



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## Not an Urge to Leave: The Horse's Empathetic Presence in Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.310](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.310)



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### Article info

Article Received: 23/07/2025

Article Accepted: 16/08/2025

Published online: 20/08/2025

### Abstract

This article provides a new interpretation of Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* through a close reading that foregrounds the horse's emotional role. The focus of the article lies in the role of the horse as a supportive companion rather than a corrective force. Traditional interpretations have often portrayed the horse as an embodiment of social responsibility, or rationality. The horse's role has been always interpreted to be an external obligation for the speaker. The horse to be a figure who interrupts the speaker's moment of solitude to urge him back towards the demands of society. These existing readings frame the horse's gesture of shaking his harness bells as a subtle reminder of his obligations waiting beyond the woods. In contrast, this analysis suggests that the horse's presence and action are empathetic. The horse functions as a quiet affirmation of the speaker's inner state rather than a disruption of it. Drawing on the modernist emphasis on interiority, this article positions the speaker in a space of introspective stillness. The stillness exists through the combination of silence, snow, and darkness, create a meditative atmosphere. In this interpretive framework, the horse's gesture becomes an act of shared awareness. A moment in which animal's non-verbal communication reflects and validates the emotional state of the speaker. Instead of an authoritative interruption, the shaking of the bells is read as a subtle signal of mutual recognition, in which both of them inhabit the same psychological and physical landscape. This reading shifts the relationship from hierarchical that is human reason over animal instinct to relational. The focus lies on the cross-species companionship that is responsive rather than directive. This article's reframing of the horse's role aligns with a broader modernist sensibility that values subjective experience over objective reality. Therefore, this article argues that "*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*" provides a subtle

meditation on companionship, in which verbal exchange is replaced by empathetic understanding.

**Keywords:** American literature; poetry; Robert Frost; *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*; companionship.

## Introduction

Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" has long been read as a deceptively simple lyric. The poem's quiet winter scene conceals complex moral, psychological, and existential dimensions. Scholarly interpretations have often focused on the speaker's inner dilemma between the allure of stillness and the pull of social obligations. The horse in the poem functions as a narrative device that recalls the speaker to his duties. In such readings, the horse is framed as a corrective presence. The horse to be an embodiment of rationality, social conscience, or external responsibility. The horse's jingling harness bells disrupt the speaker's contemplation.

However, this interpretive reading leaves underexplored the possibility that the horse's role is relational. The existing moral-allegorical readings, from Herbert R. Coursen Jr.'s symbolic comparisons to psychoanalytic interpretations like Stanley Poss's, envisions the horse within hierarchical frameworks that is human intention over animal instinct, duty over desire. Even in more subtle psychological interpretations, the horse is treated primarily as a device for narrative interruption. These prevailing perspectives overlook is the potential for the horse to participate in the moment not as an enforcer of obligation but as an empathetic companion. The horse to be attuned to the speaker's emotional state.

This article addresses that gap by foregrounding the horse's empathetic presence. By focusing on modernist emphasis on interiority and subjective experience, the analysis reinterprets the harness-bell shake not

as a call to return to societal duties but as an act of shared awareness; a moment in which human and animal inhabit the same psychological and physical space. In this framework, the speaker's pause in the snowy woods becomes more about experiencing relational grounding and less about resisting one's desires. By shifting the focus from obligation to companionship, the reading repositions Frost's poem as a meditation on human and non-human companionship and the presence of quiet reassurance found in shared stillness.

## Modernist Interiority

The first line of the poem indicates a sense of uncertainty: "Whose woods these are I think I know" (Frost 1). The expression of the speaker suggests both distance and familiarity. As John Xiros Cooper identifies in his modernist reading of Frost's poem, it evokes "quintessential twentieth-century anxieties" such as anonymity and aloofness (Cooper 89). Robert Frost, like his modernist contemporaries, is concerned with the experience of alienation, detachment from society. Frost's use of the forest as the setting does not merely signify a geographical space, but also a psychological space of one's mind. The forest is dark, deep, and inviting in its stillness, promising either escape or release. This modernist sense of interiority sets the stage for the speaker's introspective stillness, which leads to the horse's shaking of his "harness bells" (Frost 9) – a subtle response to the speaker's unusual pause in the woods, away from any sign of human settlement.

This pause in the speaker's journey is significant. This is because the poet selects the kind of space in which the poem is set. The space

is both emotionally suspended – “Between the woods and frozen lake / The darkest evening of the year” (Frost 7–8) and geographically remote. This pause allows the speaker’s entry into a psychologically liminal space and quietly confronts nothingness and even death. He experiences this pause because of the allure of the woods: “lovely, dark and deep” (Frost 13) and not out of weariness in his journey with his horse. The horse’s presence becomes crucial to understanding the emotional aspect of the moment. When the horse shakes his “harness bells” (Frost 9) – the only other living being in the scene – the speaker anthropomorphises the animal to portray a shared awareness. The horse’s subtle movement interrupts the speaker’s reverie, not as a correction, but as an act of quite emotional attunement.

