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2.1 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall

- be getting preliminary information about the Poem and Poet
- be getting an overview of the analysis and explanation of the poem
- be learning about the tone and theme of the poem

2.1 INTRODUCTION

2.1.1 About the Poet

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was a great American poet known for his realistic portrayal of rural life and immense love for nature. He depicted the rural life of New England in the early twentieth century. His famous poems include:

1. *Home Burial*
2. *The Witch of Coos*
3. *A Servant to Servant*
4. *Directive*
5. *Neither out Too Far nor in Too Deep*
6. *Provide, Provide*
7. *Acquainted with The Night*
8. *After Apple Picking*

9. *Mending Wall*
10. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*
11. *Birches*
12. *Death of a Hired Man*
13. *The Road Not Taken*
14. *Fire and Ice*

Frost's best poems explore fundamental questions of existence depicting stark loneliness of an individual in the indifferent universe. Frost stood at the crossroads of 19th century American poetry and modernism. He developed modern idiom, sense of directness and economy that reflect the imagism of Ezra Pound. Frost's theory of poetry links him to both 19th and 20th centuries. He wrote about poetry that, "It begins as a lump in the throat a sense of wrong, a homesickness, a loneliness." Like T.S. Eliot he believed that the man who suffers and the artist who creates are totally separate".

Robert Frost made use of New England dialect which is often discussed as provincialism or regionalism. His regionalism is not political but realistic. Frost had received more than forty honorary degrees and in 1924, he received his first of four Pulitzer Prizes. In 1960, Congress awarded Frost the first congressional Gold Medal. A year later, at the age of 86 Frost was honored to write and recite a poem for President John Kennedy's inauguration ceremony.

The following are the notable qualities of Robert Frost's poetry:-

- (i) Tenderness, sadness and humour
- (ii) Sad acceptance of things as they are
- (iii) Love for nature and rural life.
- (iv) Classical understatement and restraint
- (v) Clarity and simplicity
- (vi) Democratic spirit
- (vii) Realistic depiction of life and nature
- (viii) Pastoral element
- (ix) Picturesque quality
- (x) Lyrical quality

Robert Frost's style is lucid, simple and rhythmical. He often employs dialogues in his poems. He uses colloquial diction of New England. There is vivid imagery in his poetry that creates visual pictures in the minds of the readers. His poetry is often symbolic and metaphorical.

2.1.2 About the Poem

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening is one of the most popular poems by Robert Frost. It was published in 1923 and soon it became a poem that people recited, quoted and kept in memory. On the surface, the poem is simple, at metaphorical level. It tells of a man's temptation to answer the call of beauty and his ultimate decision to respond to the call of duty.

"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”

This concluding stanza of the poem has a deeper meaning. It has an interesting allegory of life and death, of duty and irresistible temptation and pleasures of life. The poem begins with a traveller passing through woods on a beautiful snowy evening. Woods are dark, deep and lonely. The traveller is tempted by the solitude of dark woods and snow-laden land. The enchanted traveller stops his little horse to watch woods fill up with snow. The little horse thinks it strange as there is no farmhouse nearby. It was the darkest evening of the year. On one side, there was a frozen lake and on the other dark, lonely but lovely woods.

The horse shakes his bell to ask if there was any mistake. The traveler wakes up from his dreamy state of mind. He remembers that it is necessary for him to go home and keep his promise. He has still to travel many miles before he reaches home and sleep. In the final stanza, there are three words that signify deep, philosophical meaning ‘Promise’ indicate one’s duties in life; be it physical or spiritual. ‘Miles’ refer to a journey of life, the period of time to live in years or decades. ‘Sleep’ signifies eternal slumber, the death, the end of the journey of life. Life’s journey includes pleasures, hardship, duties and distances.

In life, we make promises to ourselves and to others. These promises have to be fulfilled before we cover the long distance of the journey of life and yield to our final commitment: eternal slumber i.e death. In our life and the world around us, we face many temptations and distractions. These temptations can be material and physical pleasures, worldly success, fame and wealth. If these things become our center of focus, we miss the true goal of our life. The true goal of human life is self-actualization, the realization of one’s potential. We should strive to reach our true goal before we meet our final destination of our life-Death.

The poem can be interpreted in several ways but the central idea of the poem is commitment to duty. Louisa May Alcott has summed up this philosophy in a very poetic manner she wrote:

“I slept, and I dreamed that life was beauty;
I woke, and found that life was duty.”

