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Go Along or Get Along: A Comparative study of “*Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening*” and “*The Road Not Taken*” by Robert Frost

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Abstract

This paper attempts to compare and analyse two magnificent poems by Robert Frost; ‘*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*’ and ‘*The Road Not Taken*’. The comparative analysis brings home the sameness and/or differences between the two poems. Spoken from the perspective of two different travelers, travelling in woods, at different points of time and space, the speakers seem to suffer an almost same kind of dilemma. Both these poems emphasize the confrontation of man with choices offered by life and temptations which lure him throughout his journey of life. The comparison has been done Thematically, Structurally, Figuratively, Literarily and poetically so to bring forth the relationship between the two poems by the same author.

Key Words: Life, Journey, Dilemma, Choices, Man, Nature.

I. Introduction

Robert Frost (1874), the most distinguished American poet of the twentieth century is rightly called the ‘first American poet who

can be reckoned as a master-poet by world standards’. Frost’s writing is associated principally with the life and landscape of New England. Amy Lowell thought he had overstressed the dark aspects of New England life. (Britannica). He gives an exact and elaborated representation of countryside scenes making use of a direct, colloquial speaking voice in his poems. Frost’s poems emerge as meditations on universal themes. He engages himself in poetic imagination using simple nature as a gateway towards achieving the universal. Though often called the ‘poet of nature’, he does not rhapsodize over nature like Wordsworth; his attitude seems more of being a matter-of-fact. Shunning erudition, and experimentation at the same time Frost’s simple poetry, nevertheless reveals a superb mastery over language and prosody. “Frost demonstrated an enviable versatility of theme, but he most commonly investigated human contacts with the natural world in small encounters that serve as metaphors for larger aspects of the human condition”. (Britannica 184). Augustyn points out that Frost was often able to endow his rural imagery with a larger symbolic or metaphysical

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significance, and his best poems transcend the immediate realities of their subject matter to illuminate the unique blend of tragic endurance, stoicism, and tenacious affirmation that marked his outlook on life. (Britannica 187).

Carl Bode argues, 'If America of the 20th century had a national poet, it was Frost'. (Bode 216). It was Frost who was given the privilege of being the first poet to read a certain poem of his at the inaugural function of the late President John F. Kennedy.

'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is perhaps the best known of Frost's poems. First collected in *New Hampshire* (1923), the poem narrates the experience of the speaker when he paused in his journey to watch the woods filled up with snow in one 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 sounds 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 Road Not Taken' is another well-known ambiguous poem by Frost, originally published in 1916 as the first poem in the collection *Mountain Interval*. The poem presents the speaker in a state of dilemma. He is a traveler who is unable to decide which road to choose and ultimately chooses the one that 'had the better claim';

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:*

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*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

II. Comparative Analysis

The poem *'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'* entices the reader with a deep philosophical contemplation. The speaker of the poem represents everyman and any man who is often tempted by serenity, calmness and restfulness on his journey of life but is soon reminded of the responsibilities he has to shoulder, the target he has to hit and the goals he has to achieve. The basic conflict of the poem rises in the very first stanza, moves towards the next and is resolved in the end. There is an ongoing tussle between, what is called in Sigmund Freud's terminology, super-ego of man and his id.

The speaker, who happens to be an embodiment of human nature, is allured by a peaceful scene and trapped in a particular mood which tries to seduce him and conjure a satisfaction in him but his inner reason, which is represented by the 'horse' in the poem, reminds him that it is unusual of him to halt like that when he neither needs to rest nor does the 'stop' serve any purpose. The horse is considered a close associate of man in his endeavors. Being the agent of society, it is the closest thing in this very space and time. To be lulled to sleep may truly jeopardize his future. The rider may take pleasure for the moment and feel

content for the time being but shall eventually get stuck in 'snow' and 'frozen lake' which will prevent him from pursuing the further journey of life. The 'woods' may be 'lovely', 'dark', and 'deep' but the rider, on the life's horse, has 'miles to go' before he sleeps. The opposites in the poem in which the speaker gets caught up are 'Woods' and 'Village' which represent the conflict between society and loneliness; stopping and moving; and succumbing and resisting. This ambiguity maintains the freshness of the poem. The narrative sets up this subtle tension between the timeless attraction of the 'lovely' 'woods' and the pressing obligations of present situation. It is these binary opposites which maintain the pace of poem and pregnant it with deep thoughtfulness.

The last quatrain of the poem resolves the conflict wherein the speaker ultimately gets-over his numbness and chooses responsibility over the charming and complacent disposition. The refrain at the end of the poem justify the nature of such a situation. He has a long life to go before he disengages with the conscious world. These powerful lines of the poem were found written by Jawaharlal Nehru (the first prime minister of India) in his personal diary, which was found on his table at his death. (Jain 2011).