#### **From Corrective to Companion**

The speaker calls his horse “my little horse” (Frost 5) which suggests a bond built on companionship and not on hierarchy. The horse is not merely an extension of the speaker’s conscience, as psychoanalytic readings like Stanley Poss’s have indicated, nor a symbolic presence of a social duty reminder, as in prevailing allegorical interpretations. Herbert R. Coursen Jr., in a symbolic-allegorical interpretation, compares the speaker to Santa Claus and the horse to a reindeer, linking the speaker’s pause to the moral weight of seasonal duty (Coursen 237). While his argument is playful, it ultimately leans toward the traditional interpretation of the poem that identifies the presence of the horse as an external force of obligation. Instead, the horse performs an emotional role: that of a companion who cohabits the stillness of the forest. His jingling of his bells is a sign of mutual acknowledgement of the unusual pause, a small gesture that both observes and gently recognises the speaker’s psychological state.

This reading shifts the understanding of the poem away from frameworks of moral

obligation toward a model of empathetic companionship in interpreting the role of the horse. Virginia Faulkner points out the archetypal and psychological significance of the horse, identifies the horse’s resonance with Jungian symbolism to be both maternal and potent (Faulkner 560-561). This archetypal-symbolist view supports a more subjective reading, one in which the horse is not a moral corrective force but a companion. George Monteiro’s textual analysis deepens this perspective. He points out that an early manuscript of the poem read “The steaming horses think it queer,” later revised to the more personal “My little horse must think it queer.” Monteiro reads this shift as a move from an external realistic portrayal of events to an internalised imaginative depiction of the scene. In transforming the moment into art, the horse becomes a conscious emotional being (Monteiro 66- 68). In this light, the horse’s presence becomes symbolic recognition of companionship. John Cunningham, in a moral-symbolic reading, observes the “woods and frozen lake” as a metaphor for death and the last two lines as the speaker’s commitment to his human “promises” (Cunningham 269). His reading is grounded in a Christian ethical model: the speaker resists desire and returns to the moral path. However, in the framework of this essay, the speaker does not resume his journey because he is compelled to; rather, he continues because he feels emotionally grounded, prepared to move forward after experiencing a moment of emotional release and quiet affirmation.

#### **Empathy over Obligation**

The horse, as an empathetic companion, shares the stillness and helps him to feel grounded. The lines “He gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake” (Frost 9-10) – a gesture not of interruption, but of presence. The jingling sound conveys quiet attentiveness of the horse who gently anchors

him to the moment, offering not guidance but companionship.

The final two lines – “And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep” (Frost 15 – 16) – are traditionally interpreted as a resignation to moral obligations. This article argues that the speaker isn’t compelled to return to his duties by external force. He willingly proceeds to keep his “promises” (Frost 14) after a moment of introspective stillness shared with his “little horse” (Frost 5). The last two lines reflect a calming rhythm, like a mantra that helps him to re-enter the world of action. Just as the horse’s jingling sound provides a subtle auditory rhythm that acknowledges the pause the speaker takes in his journey of daily life, the final repeated lines provide linguistic rhythm that reflects his emotional recalibration.

Robert Frost’s skillful craftsmanship in poetry enhances the comprehension of his content and themes. The interlocking rhyme (AABA, BBCB, CCDC, DDDD) of this poem evokes a sense of continuity that mirrors the speaker’s psychological movement. Each stanza is connected to the next, just as one thought leads to the next thought in our minds. The tetrameter rhythm supports the overall emotional stillness. The poem’s meditative, steady rhythm – achieved through its iambic tetrameter, coupled with the interlocking rhyme scheme, deepens the reader’s comprehension. The formal structure mirrors the speaker’s quiet introspection and provides an emotional clarity of the poem’s central tension between pause and purpose. The poem’s central gesture is not of moral awakening but of emotional grounding. The woods are alluring, but it is the horse’s company that allows the speaker to pause, reflect, and move forward on his own will. In this way, Frost’s quiet lyric becomes not a moral parable but a gentle testament to relational presence in a solitary world.

## Conclusion

This re-reading of “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” through the lens of empathetic companionship offers an alternative to the dominant moral, allegorical, and psychoanalytic readings that have shaped its critical history. The horse is read not as a figure of external compulsion but as an attuned companion in stillness. The poem emerges as less a parable about resisting one’s desires and more a meditation on relational non-human presence. The horse’s gentle jingling of harness bells becomes a moment of mutual recognition. The mutual recognition happens when both share an emotional register within a landscape of snow, silence, and darkness.

This reading situates Frost’s poem within a modernist sensibility that focuses on interiority, and subjective perception. The poem’s formal elements such as the interlocking rhyme, steady tetrameter, and repetitive cadence mirror the speaker’s gradual re-entry into purposeful movement, not under obligation but with own volition. In this way, the horse’s presence affirms rather than interrupts the speaker’s moment of stillness. The horse acts as a grounding force to him in a shared awareness that enables his onward journey.

By attending to the emotional agency of the non-human companion, this interpretation expands the range of possible human-animal relationships in literary analysis. This article challenges the assumption that animals in such texts serve primarily as moral or symbolic tools. Frost’s poem, then, becomes a subtle testament to the power of empathetic presence, found in another fellow creature in a winter’s evening.

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