



Poetry is just as much about the music and rhythm of words as it is about the message of words. That's why poems often mean more when we read them out loud. Reading a poem aloud helps us to hear its music and rhythm.

Robert Frost really emphasized the “sounds that underlie the words.” Here's what he said about it:

What we do get in life and miss so often in literature is the sentence sounds that underlie the words. Words themselves do not convey meaning, and to [...prove] this, ... let us take the example of two people who are talking on the other side of a closed door, whose voices can be heard but whose words cannot be distinguished.

Even though the words do not carry, the sound of them does, and the listener can catch the meaning of the conversation. ... [T]o me a sentence is not interesting merely in conveying a meaning of words. It must do something more; it must convey a meaning by sound. (See [The Robert Frost Reader: Poetry and Prose](#), by Robert Frost, Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson, at page 295.)

The *sound* of a poem, even when it isn't read out loud, comes through with repetition. The *beauty* of a poem, even when it's not accompanied by a picture, comes through with imagery. And the *meaning* of a poem, even if it's not about us, comes through when the writer makes it personal.

A really good example of a poem with lots of repetition, imagery and personification is Frost's “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” Frost—who [lived in a snowy part of New England](#) for many years—wrote this in 1922 and published it the following year in his *New Hampshire* volume of poems (which won the Pulitzer Prize).



*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.*

Suppose Frost wrote this poem about one of his own experiences. Born in San Francisco, during 1874, he spent most of his life in New England. Away from the busyness of a large city, he could reflect about life (or whatever was on his mind) in the peacefulness of nature where snow falls in forests which are filled with miles of trees.

When Frost penned these words, people in America still used horses to travel from place to place. It was a time when snow falling on a route of travel did not cause traffic snarls and backups lasting for hours. Instead, a horse rider—like the rider in this poem—could just stop and look at the beauty of nature. He could stop and reflect on what was happening in life.

How did Frost recite this poem? Did he emphasize certain words? We can hear and see him, in this video clip:

What did Frost himself say about the *meaning* of this poem?

You've often heard me say—perhaps too often—that poetry is what is lost in translation. It is also what is lost in interpretation. That little poem ["Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"] means just what it says and it says what it means, nothing less but nothing more. (Quoted by Robin D. Gill in *A Dolphin in the Woods Composite Translation, Paraversing & Distilling Prose*, at [page 20](#)).

If we take Frost at his word, and examine this poem in some detail, we learn a few things. One of the things we learn is that it likely takes place during the Winter Solstice.

What is the line which leads to *that* conclusion? The narrator stops his horse on:

The darkest evening of the year.

That's the night of the Winter Solstice (or, December 21st) in the Northern Hemisphere. (Unless, for the poet, "the darkest evening" of this *particular* year is "darkest" because it's trouble-filled?)

We know, for sure, that the horse seems puzzled about stopping:

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

Perhaps the horse is anxious to get back to the barn on such a cold and snowy night. Does he sense there are "miles to go" before he gets there? Does he want to keep moving ahead, without stopping?

It isn't the horse's decision, though. Whenever *he* continues the journey is up to the person holding the reins. Why has the narrator decided to stop? Frost doesn't tell us. We only know that he thinks the "woods are lovely, dark and deep."

Maybe it's just a good place—and a good time—to take a break, before finishing the journey. Maybe he's facing a difficult situation when he arrives at his destination:

But I have promises to keep.

Maybe those "promises" are good things; maybe they are bad things. We just don't know. But that's the beauty of poetry ... readers can reach their own conclusions and have their own interpretations.

What's yours?

P.S. Click on the top image to see it snow.

Credits:

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," by Robert Frost, is now out-of-copyright.

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