'The Road Not Taken' also presents its speaker in woods in a state of dilemma

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wherein he is unable to decide which path to choose; whether to go where everyone has went or to choose the other path and likely find himself in places where no one has ever been. Just like in ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening’, the speaker in this poem is also a traveler treading the path of life. This poem also entices the reader with a deep meditation and refers to the existential dilemma that everyman faces. Humans often find themselves entangled in situations where they have to select one thing at the cost of other thing. We wish to grab both the things but that just not happens.

‘The poem is actually said to be written by Frost to poke fun at, his friend Edward Thomas, an English-Welsh poet, who, when out walking with Frost in England would often regret his decision of not taking some different path. Thomas would sigh over what they might have seen and done, and Frost thought this quaintly romantic. Frost complained to Thomas that he had read the poem to an audience of college students and that it had been “taken pretty seriously...despite doing my best to make it obvious by my manner that I was fooling. ... Mea culpa.” However, Frost liked to quip, “I’m never more serious than when joking.” (Robinson).

The poem, as the title itself suggests, is about the choice not taken rather than being about the one that is taken. The speaker is at first caught up in a quagmire and his

indecisiveness is dramatized to create a profound effect on its reader. The poem conveys a general message that one should be decisive in choosing his state of affairs and the decision should be taken wisely, confidently and swiftly. One should not linger for too long at a juncture in life and loose the opportunity. Opportunities are like sunrise, wait for long and they are gone. Once a decision is taken and a path is chosen, there should be no regret and no “What if....?” or “If only.” There are no turning backs in life and one should seek none. In the poem, the speaker does not claim that the road he chose is necessarily the right one. Instead he says that that is the way he is going now, and the place he ends up, for better or worse, was the result of his decision.

Structure

The poem ‘Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening consists of *four* stanzas with *four* lines each, all quatrains are of iambic tetrameter, maintaining a regular rhythm within the poem, resonating with the plod of a slow moving horse. The rhyme scheme is *AABA BBCB CCDC DDDD* and all the lines are full. All the lines flow, there is no punctuation so that no caesurae are created, suggesting a continuation of life, a smooth familiar routine. ‘The Road Not Taken’ also comprises of *four* stanzas with *five* lines each with a mixture of iambic and an spastic tetrameter, producing a steady rhythmical four beat first-person narrative.

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The poem has a traditional rhyme scheme of *ABAAB* which maintains the tightness of the lines, whilst the use of enjambment keeps the sense flowing.

Setting and Mood

Both the poems are set in Wild loneliness, away from civilization so to conjure a contemplative, meditative, reflective and retrospective mood. Since antiquity, writers have used wilderness and serenity as a vital place for the characters to meet with their own consciousness. Frost has also exposed the speakers in both these poems to true nature so that they are guided and nurtured by nature.

Poetic Devices /Techniques, Symbols and Imagery used

Frost is well known for employing various poetic devices in his poems. These poems are also no such exception. In *'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'* various devices have been used to convey the basic theme of the poem. 'Woods', for instance, represent the outskirts of civilisation where no rules and regulations of society apply and man is left all by himself and to pure nature. 'Snow' and the 'frozen lake' represent the temptations one faces in life which make his/her senses numb. The 'horse' is a *metaphor* for human passion and the ability to conquer. The horse has also been *personified* when /He gives his harness bells a shake/ /to ask if there is some mistake. / 'Sleep' in the last lines is the metaphor for death while 'miles to go'

represents living the life. Likewise in the poem 'The Road Not Taken', Road itself symbolizes the journey of life and 'diverging' represents choices, one faces, in life. Just like in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening', the snow conjures the imagery of whiteness which represents tranquility and peacefulness; the 'yellow' woods in 'The Road Not Taken' signify a middle color, in-between, indecision. Similarly, the color 'black' in the third stanza indicate that the path, the speaker chooses, is not trodden by trespassers. The *point of view* in both the poems is of two different travelers who are but both existentialistic in nature.

Conclusion

Robert Frost has succeeded in conveying universal themes in his poems like these and many others. He has exhibited a remarkable versatility of theme, but has generally probed man's contact with the nature in small confrontations that serve as metaphors for greater aspects of humanity. Both the poems investigate human psychology and bring home the fact that human psyche is by default ambiguous and has a tendency to change. In the poems, the gentle and kind surface of nature wraps the possible dangers, and death remains hidden behind dark and peculiar trees. Frost was often able to endow his rural and natural imagery with a larger symbolic or metaphysical significance, and his best poems, like these, transcend the immediate

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realities of their subject matter towards something that is more appealing and with universal significance.

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