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Analysis of figurative language in Robert Frost's poem: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Lok Raj Sharma

Associate Professor of English, Makawanpur Multiple Campus, Hetauda, Nepal

* Corresponding Author: **Lok Raj Sharma**

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Abstract

Poets employ figurative language in composing their poems to create special meanings. Figurative language embraces figures of speech that are rhetorical devices exploited for the novelty and uniqueness of expressions and meanings. This article aims at making a brief analysis of figurative language existed in the famous poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert frost, who is well-known for the realistic description of rural life and nature. The article writer has pinpointed some lexes, phrases and verse lines that indicate the implication of figurative language, and analyzed them to decipher their suggested meanings in the poem.

Keywords: Figurative language, figures of speech, Robert Frost

1. Introduction

Robert Lee Frost, an eminent American poet, was born on 26 March 1874 in San Francisco, California and passed away on 29 January 1963 in Boston. His poems are noted for dealing with nature and beauties of nature. The settings of his poems that involve the rural surroundings are employed to perceive divergent philosophical and societal themes. The poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", published in 1923, is widely read and quoted poem in speech and writings. He has enriched the treasure of literature by adding his popular poems such as "The Pasture", "The Road Not Taken", "The Telephone", "A Time to Talk", "Nothing Gold Can Stay", "A Minor Bird", "Tree at my Window", "Acquainted with the Night", "Choose Something like a " and so on.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" can be considered as a poem dealing with the charismatic power of nature. It has been written from the perception of a grown-up man, who stops by the woods to relish the mesmerizing splendor of woods in the snowy evening. The speaker wonders to know who owns the forest through which he is crossing and is convinced that he knows the landowner. The owner's house is so far away from the woods; therefore it is not physically possible to see the speaker who observes the snow falling in the forest. He believes that it must be strange for his horse to stop far away from the village. In fact, the longest night of the year is only surrounded by forests and frozen lakes. The horse is waving a harness bell asking why the speaker accidentally has stopped there. The only other sounds besides the ringing of these bells are the sounds of wind and falling snowflakes, and he compares snowflakes with the feathers falling down gently and lightly. He finds the forest to be very attractive and he is utterly fascinated by its darkness, vastness and beauty. Though he desires to stay and repose in the lap of the woods, he realizes that he has to go miles before he sleeps. It suggests that he has to do lots of things before his death.

This poem retains some major themes like nature versus society, social obligations versus personal desires, hesitation versus freedom, and pleasure versus responsibility. Nature lightens our mind and widens our vision so that we are incited to enjoy the

beauty of vast nature, whereas society is limited and it does not allow us to look and see far and wide. Social obligations load more chores on us, and our mind becomes heavy, whereas personal desires are light and wanderings. Hesitation is a situation which puzzles us what to do or what not to do, a great dilemma. Freedom allows us to do what we prefer to. Pleasure suggests that we are born to please and to be pleased. Life is an existence full of responsibilities. Fulfilling responsibilities makes our lives eloquent and meaningful.

2. Review of Literature

Literature review incorporates the opinions of writers regarding this poem and the definitions of figurative language employed in this poem.

2.1 Review of the Poem

Some writers have exposed their views on this popular poem. This poem projects the meditative mood of the speaker and his mood reflects on life, death and nature. The visual image in this poem is created through the figurative language (Zahra, 2017). In this poem, the poet has portrayed the short life span of human to accomplish all these responsibilities, which eventually result in state of despair and fretfulness. The poet has employed many stylistic devices to give an additional meaning, idea, or feeling. It deals with a conflict between cravings and communal commitments. The idyllic lure of nature and its capability to divert from the everyday situation are strong themes of this poem (Spacey, 2021). The poem points out the attractive, charming, and exciting scene of nature and beauty. It suggests that we must maintain balance between the world of reality and imagination. Robert Frost reminds human beings of fulfilling the responsibilities in our lives (Jumino, 2019). The poem is not simply a portrayal of a natural scene but is about an individual experiencing the scene. The speaker in this poem is definitely tired and possibly stressed by the activities that he has been undertaking during the day (Richard, 2000). The speaker could have not met his or her daily goals through his job, and therefore, probably meditating about the day (Lisa, 2008). In a deeper level of understanding and reading, the underlying meaning of a struggle of man to the nature, its temptation, its beauties, its depth and darkness proves to be grand in this poem. This is a poem not about only nature and its beauty, but it is also about man's duty to accomplish.

2.2 Review of Figurative Language

The term "figurative" comes from the Old French word "figuratif" which means metaphorical. Very simply, the language which involves figures of speech is called the figurative language. Figures of speech are a form of speech craftily varied from an ordinary usage. Figure of speech is a departure from the conventional form of expression or the ordinary sequence of ideas in order to yield a greater effect (Wren & Martin, 1981).