2.2 TEXT OF THE POEM

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.

– Robert Frost

2.3 KEY WORDS

Woods	:	forest
Queer	:	strange
Harness	:	a set of strap by which a horse or other animal is fastened to a cart plough etc.
Sweep	:	long swift curving movement
Downy	:	covered with soft hair or feathers
Easy wind:		slow breeze of wind
Flake	:	a small flat, very thin piece of something (Downy flake' refers to soft layer of snow)

2.4 SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The speaker in the poem is passing through woods on a cold snowy evening. He is riding on his little horse. It is a lovely dark wood that enchants the speaker by its beauty and silence. The speaker says that he probably knows the owner of the woods. He lives in a nearby village. As he is not there in the woods, he will not see the speaker trespassing. The little horse of the speaker shakes his harness bell to ask if there is any mistake. The horse does not understand why the speaker has stopped here. He thinks that there is no reason to stop in the woods. Even a farmhouse is nowhere nearby.

The place was between dark woods and frozen lake and it was the darkest evening of the year (probably in the month of December). Little horse shakes his harness bells to awaken the speaker from his dreamy state of mind. He seems to have lost in the beauty and silence of the beautiful woods. Deep silence mesmerizes the speaker. There are only sounds of cold, slow breeze and falling snow like white feathers. The speaker is suddenly awakened by the sound of the harness bells of the horse. He does not like to leave this beautiful place as it is so quiet and beautiful. However, he is reminded of his promises that he had to fulfill. He realizes that he should move ahead and reach home in time. He has to perform certain duties before he could rest his head on the pillow.

The poem ends with a message that life and the world may be full of temptations. They may compel us to stop and hinder our journey but we must remember that before we 'sleep' we have to fulfill our duties and keep our promises. We have our duties towards our family, society and the world. We also have duties towards ourselves and to God. Before we die, we should try to fulfill them all. Therefore we should avoid temptations of worldly pleasures and focus our attention on performing our duties. We should focus more on DUTY than BEAUTY.

2.5 ANALYSIS AND EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening is a well-known poem by Robert Frost. It was written in 1922 and published in 1923 in his collection of poems "New Hampshire". He had written this poem when he lived in the village Franconia in New Hampshire.

The poem consists of four stanzas of quatrains (four lines) each. In each stanza, the first, second and fourth lines rhyme but the third does not. However, the third line is a connection link to the other stanzas. It determines the rhymes of the other line of the stanza. For example, in the first stanza the first, the second and the fourth line rhyme with words 'know', 'though' and 'snow'. The third line ends with 'here' which does not rhyme with other lines. The rhyme scheme of the poem is aaba, bbcd, ccde, dddd. There are no punctuations to create pauses and therefore all lines have a nice smooth flow. Let us now discuss the poem in detail.

Lines 1-4

The speaker (may be the poet himself) is passing through the woods on a dark, chilly winter evening on his little horse. He stops amidst the beautiful woods. He says that he probably knows the owner of the woods. He lives in a village nearby. He is not present in the woods therefore he will not be able to see the speaker's trespassing in the woods. He is so enchanted by the beauty of the woods and the entire surrounding that he stops there with his horse and watches the natural beauty of snow covered woods. It is snowing filling up woods with white layers of snow.

Here the dark woods symbolize the mystery of life. Like dark woods, life is impenetrable and mysterious. Snow is a cold destructive force called Death. The mystery is always lurking and so the speaker has an irresistible urge to stop there and watch the mysterious beauty and solitude of the woods.

Lines 5-8

In the second stanza, the speaker says that his little horse thinks it strange that they have stopped at the wrong place. There is no farmhouse nearby or any other reason to stop there. The speaker has stopped his horse between the woods and the frozen lake. The weather is very cold and the lake is frozen. It is also the darkest evening of the year, probably 22nd December when the winter solstice occurs in the northern hemisphere. The speaker says that his horse is little. It suggests that it is an ordinary horse or probably a pony. He loves his little horse who is quite loyal and obedient. The speaker is not a wealthy man and therefore he does not have an expensive horse. Though he is an ordinary man with limited financial resources, he is a great lover of nature. He is a highly sensitive person who is mesmerized by the beauty and mystery of nature.

