Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening

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.

The title sounds like it would work nicely as a title for a painting, and you can easily imagine (even before reading the poem) gazing at an oil painting that shows a figure paused in a dark and snowy landscape. The "-ing" ending to the word "stopping" gives the sense of the immediate present, as though you are just now watching the speaker stop to take a gander at the woods. This "-ing" ending also makes feel as if things are in motion, and as if the speaker is in the middle of a journey or task.

When you think of woods, you imagine being in them, surrounded by trees. However, the speaker is not in the midst of a great forest: he's actually just next to the woods and staring at the trees. Staring at woods strikes as just a wee bit strange. You can imagine hanging out with trees, because trees are cool. But the speaker is on the periphery of the woods; he's separate from them. Before you begin the poem, Frost makes aware of the fact that the speaker is not inside the woods, but is rather beside them. And that strikes as just plain interesting.

Composed of four four-lined stanzas, this poem is a classic example of the Rubaiyat Stanza, which means a stanza composed of four lines. The Rubaiyat Stanza has a rhyme scheme of AABA.

You can imagine it's a dark evening, perhaps around 5:00pm, near the winter solstice (late December). Although the speaker doesn't tell why he's out, you picture our speaker has been traveling across the countryside to pay a family visit or a business visit in a town ten or fifteen miles away from his own. Perhaps he's stayed longer than he would have liked, and now he's caught in the dying light of evening. The speaker doesn't have any flashlights, floodlights, or torches with him, and so the only light around is from the dipping sun and the brilliant white of snow.

He travels across a little road used by villagers that is quickly disappearing, and he arrives upon a clearing that is bordered on one side by a glassy dark lake and on the other side by deep, dark woods. The darkness contrasted with the white of the snow is startling, even in the dying light. The scene is beautiful but lonely. There are no houses nearby that he can see. His small hometown (a village) is still miles and miles away, and he can't hear a single thing other than the snow, the wind, and occasionally his horse's bells. He is completely alone.

Frost uses his sounds to tell a story and to help set the mood. In the first stanza alone, there are seven w sounds: whose, woods, know, will, watch, woods, with, snow. The "w" sound is very gentle and very lulling. There is only one glottal stop in this stanza: "think."

In the second stanza there are two lines "Between the woods and frozen lake/ The darkest evening of the year" (5-6) , with some pleasing w sounds in "between" and "woods," and then things get hairy when you have two glottals in a row with "lake" and "darkest.". The “k” sound seems like the sound ice makes when it breaks, reminding of the setting. Glottal sounds are sticky.

Now look at stanza three, when the horse hopes to get his master's attention: "He gives his harness bells a shake/ To ask if there is some mistake" (9-10). Our throats get a workout with these glottal noises, and they seem to break the lines up into little chunks.

In the next two lines, however, things change: "the only other sounds the sweep/ Of easy wind and downy flake” (11-12).

The alliteration of "sounds", "sweep" and "easy" creates a little hissing noise, perhaps like the sound of the easy wind. The word "flake" causes the backs of our throats to stick, like snow to the ground.

You feel like the sounds of this stanza communicate the speaker's dilemma: he is torn between his duties back at the village and the seductive calm of nature. The glottal noises in the first two lines make feel like the horse is trying to wake his master up to reality, and the seductive teethy and "s" noises of the last two lines make imagine just how alluring nature is at this moment.

The woods in this poem are something to write home about. The speaker can't get enough of them, telling us that "the woods are lovely, dark and deep" (13), as though he were hypnotized. The woods must be all that and a bag of chips, because the speaker is compelled to stop and stare at them on the freezing, dark winter evening. There's a mysterious element to these woods as well, and you get the sense that the speaker is not alone, even though he is very much by himself. You also think of woods as being mazelike and full of hidden obstacles.

In conclusion you can say, the speaker is digging the natural world. Picture him hanging out with his horse, between a frozen lake and the edge of the woods, while the snows falls gently all around him. The ideas of the village, of a farmhouse, or of the promises he must keep are not nearly as appetizing to the speaker as the cold beauty of the world around him. There's something very lulling about the "easy wind and downy flake" (12), and you get the sense that the natural world is pretty compelling and pretty good at convincing the speaker to forget about civilization. Nature is powerful in this poem.