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Robert Frost and The Concept of 'Escape'

As each person grows older, important questions about suffering and one's calling in life become more difficult to answer. Oftentimes, experience causes many to lose hope and become cynical. American poet Robert Frost, however, acknowledges this fact in order to critique the world's demands of him and to challenge his own sense of unfulfillment. In his poems "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Birches", Robert Frost employs vivid imagery and natural metaphors to describe his desire to escape his toilsome day-to-day life. Frost's poetry acts as a catalyst for a change in the world's expectations of the habits and lifestyle of the average American citizen.

Frost acknowledges that his urge to escape his everyday life is frowned upon by others around him. In his poem "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening", he describes his entrance into a forest that he finds attractive. He reminds himself that the owner of the woods lives in the village and that "he will not see [Frost] stopping here" ("Stopping" 3). Frost feels the need to be alone in the woods, because he worries about the village life judging him for his desire to be in the woods. Even his horse, which is an essential part of Frost's daily routine, will "find it queer/To stop without a farmhouse near" (5-6). When he is by himself, however, he can daydream all he wants. While Frost knows that he may be alone in his thinking that the forest is a good place to stay, he still feels a desire to break free of his counterparts who do not agree with him.

Frost still clings to his desire of escaping his ordinary life, despite the opposition. While he muses on his horse's distrust of his stopping in the woods, he is distracted by his other senses. He can only focus on the sound of "the sweep/Of easy wind and downy flake" (11-12). The snow is described as "flake" to be imagined as soft to the touch, and the wind is "easy" rather than harsh. Frost is tempted by the simplicity and peacefulness of the forest, as a sharp contrast to his normal life that is presumed to be full of hard work and pain. Frost writes that "the woods are lovely, dark, and deep" (13). Picking this line apart piece by piece reveals the true nature as to why Frost feels his desire towards the woods. The woods are "lovely" to him, denoting beauty and a belief that the woods are inherently good and will not lead him to evil. The forest is also "dark" and "deep" to Frost, creating a sense of mystery that he seeks to discover. The forest is the perfect place for him to escape into, without any other obligations following him on his journey. These obligations do catch up to Frost, however.

The last three lines of Frost's poem marks his realization that he cannot have the life that he dreams of. He cannot enter the forest because he "ha[s] promises to keep" (14); he has established so much of his life within the social circumstances he has been given and he must commit to them. Perhaps he has a family that he is responsible for taking care of, or an occupation that he depends on for a steady income. His responsibilities weigh too much on his shoulders to be abandoned, and Frost feels that he has "miles to go before [he] sleep[s]" (15). This phrase is repeated twice at the end of the poems, emphasizing Frost's exhaustion and disappointment of having to return to his normal life. If he cannot have his dream, he would at least like to feel more content, but he has "miles" of work to do before he can get to this point. Frost is left to accept his responsibilities in the real world, and he realizes that he does not have

the time to explore his desires or to feel content with himself. This desire still remains, however, and Frost reflects on it again in his other poems.

In his poem “Birches”, Frost describes his dissatisfaction with his older, enlightened age and his wish to have a more innocent view of the world around him. This desire is illustrated in the poem through Frost’s attempt to explain why he has stumbled upon a group of bent birch trees. Frost’s maturity and sense of realism stops himself from imagining different scenarios about the birches. After Frost states a very unrealistic reasoning for the birches, that he “like[s] to think some boy’s been swinging them” (“Birches” 3), he quickly interrupts himself with the true answer about the trees, which is that they became bent from ice storms. Rather than having a more positive, childlike explanation for the trees, the reality is that nature is responsible for the harm caused to the trees. In coming to terms with the fact that the trees are harmed into bending, Frost has also come to terms with the fact that pain and suffering will naturally happen as well, despite his efforts to stay oblivious to these facts.

Frost’s description of the ice storm that bends the birches actually serves as a metaphor for his worldly experience tarnishing his sense of innocence. Suffering causes the same effect on humans as ice does on the bark of a tree, “as the stir cracks and crazes their enamel”(9). These tragic experiences are hurting Frost and, like the cracking of a tree’s bark, he finds his hope or faith in the world cracking as well. His faith is not completely broken, just like the trees “seem not to break; though once they are bowed/So low for long, they never right themselves”(15-16). In the same way that the trees are bent and cannot bend back into place, Frost has been hurt in an unhealable way by his experiences, and he will never be able to right himself and become innocent again. Frost also adds that his loss of innocence may have led him to a loss in his faith

in God, as he writes that “such heaps of broken glass to sweep away/You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen” (13). As if heaven has fallen, this suffering makes Frost feel hopeless. Hoping to recompense this fact, however, Frost tries to change his manner of thinking and use a more innocent sense of reasoning to answer his life questions.

Frost overcomes his sense of reason and returns to his childlike imagination. He claims that he “was going to say when Truth broke in/With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm” (21-22), that he likes to pretend that birch trees are bent by children playing on them. In this line reality is personified as a bossy, almost parental figure that is correcting each of his inaccuracies. This perceived annoyance with the character of Truth shows Frost’s exhaustion with the fact that he must be constantly reminded that he must adhere to the real world’s demands of him. He must have a real, dismal answer to every observation that he has of the world. He can no longer experience something, like a tree, for the first time due to the knowledge and experience he has accumulated throughout his life.

Frustrated with the pressure to have a mature, unimaginative attitude towards the world, Frost explains his anger about the issue as he approaches the end of the poem. He says that he dreams of going back to being a child that swings on birches, especially at times when

“Life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig's having lashed across it open.” (44-47)

Frost uses this imagery of a tree branch scraping his face as a simile for his life causing him pain as he grows older and learns more. He says that his injuries, like a burning face or the scraping of an eye, are caused by these branches, of life and experience itself. Frost then states his wish to avoid pain, as he says that he would “like to get away from earth awhile/And then come back to

it and begin over.” (48-49) Similar to “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”, Frost voices his desire to escape from his habitual life and return to it with a more enlightened mind.

As the poem comes to an end, Frost leaves his readers, as well as himself, with a challenge to adjust their point of view. Frost argues that the world should not ridicule those who seek to use their imagination or act childlike. With all of the war and evils that are being committed in the world, “one can do worse than swing on birches” (59). Frost argues that seeking to be a more positive person and to appreciate the beauty of innocence is not inherently bad, and that there should be less ridicule for those who ‘swing on birches’ and more for the problems in the world that are actually evil and need solving. Society is better off focusing on more serious matters, instead of critiquing the trivial thoughts of others. In the same way that Frost wants to focus on escaping his suffering rather than wallowing in his sorrow, he asks the world to do so as well.

Through his poetry, Frost creates a narrative of his struggles in a manner that any human can relate to. Using nature as a means to portray his concepts of escape and exploration, Frost shares his deep urge to find a place outside of his responsibilities and obligations. By conveying a message of frustration and a desire to seek what lies beyond the everyday expectations of an American citizen, Frost taps into the universal struggle of finding out what else there is to life than simply suffering and everyday toil.

Works Cited

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