The speaker's strange behavior creates a surprise to his little horse. The 'little horse' stands for common sense and pragmatism. He thinks that his master has probably made a mistake by stopping at the wrong place and wrong time.

Lines 9-12

The little horse shakes its harness bells to ask the speaker if there is some mistake or any problem. The horse thinks that there is no reason to stop at such a dark and chilly place. He wants to draw the attention of the speaker

and correct his mistake, There are only two kinds of sounds slow cold wind and falling of white feather like snow. For the horse, these sounds were strange and scaring but for the speaker, it was mysterious and enchantingly beautiful. He was spell bound by the solitude of the woods and frozen lake.

Lines-13-16

The last stanza is an epitome of Frost's philosophy of life. These four lines are popular among readers. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India liked these lines so much that he kept them under the glass top of his table in the Prime Minister's office.

The speaker in the last stanza says that the woods are lovely dark and deep. They fascinate the speaker with its beauty and mystery. 'lovely', 'dark' and 'deep' are suggestive of 'beauty', 'mystery' and 'profundity'. Very often beauty is inexplicable, incomprehensible and impenetrable. It enchants the speaker and he stops there lost in the beauty and mystery of the woods.

The horse's intrusion into his meditative state makes him aware of his duties and responsibilities. He realizes that he has to fulfill promises after travelling many miles. Therefore, he cannot stay there. He must move on and reach his home in time. He can rest only after keeping his promises and fulfilling his duties. Here 'sleep' refers to death. Before we die, we have to fulfill our duties. We have to play various roles in our life such as the role of a son or daughter, husband or wife, father, mother and so on. We have to maintain family relationships and social relations. We have duties towards family, society, nation and the world. We should fulfill them sincerely before we meet the final destination of our life i.e 'Death'.

In our life, we make 'Promises' to ourselves, to society and the nation. People also make 'promises' to us. Fulfilling mutual promises is equally important in life. It is the duty of an ideal individual towards himself and to the world.

We know that the journey of life is never smooth. There are distractions, temptations and innumerable obstacles on the path of life. We are often distracted by such temptations and forget our duties and commitments. Worldly pleasures and beauty of nature are alluring. We indulge in them and we want to continue to enjoy them forever. Failure in performing our duties is the failure of our life.

The speaker realizes this and decides to move on hurriedly. He thinks that keeping promises must be his priority. He must reach home, complete his tasks and then go to bed. This is the surface idea of the poem. The inner meaning is profoundly philosophical. It reminds us of the great message of the 'Bhagavad Gita' about duty, the importance of Karma (action). Life is beautiful and full of enchanting pleasures but the ultimate aim of life is to do one's duties and not to indulge in material pleasures of life.

The famous poem by Louisa May Alcott beautifully sums up the message of this poem.

"I slept and I dreamed that life was beauty.

I woke and found that life was duty."

Robert Frost uses symbols and imagery very beautifully in his poems. The imagery of the poem *Stopping by woods on a Snowy Evening* is vivid and picturesque. His language and diction are simple and colloquial. He creates

rhythm and music using short and simple words. In this poem, he has employed only monosyllabic and disyllabic words often repeating them as in the last stanza of the poem.

“And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep”

For Frost sound was equally important as the meaning of the words. He emphasized on dramatic element and metaphor in poetry.

2.6 TONE OF THE POEM

Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* conjures a tone of quiet reflection and remembrance of a winter evening. The narrator passes through the forest with his little horse on a chilly winter evening. He stops amidst the forest which is laden with fine feathery snow. It was the darkest evening of the year. The narrator is mesmerized by the beauty and mystery of the lovely dark surrounding. On one side, there is deep forest and on the other, there is a white frozen lake. The deep solitude affects the meditative mood of the narrator. There are only two sounds slow breeze of cold wind and downy flakes of falling snow. The narrator reflects upon the mysterious beauty and solitude of the lovely, dark and deep woods.

The little horse reminds the narrator posing the question why he stopped in the forest. There was no farm house nearby. He shook this harness bells disrupting the reflective mood of the narrator. The narrator wakes up to the job at hand and realizes that he has certain promises to keep, some duties to perform before he would go to sleep. Here the word 'sleep' indicates 'Death' which always makes us aware of uncertainty of life, and duties to be performed within that short span of life.

The tone of the poem is not sad or painful but the meditative realization of duties, to be performed and promises to keep.

