

# Psychological Conflict in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

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## ABSTRACT

This research article aims at exploring the psychological conflict in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." The poet, in the poem, depicts an aesthetic diversion and admiration of natural beauty against the messy existence of a man. Tossed between the temptations the world offers to a man and his desire to pursue his chosen path of commitments; the speaker seeks for the meaning of life. Although the universal enigmatic question of indecisiveness is presented in the poem through a series of symbols, imagery, metaphor, personification and carefully chosen words and dictions, the speaker consequently overcomes the inner conflict of his mind and resolves to carry on performing his responsibility to continue his journey of life until his death. So, employing a qualitative method, the researchers examine how deftly the poet has delineated psychological conflict in the poem.

## 1. Introduction

Robert Frost (1874-1963) is one of the most famous American poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even one of America's rare "public literary figures, almost an artistic

institution” (Stine and Marowski 110). His poetry deals with the life of common people, simple subject matter, a wide range of emotions, human interaction with nature, the beauty of nature, the potential dangers of rural New England, and above all his own vision of life. Frost, on one hand, treats nature as a strange force that can annihilate humans. On the other hand, he has also seen the heroic scuffle of humans against nature. His poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” shows his vision of life along with other characteristic features. The poem is seemingly simple but intensely insightful. In a letter to Louis Untermeyer, Frost called the poem “my best bid for remembrance” (Tuten and Zubizarreta 347). In the poem, the poet expresses sheer truths through the awe-inspiring presence of nature, which reflects the speaker’s broad outlook and realistic approach. The poet strives to establish a relationship between the speaker and his natural surroundings in spite of having a psychological conflict in his mind, the conflict between the allure of nature and the responsibilities of life. While riding on horseback by the snowy woods through a landscape, the speaker stops there being enthralled by the serenity and solitude of the woods when the woods epitomize personal desire and a respite from the odds of reality. At the same time, the speaker is also driven by a sense of duty as the researchers find him in a dilemma “promises to keep, /And miles to go before I sleep,” (Frost, lines 14-15). Here, lies the conflict. So, this study investigates this never-ending psychological conflict going on in all human hearts which ultimately highlights Frost’s vision of life in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

## **2. Objective of the Study**

The objective of the study is to comprehensively understand the psychological conflict as introduced by Robert Frost in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.”

## **3. Literature Review**

Conducting a critical analysis of various scholarly works on Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” the researchers examined diverse interpretations of the poem offered by different scholars. Through this review, they aimed to identify existing research gaps and uncover opportunities for further exploration and study in this area. Some researchers have already worked on different literary works by Robert Frost. A few of them concentrated on the poem ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.’ Most of them in their writings noted the disparity between the real world and the imaginary world. The researchers in this study have reviewed and analyzed several research articles such as “Stylistic Analysis of Robert Frost’s Poem ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’” by Muhammad Ahmad Hashmi, Muhammad Asim

Mahmood & Muhammad Ilyas Mahmood published in *International Journal of English and Education*, ISSN:2278-4012, Volume:9, Issue:3, July 2020 where the researchers talk about the stylistic part of the poem. In another article “Re-looking at Robert Frost’s ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ by Md. Saiful Islam Published in *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*-Vol. 6, No. 10, the writer tries to find a possible new religious meaning of this poem. “A Critical Reading of Robert Frost’s Poem ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’” by Shridhar Bhat and G. Shankar published in *IJCRT*, Vol. 5, Issue1, February 2017, ISSN: 2320-2882 in which the author tries to bring out a subtle tension between the timeless attraction of the nature and the pressing obligations of the present moment. In “Poetic Structure in Robert Frost’s ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’ by Marion A. Davis published in *INQUIRY*, 2009, Vol.1, No. 12., Mr. Davis states that the narrator is simply looking over the scenery while contemplating mood. In “Biographical Analysis of Robert Frost’s “Poem ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’” by Kurt Salac Candelas published in *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 4, Issue 11, October 2016, Candilas ventures to explore symbolic interpretation revealing the poet’s downfalls and his worth emulating fatherless and husband character via biographical literary theory.

