

## Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening": The Allure of the Fatal

*Espaces lisses*<sup>1</sup>, areas of unpredictability, disorder and potential death, are paradoxically alluring to humans, which is a topic explored by Robert Frost in 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. Though the poem appears to be describing a horse ride by the woods where the speaker briefly stops to enjoy the view, the chilling descriptions and ominous connotations indicate otherwise. Through the tension created by alternately inviting and grim descriptions, the woods become a symbol for our attraction to the fatal, and decision to abstain, if only temporarily.

Frost's use of imagery conveys how desolate the woods are, setting a chilling tone for rest of the poem. From the first stanza it becomes clear that the woods are deserted: even the owner is 'in the village' (2) from where 'He will not see [the speaker] stopping' (3), implying the complete isolation of the speaker by the woods. This idea is revisited later, when the area is described as being 'without a farmhouse near' (5) and 'Between the woods and frozen lake' (6). Coupled with the fact that the nearest living creature is a 'little horse' (5), these images emphasise the speaker's distance from civilisation.

As well as being deserted, the woods are eerily empty, as implied by the language and sounds used in the descriptions. The woods are described as being '[filled] up with snow' (4) and the only sounds present being the 'sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake.' (11-12). The former image relates them to a void waiting to be filled, while the latter suggests the absence of any signs of life. The 's', 'w' and 'f' sounds used are very soft and muted, creating the impression of an environment devoid even of sound. The word 'downy' (12) adds to the sinister description, implying a downward push as if the snow flakes were

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<sup>1</sup> *Espaces lisses* are representative of the unknown; they are unreadable, unpredictable and potentially dangerous. In literature they are often represented by woods, the ocean, space.

a suffocating blanket. With these connotations, the woods become an unpleasant, threatening environment.

Despite the foreboding nature of the woods being made explicit, contrasting imagery portrays these woods as attractive to the speaker, creating a startling tension. A sense of longing is created at the beginning where the speaker is described as stopping 'To watch [the] woods fill up with snow' (4). The infinitive verb implies a long action, which in turn implies that it is pleasant to do so. This is especially startling considering the reader's awareness of the potential dangers associated with becoming caught in snow. Frost later elaborates on the agreeableness of this environment when he describes the sounds of 'the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake' (11-12), with 'sweep', 'downy' and 'flake' all bringing to mind comforting and delicate images. The word 'downy' (12) therefore has a two-fold effect; while carrying the sinister connotation of death, it also refers to the pleasant imagery of soft feathers. This duality, the tension between pleasant and lethal, is continued in the final stanza with the statement that 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep' (13) and the contrasting adjectives used therein. The woods are thus portrayed as comforting and attractive, although fatally so.

The simultaneously haunting and compelling nature of the woods cements them as an *espace lisse* which the speaker irrevocably prefers to the *espace strié*<sup>2</sup>, despite its comparative security. The woods and the village are diametrically opposed in the poem; they are geographically separated, but they also represent different things. While the speaker can waste their time watching the woods 'fill up with snow' (4), they have responsibilities and 'promises to keep' (12) in the village. They are tempted by the woods, but are indecisive and do not venture into them, choosing instead 'to watch' (4) and 'To stop' (6).

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<sup>2</sup> The *espace strié* is the opposite of the *espace lisse*; it is symbolic of the predictable, measurable and organised. It may be represented by something as abstract as time, or as concrete as a city (a notable example being New York city, with its grid-like layout).

The woods represent sweet, eternal rest, as implied by the adjectives in the final stanza and the mention of 'sleep' (13, 14) as an allegory for death. However, the speaker resists the charm of the woods, choosing to continue their journey past them. The last line is repeated twice, and the monosyllabic words give it a chant-like quality, overall strengthening the resolve of the speaker. However, there is a decisiveness to the 'before I sleep' (13, 14) which implies that while he chooses to go on for now, he will ultimately return to the woods.

Though Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' appears to describe the journey of one being, the fact that any reader can take on the role of the I-speaker implies that its message is applicable to all, thus revealing an alarming truth about human nature. Through the image of woods which are dark and threatening, yet paradoxically comforting and attractive, Frost epitomises the idea of the *espace lisse*. He presents it as something fatal but which we happily embrace in favour of the known. We may decide to resist its pull, but this is only temporary as we all succumb eventually.