

# Interpreting Robert Frost's Work Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening from a Metaphorical Perspective

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**Abstract:** Robert Frost lived in a transitional period between the old and new social orders, experiencing a transition from traditional literature to modern literature. His poetry is a product of the times and a reflection of society. Robert Frost's poems make extensive use of metaphor, especially the metaphor "Life is a journey". Based on the theory of conceptual metaphor, this paper tries to find out how the poet constructs metaphor system and expresses his attitude towards life in *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*.

**Keywords:** Conceptual Metaphor Theory; Robert Frost; Cognitive linguistics

## 1. Introduction

Robert Frost lived in a transitional period between the old and new social orders, experiencing a transition from traditional literature to modern literature[1]. His poetry is a product of the times and a reflection of society. Although many critics view Robert Frost as a "natural poet" or "peasant poet," he himself refuses to limit his poetry to purely scenic descriptions. Although his poetry continues to use traditional poetic forms, it is not limited to tradition [2]. This article analyzes the three poems "Turtle Eggs and the Locomotive", "Extinguish, Extinguish -", and "Repair the Wall" to explore Robert Frost's warning to the industrialized society expressed through his poetry creation. Warnings can be divided into three categories: the destruction of nature by industrialization, the exploitation of humanity by industrialization, and the alienation of interpersonal relationships caused by industrialization. Therefore, it can be said that Robert Frost was not only limited to describing rural scenery, but also a great poet who was concerned about his country and society.

When people praised him as a great pastoral poet, Frost himself stood up and clearly stated, "I am not an pastoral poet, because in my poetry, only two are pure pastoral poems that do not depict humanity and human society [3]. Therefore, simply treating Frost as a pure pastoral poet is not comprehensive enough, and his poetry must also contain more content. At the beginning of the 20th century, influenced by World War I, the rapid rise of capitalist industrialization led to unprecedented prosperity in the American society and economy [4]. However, at the same time, the rapid development of industrialization also caused an imbalance in the relationship between humans and nature, leading to many serious social problems. Robert Frost is known as the "pastoral poet of the industrial society" by later generations, and his poetry is also dedicated to exposing the negative effects caused by the rapid development of industrial society. Therefore, although most readers classify Frost's poetry as pastoral, Frost, while writing about nature, also reveals various drawbacks and harsh realities of modern industrialized society. As a modern poet who loves nature, Frost's superb depiction of the natural environment reflects the imbalance in the relationship between humans and nature during the rapid development of industrialization, while also providing warning and inspiration to people in modern society.

Lakoff and Johnson introduced Conceptual Metaphor Theory in their seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By*. It dramatically changes people's understanding of how language, thought, and even action are intricately connected (Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 4) [5]. Their theory challenges the traditional view that metaphors are merely linguistic tools or poetic embellishment, proposing that metaphors are fundamental cognitive mechanisms that shape the way we perceive and interact with the world around us.

The central idea of their theory is that metaphor transcends language and permeates our thought

processes and actions. Metaphor is not confined to the realm of words; it operates at a deeper cognitive level, influencing how we conceptualize complex and abstract concepts by mapping them to more familiar and concrete domains. This mapping process is a crucial cognitive operation that allows us to make sense of unfamiliar things by drawing on familiar experiences.

Essentially, the essence of metaphor lies in its ability to bridge the gap between two distinct domains: the source domain and the target domain. The source domain is a concrete and known category, while the target domain is usually an abstract and complex concept. By associating elements of the source domain with the target domain, we can more effectively grasp and navigate the complexity of the target domain. This process allows us to imbue abstract concepts with tangible qualities, making them easier to understand and relate to.

Based on our cognitive experience and the relationships observed in the source domain, certain attributes can be projected onto the target domain, enriching people's understanding of the target domain. This mapping process isn't just a linguistic trick. This is a cognitive strategy that allows people to understand unfamiliar things by comparing them to what people already know. For example, when describing time as "passing," a metaphor is used that comes from people's understanding of physical motion, making the abstract concept of time more tangible and relevant.

Metaphor has also become a common device in Robert Frost's poetry, for he considered poetry to be essentially metaphor (Cox and Lathem, 24) [6]. In the poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, Robert Frost employs such a metaphor, "Life is a journey." Journey represents the source domain, while life represents the target domain. Journey encompasses the traveler, starting point, route, potential obstacles, and destination, which correspond, in the mapping, to the individual, birth, choices in life, encountered difficulties, and death, respectively. In *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, he presents an extended metaphorical comparison that only uses language from the source domain of the journey, leaving the target domain of life entirely implicit (Steen, 198). By utilizing the concrete concept of "journey", Frost invites us to explore the abstract concept of "life". By delving into the metaphors employed by Frost, we gain insight into the themes of contemplation, escapism, and responsibilities in reality, which pervade this poetic masterpiece. The following is the full 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.

