poem are synecdochic,” (Bagby, 386). With this being said, it is clear that there are many levels of analysis in Frost’s poem. Reginald L. Cook makes this clear in “Robert Frost’s Asides on His Poetry” by quoting Frost, “He once remarked that ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ was the kind of poem he’d like to print on one page, to be followed with ‘forty pages of footnotes,’” (Cook, 355). The most obvious theme the reader will be able to recognize is the speaker’s battle between temptations and expectations.

*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*’s first stanza can give away a lot of hints about the true meaning if the reader looks at it in the right away. It presents the reader immediately with a lot of questions and uncertainty. The first stanza also begins by presenting many visuals that quickly place the reader in a new environment. The vocabulary draws the reader in, much
like how the speaker is drawn in by his surroundings. The poem opens with:

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.

The vocabulary that Frost uses is calming and peaceful, leading the reader to believe that the speaker is having a desirable experience. The softness of the words, especially at the end of each lines, tempts the reader and draws him or her in. At this point in the poem, it is unclear who the man is that the speaker is talking about. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*’s opening makes it clear that the speaker already is aware of something that the reader is not, which is typically an uncommon theme in literature, as irony usually goes the opposite way. It is evident that the poem holds a deeper meaning beyond the surface due to Frost’s choice of vocabulary within the first stanza.

The reader will eventually be able to acquire a general idea of whose woods the speaker is observing. After completion of the poem, it becomes evident that the woods belong to a personified death, or the grim reaper. These lines indicate that the speaker is aware of what his temptation is and realizes that it is in fact death that is drawing him in. The speaker notes, “He will not see me stopping here,” (Frost, 9). This indicates that he is only observing, and that death will not be able to touch him yet.

The third and fourth lines of this stanza are important to note. These lines indicate that the speaker is engaging in a private moment that possibly involves self-evaluation. It can be assumed that no one is aware of the speaker’s private desires and no one will find out at this
time. The final line also indicates that the speaker is not getting too involved with his temptations. Lloyd N. Dendinger comments that *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* displays “Frost’s fascination with that something in the natural world to which he responds with great caution and ultimately, ambivalence,” (Dendinger, 93). He continues with, “The woods are lovely but he doesn’t enter them. Rather he makes much of keeping the line between him and the woods distinct,” (Dendinger, 93). He seems to only be observing the possible option of death from afar and admiring its serenity without actually getting close enough to touch it. These lines indicate that death is only a thought or a desire, but is not a line that he will cross.

The first stanza already makes it apparent that the speaker is outside in the winter time due to the snow fall. Winter is a classic symbol for the end of life and death. At this point, is unclear whether or not the speaker is close to the end of his life, possibly due to old age or sickness. The poem addresses this question in the last stanza.

The second stanza of *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, which introduces the opposition to the speaker’s desires, is:

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.

In this poem, the speaker has a horse along with him on his journey. It can be best argued that the horse is representative of the speaker’s conscious, reasoning, or responsibility. The horse seems to represent the speaker’s will to live and all of his feelings opposed to or afraid of death. Literally, these lines suggest that the speaker’s horse is finding it strange or unusual that the
speaker has stopped to observe in an area that they are not ready to stop at. These lines make it clear that part of him finds it uncomfortable that he is intrigued by the idea of death. This could mean that the speaker is scared is in a part of his mind and thoughts that he should not be accessing, at least not quite yet. The part of the speaker that the horse represents is not as engaged in the enchanting surroundings. Marie Borroff, in her essay “Sound Symbolism as Drama in the Poetry of Robert Frost”, comments “I consider this statis temporary if only because of the presence of the “little horse”, a creature that, not being susceptible to the aesthetic seductions of the landscape, can be counted on to shake its harness bells again and even to give the wagon or sled a jerk forward,” (Borroff, 140). Borroff is explaining that the side of the speaker that acknowledges expectations is ignoring the temptation and eager to keep moving forward.

In the fourth line, Frost identifies the night as “the darkest evening of the year”. Literally, this could mean that it is the winter solstice or just a particularly calm and empty night. But, as it is well known, this line is an obvious symbol for death or the unknown. This can be assumed because winter, night, and darkness are all tied to death or the end of the life cycle. Considering that the speaker is considering death or suicide, “the darkest evening of the year” could have an even more extensive meaning. This line could mean that this is the night the speaker feels closest to death for many possible reasons. It is possible that at this time, the speaker feels the saddest, emptiest, and most depressed that he has ever felt in his life. It is made evident that the speaker is in a dark place mentally.

The third stanza of Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening is:

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.

The only other sounds the sweep

Of easy wind and downy flake.

The third stanza is an important shift in the poem’s original mood. These lines represent a sort of conflict occurring between the speaker’s temptation and reasoning or between the speaker’s desire to die versus his will to live. One side of the speaker is opposing his own dark ideas and trying to shake himself into reality by giving “his harness bells a shake”. He is questioning his own temptation and asking “if there is some mistake”. The third and fourth lines represent that on the other hand, death is drawing him in. Again, the speaker’s environment is made out to be peaceful and beautiful. Frost makes it clear that at this time, only two things are on the speaker’s mind- life and death.

As if the true meaning of Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening was not obvious enough in the previous three stanzas, the fourth makes it even clearer. Frost writes:

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.

