

This famous poem has been the subject of a great deal of critical analysis. Why? On a quick reading, the poem seems to be a simple, straightforward account of a man who stops briefly to watch snow falling in the woods at night. But there is much more to this poem than meets the eye. If we read it only on a literal level, we will miss its deeper, symbolic meanings.

When we read something on the literal level,

we absorb the actual, the observable, the matter-of-fact. When we go deeper and read something on the symbolic level, we deal with those unseen or unspoken connections that only the imagination can make. On the literal level, this is a simple poem about a simple event. Read the poem twice. Monitor your reading the second time around by writing down your reactions to any deeper meanings or connections you sense in the text.

## Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

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.

- 5 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.

10 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.

- 15 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.

## Responding to the Poem

### Analyzing the Poem

#### Identifying Details

1. On the literal level, why does the speaker decide to move on just as he's enjoying the beauty of the woods?

#### Interpreting Meanings

2. To understand the poem on a **symbolic** level, we have to make those connections that will convince us that the poem is about much more than our simple literal reading indicates. What might the harness bells remind the speaker of? (What other bells summon us to do things in life?)
3. In contrast to the bells, what do you think the wind "says" to the speaker? Why is it significant that the speaker hears only those two sounds? What **conflict** do they establish?
4. "The woods are lovely, dark, and deep," says the speaker, and follows this statement with "But"—as though scolding himself for being so enchanted with the beautiful scene. This indicates that he has come to his senses and realizes he has commitments—but to what, or to whom? What do you suppose his "promises" are?
5. Robert Frost was asked many times what the "miles to go" and the "sleep" in this poem symbolize, but he never answered the questions. When the speaker first says he has "miles to go" before he can "sleep," what is he probably thinking of? What **metaphorical** "sleep" do you think he might mean when he repeats the line?