## 2. Analysis of superficial meaning

Before analyzing the metaphors in the poem, it is necessary to understand its superficial meaning. "I" ride through the forest on a snowy night. There is an owner of this forest, and I know who he is, but he cannot see me yet because of the snow-covered trees. Enchanted by the beautiful snow scene and the

tranquil night, “I” stop and revel in it. My horse finds it strange that “I” have stopped in the woods where there’s no farmhouse. The horse and I must have traveled a long way to be so familiar: usually, we don’t stop in such a place without any person. There are woods and frozen lakes. It is the darkest night of the winter. The horse rings the bell on his harness as if to ask whether something is wrong. The woods are very quiet, except for the ringing of the bell and the sound of the gentle breeze sweeping the fluffy snow. “I” am intoxicated by the beauty and want to stay here, but I have promises to fulfill. I also have many miles to go before I can rest. It is a long journey. The poet has created an atmosphere that is both relaxing and suspenseful. It’s relaxing because the woods are tranquil and ethereal, with faint glimpses of snowflakes and the frozen lake in the darkness of night. If one wants to hide from the world, this must be the perfect place. Besides, the suspense is because of the fact that the woods have an owner who “I” know, but “I” don’t want him to know I’m coming. Why is that? Does the owner dislike the visitors? On this trip, “I” have to fulfill my promises, but the poet does not tell the readers what “my” promises are. Where is “my” destination? The author does not go into detail either, except to say that it is far away and to emphasize this point by repetition. The whole poem ends, leaving the reader with a story without a clear end: the readers have no idea where “I” come from, where “I” am going, and what “I” am going to do. They only know that “I” and the horse stay in this forest on this snowy night. Robert Frost sets many puzzles to be solved, and these puzzles need to be explained by analyzing his metaphorical system.

### 3. Analysis of metaphorical meaning

In the first stanza, the traveler’s encounter with the tranquil forest and his emotions are intricately connected to the underlying metaphorical mapping of life’s journey and its challenges. The first-person narrative of the poem shows that the traveler symbolizes the poet, and the traveler’s journey metaphorically represents the poet’s life journey. The metaphorical journey begins with the traveler’s attraction to the tranquil forest. The woods, in this context, serves as the target domain, representing the broader concept of life’s journey. The tranquility associated with the forest metaphorically signifies a temporary escape from life’s hustle, bustle, noise, and restlessness. The woods metaphorically symbolize the various temptations encountered in life, inviting individuals to pause and stay. The traveler feels freedom, comfort and a sense of satisfaction here, and then stops (Shabir, 17). This projection helps the reader to understand the traveler’s emotional state and his yearning for moments of respite from life’s challenges.

In the second and third stanzas, the poet describes the horse’s reactions and attributes human characteristics to the horse. The horse doesn’t understand why its master would stop in a remote forest on the darkest winter night of the year. So, it gently shakes the harness bells as a reminder. The second stanza also contains another metaphor that requires understanding in conjunction with the poet’s early experiences. Frost lost his father in his childhood, his mother in his youth, and his wife in his middle age. Faced with consecutive setbacks, he did not succumb to despair but continued to pursue his dream of becoming a poet, yet he struggled to make a name for himself in the world of poetry. The blows to his life and career brought him countless darkest nights. Therefore, the metaphor “the darkest evening of the year” represents the frustration in life. The two stanzas highlight indirectly the traveler’s love for this snowy forest night from the horse’s perspective. The traveler finds spiritual peace in this place, temporarily forgetting worries and sorrows, and the hustle and bustle of life. Then, a bell sound breaks the silence of the snowy night, bringing the traveler’s thoughts back to the real world, and he realizes that he must continue his journey to fulfill the unfulfilled promises, just as Frost once contemplated giving up and hiding from responsibilities and duties. However, his passion for poetry supported him in overcoming various difficulties and not succumbing to the temptations of temporary comfort. Therefore, the horse metaphorically represents the poet’s subconscious rational self, reminding the poet to remain vigilant in the face of temptations and not forget his original aspiration (Shabir, 17). In an ideal world, it would be possible for the poet to be free from the responsibilities, duties, troubles and afflictions of reality, living freely without restraint. He may allow himself to be immersed in it, and choose to rest peacefully there. In reality, however, the rational self cannot ignore what is going on. A fierce struggle take place between the poet’s inner desire and reason. The night, the woods and the frozen lake symbolize the ideal world away from the mundane, where the poet can search for inner peace and solitude. They are so alluring that the poet cannot see the white snow, only the darkest night of the year. However, the sound from the horse bell string awakens the poet, which symbolizes that the rational self won’t allow the poet to indulge in the ideal world. At this moment, only a gentle breeze stirs, and snowflakes gently descend, filling the surroundings with serenity. No matter how fierce the poet’s internal struggle, nature still runs on its normal course, ignoring the poet’s entanglements. The