2.7 THEMES OF THE POEM

At the literal level, the poem tells us about the speaker's passing through the dark and deep woods on a cold wintry evening. He stops amidst the dark and mysterious surrounding. The little horse finds the narrator's stopping by the woods quite queer and shakes his harness bells to alert the narrator. The narrator realizes that he should move on and reach home in time to complete his tasks and fulfill the obligations on hand before going to bed. However, the poem has deeper symbolic meaning. There are serious themes like death, duty, choices, obligations, isolation and beauty etc. in the poem. Let us discuss the major themes of the poem briefly.

- (1) **Beauty:** The beauty of nature is enchanting. It attracts human beings making them negligent towards their duties. Beauty creates repudiation of action and obligation. The darkness of woods is mesmerizing and mysterious but it is treacherous. It cuts itself off from action. The peace and solitude of the woods move one forget one's duties and obligation. The poet says that such beauty and solitude must be left behind to fulfill one's promises. According to Indian philosophy, beauty of the world creates illusion, maya that entraps human beings creating amnesia about their duties.
- (2) **Loneliness and Isolation:** The speaker finds himself lonely in the

dark and deep woods. He is far away from hustle and bustle of human world. Even the owner of the woods is not there. So his trespasses into his woods and enjoys the loneliness and isolation. He likes to stay there enjoying the solitude of the woods and the frozen lake. There are no sounds except slow cold breeze of wind and falling of snow.

- (3) **Choices:** The speaker in the poem stops in the woods. He enjoys the beauty and solitude of dark woods. He has choice to stay or go home. At first, he feels that he should stay there and relish the beauty and peace of the forest and frozen lake. However, his little horse reminds him of his mistake. Now the speaker is torn between two choices to stay in the woods or go home. It was difficult to take the decision but finally, the speaker decides to go home and keep his promises. He feels that it is necessary for him to fulfill his obligations before sleep. In human life, we often face such choices but to make the right choice is not an easy task. It is the test of life that symbolizes our attitude towards beauty, duty, life and death etc.
- (4) **Man and Nature:** Human beings are part of nature. They feel enticed towards the beauty of nature because man is also the creation of nature. Civilized men have tried to separate themselves from nature but when they are amidst nature, they become captivated by its beautiful beauty and peace. Nature is not always soothing and beautiful. It is scary and fierce too. The speaker in the poem likes, to stay in dark woods laden with snow but it is not safe to be there for long. The horse is a practical animal and he reminds the speaker to move on. The narrator also realizes that it is more important to reach home and perform his duties before going to bed. It is also safer to be at home in its cozy environment and warmth of the family.
- (5) **Duty and Obligations:** All human being have duties and responsibilities towards family, society and the world at large. We are not islands separated from one another. We are all connected with one another. We have duties towards the earth we live in. If we do not care for environment, time would soon come when the earth would be depleted of all its resources. It would ultimately destroy all lives. Therefore duties are important for the survival of mankind. We have to play roles as sons, daughters, husbands, wives, brothers and soon. We have obligations and responsibilities towards our country, our state and our city or town. In India, we believe that we have duties towards the Creator (God) who has created us as human beings, the highest species on earth. 'The Bhagavad Gita' says that we should perform our duties. First we should not think of the results but of action only. Lord Krishna says that Karma (actions) alone must be the priority of all human beings.
- (6) **Death:** Death has always been an enigma. Is it the end of life or transition to another life? We, in India believe that death is not the end of life. It is like changing clothes. The Gita says that life is eternal. Soul does not die, it is the body that dies. The soul exists forever, it has no beginning or end only body is born and it is the body that dies and is reborn.

Death is often compared with sleep in literature, philosophy and psychology. Sleep and death are brothers according to old Greek proverb. In sleep, we experience temporary death. We experience peace and rest in sleep. It relieves us from stress and pain of our hectic schedule. Death, like sleep also liberates us from pain and stressful journey of life. Robert Frost uses the theme of Death by calling it ‘sleep’.

“And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep”

2.8 STRUCTURE/DICTION/STYLE OF THE POEM

The poem ‘*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*’ has four stanzas of four lines each. All quatrains have metrical pattern of iambic tetrameter. Each line has four iambic feet which are made up of one unstressed syllable followed by stressed syllable.

U/ | U/ | U/ | U/
U/ | U/ | U/ | U/

The woods | are love | ly dark | and deep

Syllable:

Note : (U) indicates unstressed syllable and (/) indicates stressed syllable.

