

The Neglected Equine Agency in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

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Abstract

This article explores Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” from the posthumanist perspective of equine agency and argues that the narrator’s actions represent man’s belief in anthropocentric superiority. The horse, through his exquisite kinetic senses, perceives the impending danger that awaits in the freezing woods and advises the narrator to reverse course. The narrator, however, obtusely misinterprets the message, believing the horse to be incapable of comprehending aesthetics and promises, reaffirming human superiority over the equine species. Under closer scrutiny, however, this anthropocentric vanity crumbles. First, human beings, while privileged to observe the world through a keen sense of vision, are led astray in their professed ability to recognize beauty. For example, the narrator remarks on the beauty of the “dark, deep” woods, but in doing so his visual penetration is blocked and confined within a superficial level. Then the speaker’s lofty promises to travel miles before stopping to rest acquire an ironic touch. Instead of exploring an uncharted territory, the speaker embarks upon the same trips within a familiar region. Given his frequent travels on well-traveled paths, if the narrator still has a long way to go after evening, he has poorly planned his trip. Rather than acknowledging his blunder, however, the narrator boastfully promises, “And miles to go before I sleep,” and the repetition of the last line reveals his underlying anthropocentric vanity.

Keywords: Robert Frost, the Horse, Anthropocentric Superiority, Aesthetics, Promises

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

By Robert Frost

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.

1. Introduction

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” the

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most memorable poem of Robert Frost, has a never-waning appeal. Even “my little horse” has received extensive scholarship, albeit overlapping in nature. The horse shakes its harness bells of social “obligations” to keep the dreamy poet awake (Henry, 1978, p.38). Similarly, the equine embodies “social condemnation” for the guilty poet who takes a break in a workaholic society (Frank, 192, p. 44). Richard Moore, in comparison between Frost’s horse and Swift’s Houyhnhnms, maintains that the animal is “rational, predictable, mechanical” (Moore, 2000, p. 96). Few critics have paid attention to the horse as a horse per se. How does the horse perceive the woods? From their different understandings, what relationship between animals and human beings is revealed? This article explores the poem from the perspective of posthumanism. Posthuman theory, according to Rosi Braidotti, mainly consists of “becoming-animal, becoming-earth and becoming-machine.” These branches have different accentuations but they all share the same view, that is, to contest against “arrogance of anthropocentrism and the ‘exceptionalism’ of the Human as a transcendental category” (Braidotti, 2013, p.66). As far as animals are concerned, Cary Wolfe proposes an enlightening approach to gain apprehension of nonhuman species. “To ‘understand’ the animal,” Wolfe writes, we have to “stand ‘under,’ not above her—by surrendering the dream of mastery troped as vision” (Wolfe, 2003, p.5). Stepping back from an anthropocentric view enables men to have a more accurate understanding of human positioning in the world and a better opportunity to learn about agency of nonhuman species. This leads to a paradox: acknowledging nonhuman agency broadens human knowledge but it simultaneously challenges human vanity and desire for superiority. “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” reveals the narrator’s unconscious process of struggling to resolve this tension. According to this essay, the poem demonstrates the speaker’s frustrated efforts to establish anthropocentric superiority over the horse through aesthetic appreciation and social promises.

2. The Neglected Horse in the Poem

The little horse plays an essential role in the poem

but it is often neglected by readers. If we examine the world from the equine perspective, we will be enlightened by the poem’s nuances. “My little horse” has a distinctive perception of the scene from the speaker “I.” The structure of “Stopping by Woods” is crafted to present the first and last stanzas from human perspective, but to narrate the second and third quatrains from animal viewpoint, beginning with “My little horse must think it queer” (Frost, 1995, p.207). Horses are known for their exquisite kinesthetic sensitivity. “Every muscle twitch of the rider will be like a loud symphony to the horse” (Hearne, 1987, p.108). The horse’s extremely fine sense of touch finds its full expression in the poem. “Feathery flake,” the usual English expression, accentuates the size of snow, while “downy flake” emphasizes the tactile quality of softness of snow. Flake, a piece of something especially “that has broken off from something larger” (Wehmeier, 1997, p. 768), suggests that a single flake of snow is connected with a mass of snows.