poet is caught in a dilemma between his heart's desire to escape reality at will and his rational self's insistence on shouldering responsibilities. These two stanzas reflect humanity's ongoing struggle between reality and the ideal world. This poem, which depicts the inner struggle, deeply demonstrates the complexity and multitude of emotions within human nature.

The fourth section shows the poet's pursuit of life after the conflict and struggle. The poet uses "lovely, dark and deep" to describe this forest, and it is obvious that the forest in the poet's eyes does not only refer to the woods existing in nature, but further implies that the forest is a metaphor for temptation. They offer respite from the heavy journey of life, tempting the weary traveler to abandon his obligations and yield to the serenity. Combined with the poet's life experience, we can see the poet's inner sense of worry. Robert's main creation theme is about rural life, with his unique writing method and his adherence to the pastoral poetry tradition established by the ancient Roman poet Virgil (70—19BC). This adherence and development created considerable confusion in the American literary scene at that time. At the very beginning of Frost's poetry creation, he chose a path completely different from that of most contemporary poets, which determined the poet's extremely difficult and lonely psychological experience in the path of self-creation. The metaphor also forces the reader to confront the universal human desire for escape, which often conflicts with the duties and obligations that anchor us in reality. After the traveler's mind returns to reality, he realizes that he has not lived up to his promise, so he forgoes the present beauty and tranquility and continues his journey until he reaches his destination. For Frost, "promises to keep" are the promises made by the poet to himself, that is, to end the self-doubt about the lifestyle he has chosen and the path of poetry creation, and to be passionate and self-affirming about the life creed he has adhered to. Life is as elusive as a forest on a snowy night, with its own mystery, but the meaning of life should be to stick to the faith, obligation and responsibility to continue to complete the unfinished ambition, rather than idle, wasting time, and lingering in the beautiful scenery along the way. "Miles to go" is a metaphor for life's unfinished journey. This means that he will always stick to his beliefs and stick to the road of creation until the end of his life. Thus, in the target domain of "life", "promises" metaphorically represents the duties and obligations undertaken by the poet, and "sleep" is a metaphor for the end of life, that is, death (Hashmi, Asim Mahmood and Ilyas Mahmood, 376).

#### 4. Conclusion

Frost skillfully projects the elements contained in journey—traveler, route, obstacles, destination—onto his own life journey, corresponding to the life he has experienced, the difficulties and temptations he has encountered, and the end of life. This creates the metaphor of "life is a journey". His extraordinary life experience is like a journey, full of hardships, but the poet's rational self overcomes all kinds of temptations and self-doubt, sticks to the original heart and belief, and always persists on the road of poetic creation until the end of life. The poem's metaphors remind us of the allure of escape and the importance of resisting its temptations. While the woods may seem inviting and peaceful, they also represent a surrender. Frost's portrayal of the traveler's ultimate decision to move on underscores the significance of fulfilling commitments and responsibilities, choosing to embrace the challenges and joys of life rather than succumbing to the seductive call of escapism. However, this does not mean that we need to keep moving forward without ever stopping. The traveler's pause in the woods represents a momentary reprieve from the demands of society. It speaks to the necessity of finding moments of stillness amidst life's chaos to reflect on our purpose, values, and individual journeys. Frost's metaphors encourage us to appreciate the solace that introspection and self-discovery can bring, despite the pressures to keep moving forward.

In summary, Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* captivates readers with its deceptively simple but metaphorically rich composition. An exploration of Frost's metaphor "life is a journey" reveals his projection of the attributes of the journey to his own life experiences, challenges, and the end of the ultimate journey. The metaphor offers insight into the complexity of human, the allure of escapism, and the importance of accepting the responsibilities and challenges of life. Through the clever use of metaphor, Frost's poems guide us through the emotions, choices, and reflection inherent in human experience. Just as the traveler decides to continue his journey, it prompts readers to reflect on the metaphorical landscape that shapes our lives and the path we choose to follow, reminding readers that they must strike a balance between self-reflection, the temptation to escape reality, and fulfilling our responsibilities in reality.

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