Unstressed syllable is a low beat and the stressed one is high beat. In Iambic Tetrameter, there are four feet with rising rhythm.

The rhyme scheme of the poem is aaba, bbcd, ccde, dddd

Whose woods these are I think I know	A
His house is in the village though;	A
He will not see me stopping here	B
To watch his woods fill up with snow	A

(‘Know’, ‘though’ and ‘snow’ rhyme while the third line does not rhyme)

Robert Frost’s diction is simple and often colloquial. The poem contains simple images from rural life like horse, woods, darkness, freezing cold, snow, promises, distance and sleep etc. These simple images are symbolic, for example, ‘dark wood’ symbolize mystery of life, promises stand for obligations and ‘sleep’ stands for death. The poet has used several poetic devices like alliteration, metaphors and personification. The horse ‘thinks’ and ‘asks’ the speaker like a human being and therefore the ‘horse’ is an example of personification. The examples of alliteration are; whose woods/his house/ watch his woods fill up with/ he gives his harness/dark and deep.

The repetition of final line reiterates and reaffirms the idea of promises and obligations the narrator has to fulfill.

Check Your Progress: 1

2.9 ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN BRIEF.

1. Where does the speaker stop? Why?

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2. Does the speaker know about the owner of the woods? Where does the owner of the woods live?

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3. Why does the horse think the speaker's stopping by the woods queer?

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4. Describe the place where the speaker stops in the woods.

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5. Why does the horse give his harness bells a shake?

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6. In silence of woods, what are the two sounds the speaker hears?

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7. Why does the speaker decide to move on?

8. Explain the message of the poem in brief.

Check Your Progres: 2

2.10 CHOOSE THE CORRECT OPTION FROM GIVEN BELOW.

1. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* is poem by
 (a) Robert Frost (b) John Keats
 (c) William Wordsworth (d) Emily Dickinson
2. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* was published in
 (a) 1921 (b) 1923
 (c) 1947 (d) 1950
3. *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* has
 (a) five stanzas (b) four stanzas
 (c) three stanzas (d) two stanzas
4. Quatrain contains _____lines
 (a) five (b) four
 (c) three (d) two
5. The horse is puzzled why the speaker
 (a) is unhappy (b) is shocked
 (c) stopped by the woods (d) stopped by the lake
6. The horse gives his harness bells a shake
 (a) to awaken him (b) to caution him
 (c) to ask him if there was any mistake
 (d) to ask him to move on
7. It was the _____ evening of the year.
 (a) hottest (b) coldest
 (c) darkest (d) the most fearful

8. The speaker was enticed by
 - (a) the beauty of woods
 - (b) the dark evening
 - (c) deep forest
 - (d) frozen lake
9. The speaker finally decides
 - (a) to stay in the forest
 - (b) to rest amidst woods
 - (c) to move on
 - (d) to go to a farm house
10. To keep promises means
 - (a) to obey orders
 - (b) to follow rules
 - (c) to live honestly
 - (d) to fulfill one's obligations
11. 'Sleep' symbolizes
 - (a) death
 - (b) suicide
 - (c) life
 - (d) uncertainty
12. The speaker finally realizes that
 - (a) life is mysterious
 - (b) life is full of beauty.
 - (c) life is full of temptations
 - (d) life is not just beauty but it is duty.

2.11 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learnt that poetry is the most compact and meaningful form of literature. Great poetry is always profoundly philosophical, reflective and meditative. Poetry deals with the issues of life aesthetically. As we have stated earlier, a single stanza of a poem can epitomize the philosophy of life that a volume of prose work can do. It holds mirror up to nature and the world vividly.

2.12 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. Works by Robert Frost at Project Gutenberg
2. Robert Frost, Poetry Foundation
3. Robert Frost (1995) Poirier, Richard, Richardson, Mark eds. Collected poems.
4. Deirdre, J. Fagan (1 January 2009) critical companion to Robert Frost: A Literary Reference to its life and work.
5. www.britannica.com
6. Wikipedia.org
7. <https://www.aresearchguide.com/>
8. www.enotes.com
9. <http://study.com>

Answers

1. (a), 2. (b), 3. (a), 4. (b), 5. (c), 6. (c), 7. (c), 8. (a), 9. (c), 10. (a), 11. (a), 12. (d)