Likewise, “easy wind,” the reference to gentle breeze, not only underscores the tactual feeling of balmy air but also conveys an equine evaluation, but what is easy? The combination of “easy wind and downy flake” is “the sweep,” which according to *Oxford Dictionary*, means “move quickly with force” (Wehmeier, 1997, p. 2041). “[T]he sweep of easy wind and downy flake,” neither quick nor forceful, is contradictory to human logic, but not to the horse’s delicate sense of touching. The imperceptible accumulation of falling snow under continual wind during a long period is likely to result in potential danger of massive snowballs. The word “up” in “his woods fill up with snow” has already indicated an enormous amount of snows that has almost filled up the woods. The horse intuitively senses the hidden peril and becomes aware of human negligence: it is “easy” for men to relax their caution under the impression of “easy wind and downy flakes.” Therefore “He gives his harness bells a shake” to remind the master of the hazard. Before that, the horse had already given a caveat to the narrator. Resonating with the aggrandizement of fragmentary flakes, the “frozen lake” has unified water into a smoothing wholeness. “Frozen” also indicates the rapid decrease of temperature after winter evening

and the subsequent freezing coldness. Thus the horse expresses its disapproval of the speaker's "queer" activity. The message is taken up, but not taken in, because the poet misinterprets its motivation: "My little horse must think it queer / to stop without a farmhouse near." In the mind of the speaker, animals could not raise themselves above basic life necessities: a farmhouse to access food and shelter. Therefore the complicated speculations of the animal are monotonously reduced to the "lower, practical, instrumental reason" of simple utilitarian needs (Coetzee, 1999, p. 29).

3. The Speaker's Vanity of Establishing Anthropocentric Superiority

Furthermore, the narrator endeavors to establish human superiority through aesthetic appreciation. The purpose of devaluing animals is to establish anthropic superiority by aesthetics. "He will not see me stopping here / To watch his woods fill up with snow" (Frost, 1995, p.207). Artistic admiration, a utility-transcending activity, is regarded as a privilege of human mind. The ascendancy of visual stimuli from olfactory stimuli, a line of demarcation to distinguish human beings from animals, leads to "the threshold of human culture" (Freud, 1961, pp. 51-2). Man, in his "upright gait," begins to be distinguished by aesthetic sensitivity and distant contemplation. Likewise, Una Chaudhuri also holds a similar idea. One prominent feature of Human beings is "the privileging of sight in the human evolution from quadruped to biped," which is reinforced by "the derogation of the 'lower senses' (touch and smell)" (Chaudhuri, 2007, p.11). The importance of human sight, highlighted by such verbs as "see" "watch," culminates in visual pleasure: "the woods are lovely." However, the woods are also "dark and deep." "Dark" suggests the impenetrability of vision, and "deep" allows a superficial sight but blocks further insight. The conjunction of "dark and deep" rouses the feeling of uneasiness, even anxiety, canceling the momentary aesthetic pleasure. Therefore, human superiority is traumatically thwarted.

To reestablish human superiority, the narrator has ushered a new vantage: promises. "But I have promises to keep." Promises are a unique and

exclusive human phenomenon because a man's honor depends on his word which in turn defines his responsibility. Promises include personal ones and "those that my ancestors made for me, known as the social contract" (Frost, 1995, p. 823). The one in the poem is "And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep" (Frost, 1995, p.207). The literary repetition of poetic "miles to go" produces an impression of a far-away odyssey while the placement of "miles to go" in the context of metaphorical "before I sleep" suggests an exploration of risky and unknown territories. Richard Gray also holds that the poet feels compulsive to "take risks and explore the truth" in his "spiritual quest" (Gray, 2012, p.352).

However, under scrutiny this lofty mission crumbles. First, the poet does not explore a foreign land, and he just makes usual trips in a familiar region. He knows "whose woods these are" and is even acquainted with the owner whose "house is in the village" (Frost, 1995, p.207). Given his frequent travels in familiar surroundings, if he still has a long way to go after evening, he has ill-planned his trip; he is too unrealistic to fulfill his pompous promise. If it is not so long, the repetition of "miles to go" is his bombast of trivial walks back and forth between the village and market; he is prone to exaggerations of petty swears. Either way, his promise or responsibility, is severely undermined. In contrast, the equine, as "my little horse," demonstrates its due responsibility towards the master. Intuitively convinced of the potential hazard, the horse cautions a "queer" expression to the poet who does not understand it. Then the animal hardens its attitude to show that "there is some mistake." Moreover, the horse adjusts its way of communication with human beings and skillfully employs a man-made instrument to convey its message: "He gives his harness bells a shake." The sound reminds the poet of his "promises" and drives him to continue the journey. Twice embarrassed by the intelligent horse, the poet hastes to mechanically repeat a forced closure to stabilize his human identity: "And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep."

In short, this article explores the kinetic world from the perspective of the horse and challenges the assumed superiority of the human narrator in

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” The decentering of the anthropocentric gaze, along with due attention to nonhuman agency, initializes an indispensable step to appreciate the full complexity of the natural world that frequently foregrounds Frost’s poetry.

discourse of species, and posthumanist theory.
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