To sum up, different aspects of Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” have been critically analyzed by different researchers. But, the psychological conflict in the poem is not depicted well by any researcher. This research intensively addresses the psychological conflict in the text. Moreover, here the researchers attempt to capture the relationship between man and nature and also highlight the conflict between wishes and obligations men often face in their lives. They have also tried to evaluate different scholars’ criticism of the poem and endeavor to provide this study with a new veneer that was not previously explored. The researchers viewed *that no work has been done on the title* “Psychological Conflict in Robert Frost’s Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” in detail. So, the selection of the title is justified and this research article will serve as a beneficial resource for the researchers in future.

#### **4. Materials and Methods**

This research will be a qualitative one based on the close reading of the poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost. The research methodology employed here encompasses a comprehensive utilization of secondary sources while the text has been used as a primary source. Data collection is conducted through the analysis of academic articles apart from the thorough analysis of the main text. The essence of these writings also helps the researchers append new features to the exertion. The researchers, furthermore, have gone through different books,

journals and discussions for well-run information to enrich the research. The researchers have also tried to evaluate different scholars' analyses of the poem and endeavored to provide this study with a new layer that was unexplored by other researchers in the past. The research methodology emphasizes proper citation and referencing to uphold the accuracy and appropriateness of the sourced information.

## **5. Discussions**

Robert Frost's poetic works predominantly center around the rural life of New England, employ the unadorned vernacular of the region. Despite his focus on commonplace subject matter, Frost adeptly elicits a spectrum of emotions within his poems. Much of his poetry delves into the dynamics of human interaction with the natural surroundings. While he recognizes the innate beauty of nature, he also discerns the potential perils of it. Nevertheless, his themes serve as wellsprings of inspiration and innovation. His poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' leaves an indelible impression by vividly portraying the captivating essence of the natural world. In this poem, a juxtaposition of outward serenity and inner profundity becomes apparent.

Generally Robert Frost's poetry expresses fundamental truths about the human condition. Using a straightforward language, symbols, imagery, personifications and repetition, the poet offers a meditation on life's ultimate essence in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". This poem serves as a platform for the poet's unvarnished commentary on the inherent, and often contradictory, emotions residing within human beings. In the poem, the poet does not merely represent a picturesque, enchanting, and dark forest; rather, he refers to the psychological discord between a desire for oblivion and a sense of obligation. Ultimately, the sense of obligation emerges triumphant in this internal struggle and the speaker chooses to keep his promises and continue his journey before death.

The poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has a regional setting and atmosphere. By the looks of it, the poem is a moving description of a series of local pictures. While traveling to watch snow falling through the tree, and to see the overall fascinating beauty of nature, the speaker stops near a forest of a landlord in the snowy evening far away from human habitation; the horse is the only companion of the speaker. The place with its snowflakes, frozen lakes, and frosty atmosphere attracts the speaker who feels enticed to enjoy it. The snowy scene, the evocative image of the poem, makes some deep appeal to the speaker. He declares:

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.

.....

.....

Between the woods and frozen lake

The darkest evening of the year. (Frost, lines 1-8)

Here, the poet brings the motifs of risk and decision characterizing both the choice of the two paths- temptation of the woods and the call of duty. The poem also employs the landscape, people, habits, customs, and manners of a particular region which are, of course, some selective features of the New England landscape, which the researchers find in many other poems of Frost. Frost's portrayal of the scene records his minute observation and accurate description. In a sense, the poem can be taken merely as a memorable recreation of a winter evening.