After already acknowledging that the woods symbolize death or the afterlife, it can again be observed that the speaker finds it tempting. Death is being described as a beautiful, peaceful, and mysterious place. The speaker makes it clear that he is being drawn in by death. Suddenly, though, the poem takes a turn. The speaker then notes that he has obligations and expectations in life that he must fulfill before he reaches death. He may have goals left to accomplish, duties to
tend to, or people that he does not want to disappoint. In Eben Bass’ “Frost’s Poetry of Fear”, he comments, "Yet in the language of “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”, his “promises to keep” ought to be to keep alive for his family’s sake, not to seek out an adventure,” (Bass, 604). The miles that the speaker has to go are actually representative of years or time he has left to live. Sleep is obviously a symbol for death or eternal sleep. Literally, the speaker is unable to stay in the woods and he must keep moving forward on his journey. Nina Baym expands on this point in “An Approach to Robert Frost’s Nature Poetry,” by stating “Here the speaker struggles against and overcomes the temptation to go along with the flood, to get swept into the inevitable course of nature. He turns a resolute back on the loveliness of the dark woods and cold snow, picks up the reins and returns to his promises,” (Baym, 722). Although he is tempted, he has a much greater distance to go before he is able to rest. In other words, he has obligations to tend to before he can give into death’s temptation.

The redundancy of the last two lines also leave some questions open. The line could be repeated to really drive the point home. It could be done to emphasize the speaker’s final decision to stay alive for many more “miles”. On the other hand, the line could be repeated for the opposite reason. It is also possible that the speaker is thinking this over again because he is trying to convince himself, even though he may not want to continue living. It is unknown to the reader whether or not the speaker’s internal struggle has been resolved or not. In “Robert Frost and The Middle Way,” Robert G. Berkelman addresses the final lines by stating, “The poem, incidentally, is an excellent illustration of Frost’s love for synecdoche; that is, he here makes a small part represent the whole of life. But to analyze such a sensitive poem and employ it as evidence seems almost unforgivable. It whispers, we make it shout,” (Berkelman, 351).
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening can be looked at through a Freudian perspective and analyzed quite thoroughly. The speaker struggles between his id convincing him of one thing and his superego convincing him of another. Stanley Poss in “Low Skies, Some Clearing, Local Frost” describes this poem to be “quite orthodox Freud” (Poss, 439). Poss goes on to state, “The poem depends on the assumption that the Superego mediates between the Ego’s reaction to the outside world (typically, an acknowledgment of responsibility toward society), and the impulsive, pleasure-seeking drives of the anarchic Id, instinctively bent on self-gratification” (Poss, 439). It can be observed that the woods are representative of the speaker’s id, while the horse symbolizes his superego. The speaker’s id is full of tempting and natural desires and the need for instant gratification without thought of consequences. On the other hand, his superego reminds him of norms and expectations, pulling him in the other direction. The speaker is drawn between these two ideas and seems to eventually settle with his superego.

An interesting aspect of this poem is that the desire to die isn’t necessarily represented as a vice. Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening isn’t a poem of the devil on one shoulder versus an angel on the other. Although the speaker chooses to fulfill his promises, his choice is not clearly portrayed by Frost as the correct decision. It is never entirely clear if a correct option even exists in this scenario. The poem is more of just a peek into the mind of an unhappy or questioning individual who sees beauty in calmness of death. The speaker’s internal struggle versus nature can be explained well by Donald J. Greiner in “The Use of Irony in Robert Frost”. Greiner states, “A retreat to nature does not promise a defense against the pressures of reality because similar pressures are to be found in nature’s domain. A second reason why Frost is suspicious of nature as an aid to man is that he, along with other twentieth-century poets, rejects
the suggestion that man and nature are joined together in the overall scheme of creation. Nature holds its place as that part of life which is non-human, forever separated from man. Man, in fact, is insignificant when compared to the expanse and continuity of nature,” (Greiner, 54). Frost’s poem, Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, is representative of man’s struggle with the natural, inevitable, and mysterious death. In “Robert Frost’s ‘Directive’ to the Wilderness”, James P. Dougherty explains this as “Frost represents himself in a momentary equipoise between the desire to plunge into the darkness of the forest, and a restraining mixture of fear and commitment to ‘promises’ in the world of men. The face that he has risked coming so far makes the poem possible, but each time he turns back, withdrawing into human society. But here directions are reversed; the guide turns “back” into the woods, and recommends that the listener follow,” (Dougherty, 212).

Although Robert Frost’s poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is short and seemingly simple, beneath its surface, it touches on an extremely deep issue. Every simple element of the poem- the woods, the winter, the horse- are representative of much more complex ideas. The woods, frozen lake, and winter night are representative of death and temptation. The horse is representative of the superego, reasoning, expectations, or the will to live. The miles symbolize time, years, or experiences. Sleep represents death. The promises are representative of obligations or expectations of others. “He” represents the grim reaper. Robert Frost made it clear himself that *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* goes far beyond what it seems. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* reinforces the constant battle between the id and the superego that humans undergo daily, often times without even realizing. The simple imagery of the poem actually represents an internal struggle between responsibility and the desire for a peaceful
eternal sleep. Ultimately, the speaker chooses to carry on with his life and fulfill his obligations instead of committing suicide.