Again, the deeper analysis of the poem's symbolic connotations reflects Robert Frost's modern sensibility in the poem. The speaker's unknown identity and destination add mystery to the poem. The woods, within the context of the poem, assume an enigmatic symbolism, evoking a strong sense of mystery. The pervasive whiteness of the snow, coupled with the temporal setting of the winter evening, brings an association with impermanence and mortality. Consequently, the poem may be interpreted as a depiction of an individual contemplating the notion of death. The entire landscape portrayed in the poem exhibits a stark lifelessness and darkness, with the frozen lake serving as a testament to the winter season's severity. These elements collectively contribute to the speaker's inclination to relinquish life. But, the ringing of the horse's harness bell sadly reminds the speaker of his earthly obligations and responsibilities while the horse personifies human characteristics and the harness bells symbolize humans' inner conscience. Eventually, this realization dawns upon the speaker, prompting introspection as reflected in the lines below:

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. (Frost, lines 9-12)

Although it seems that in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" Frost simply deals with rural subject matters, his poem offers experiences that are typical of the

modern man. Here Frost shows the essential loneliness of the modern man. The loneliness, fragmentation, ambiguity, and complexity that the poet represents within the speaker proves Frost a very modern poet too. Again, in the attitude of the speaker, the researchers find the modern man's sense of indecision and hesitation, as they find in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' where Prufrock too suffers from indecision at a critical juncture of his life, as Eliot states that this ambivalent attitude towards life and death is characteristic of a modern man.

In treating nature Frost also shows his modern sensibility. The subject matter of Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has much to do with nature. The poem has many elements of a physical nature like woods, frozen lake, easy wind, downy flake, frost, snow, etc. all of which are taken from the natural landscape of New England, the region in which Frost used to live. Although Frost deals with these natural elements, he, unlike William Wordsworth and other Romantic poets, conveys no romantic notion of nature, does not search for any spiritual quality, and does not recognize any divine presence in nature. The poet only relates that "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep," (Frost, line 13). He presents a very realistic picture of nature. The researchers note that in many poems Frost describes the destructive characteristics of nature too, for example, in "The Hill Wife." Yet, in this poem, a symbolic meaning can be deduced from Frost's description of nature. As the poem is open to multiple interpretations, and the symbols can be read in different ways, the woods symbolize something mysterious.

Much like Robert Frost's other literary works, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" describes an initial veneer of simplicity. On its surface, it appears to be a simply straightforward narrative of a horse rider who momentarily contemplates a pause in his journey. But, when a reader goes into the depth of the poem and goes through the final stanza of it, he discerns that the poem is not as simple as it seems to be, it rather delves into psychological terrain, touching upon a universal existential quandary faced by individuals. More importantly, the researchers can take into consideration Frost's use of the conjunction 'But' which nicely draws a border line between temporary pleasure and responsibilities making life meaningful. The word 'But' implies that the work is of greater value than the pursuit of worldly comforts. Again, the repetition of the line "And miles to go before I sleep," (Frost, line 14) in the last stanza of the poem emphasizes the speaker's commitments to life and its responsibilities. The speaker does not want to stay in the lovely woods anymore because he has lots of responsibilities to do. This sense of duty endures amidst the internal conflict. The following often quoted beautiful, meaningful and philosophical lines precisely echo the psychological conflict and philosophy of life:

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, lines 13-16)

Based on the above discussion, it appears that the poet wants to give a message - motion is life, not to stop. Through the depiction of human psychological conflict, the poem teaches and poignantly reminds humans about their responsibilities. Man ought to realize that performing duties is of greater value than the pursuit of temporary worldly pleasures. Here, the speaker, the meditative master of the horse, is highly committed to the responsibilities of his life. His consciousness keeps him moving forward ignoring all momentary temptations of the world.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, this research paper explores the conflict between personal desires and societal obligations, reflecting the complex nature of human psychology and the tension arising in an individual's mind as seen in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening". Although the universal, enigmatic question of indecisiveness is presented in the poem, the speaker ultimately resists all temptations and the hazards of the materialistic world, prioritizing his commitment to fulfill his promises and persevere until death. Frost's portrayal of this internal struggle echoes deeply, as it mirrors the choices we all face between fleeting pleasures and enduring responsibilities. The poem's haunting beauty lies in its ability to capture the seductive pull of escape while celebrating the quiet triumph of duty, reminding us that the path of integrity, though arduous, is ultimately more fulfilling. Through this searching, Frost invites us to reflect on our lives to find strength in our commitments.

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