Figurative language refers to the use of words, phrases or sentences in such a way that deviates the normal or conventional order and meaning to express specific and unique meanings, resulting in creating a particular effect on the readers. It involves implicit or explicit comparison between two entities. Metaphor, simile, symbol, personification, hyperbole, paradox, euphemism etc. function as the backbone of figurative language. Figurative language embraces the features which are semantically and grammatically marked. This poem includes the following

figures of speech to turn the literal language into the figurative one:

2.2.1 Alliteration

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds in the beginning of adjacent words. It is viewed as the recurrence of the initial consonant in two or more words (Wales, 2002). It is a sound device used in poetry.

2.2.2 Assonance

Assonance is a repetition of the vowel sounds in the same line. It is the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds – particularly in stressed syllable in a sequence of proximate words (Abrams, 1993). It deals with the duplication of vowel sounds in the words.

2.2.3 Consonance

Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds. It is the adjacent repetition of the identical consonant sounds before and after dissimilar vowel sounds. It is not as common as alliteration.

2.2.4 Hyperbole

Hyperbole is an exaggerated statement. It is a bold overstatement, or the extravagant exaggeration of fact or of possibility; it may be used either for serious or ironic or comic effect (Abrams, 1993). It is used to emphasize a point in an ironic or satirical way. It may also be used to admire or insult beyond the limit.

2.2.5 Imagery

Imagery is used to make readers feel things through their five senses. Imagery, images taken jointly, is used to connote as the objects and qualities of some insight referred to in a poem or other work of literature. An image may be visual, olfactory, tactile, auditory, gustatory, abstract and kinesthetic (Cuddon, 1999). Imagery is the delivery of sensory experience through language (Perrine, 1988). It is a literal and concrete sensory experience of an thing that is recognized by one or more of the senses. (Holman, 1985). It is an ingredient of all creative writing which involves the readers' senses (Brown & Olmsted, 1962). Imagery enlivens the setting and situation of the actions by stimulating sensuousness.

2. 2. 6 Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another. A comparison is usually implicit; whereas in simile it is explicit (Cuddon, 1999). It is widely used in literary writings to suggest something indirectly.

2.2.7 Personification

Personification is attribution of human characteristics to non-human objects. It is particularly associated with literary, especially poetic language (Wales, 2002). Giving human attributes to non-human beings intensifies the assertions.

2.2.8. Rhyme

Rhyme refers to the identity of terminal sound between accented syllables, usually subjugating corresponding positions in two or more lines of verse (Harmon, 2009). It involves the repetition of the vowel sounds followed by the same consonants in the words.

2.2.9 Symbolism

Symbolism refers to the use of symbols to signify ideas or qualities. Symbol is an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or 'stands for something else' (Cuddon, 1999). Symbols deepen the meaning of expressions.

3. Analyzing the Figurative Language in the Poem

The article writer extracts the following figures of speech functioning the figurative language from this poem, and analyzes them.

3.1 Alliteration

This poem employs ample use of alliteration, as observed in the following verse lines:

His house is in the village though (Line 2)
He will not **see** me **stopping here** (Line 3)
 To **watch** his **woods** fill up **with** snow. (Line 4)
He gives **his** harness bells a shake (Line 9)
 The only other **sound's** the **sweep** (Line 11)
 The woods are lovely, **dark** and **deep**, (Line 13)

Analysis

There is the repetition of the voiceless glottal fricative consonant sound / h / in the words "His" and "house" in the second line. It indicates the possession. The replication of the consonant / h / in the words "He" and "here", and the voiceless alveolar fricative / s / in the words "see" and "stopping" in the third line creates a sort of cohesion between the action and the locale. The fourth line retains the repetition of the voiced bilabial semi-vowel / w / in the words "watch", "woods" and "with". This recurrence deals with the condition of the woods and the purpose of the speaker's action. The repetition of / h / sound can be seen in the words "He", "his" and "harness" in the ninth line. This indicates the horse and his action. The consonant sound / s / is repeated in the words "sound" and "sweep" in the eleventh line that describes the gentle sound of the falling of the snow in the woods. The thirteenth line employs the reiteration of the voiced alveolar plosive / d / in the words "dark" and "deep" which attribute the woods.

3.2 Assonance

This poem sounds rich in the exploitation of assonance, especially in the repetition of a short vowel / i / if we equally value the major and minor words as in the following verse lines:

His house **is** in the **village** though; (Line 2)
He will not **see** me **stopping** here (Line 3)
 To watch **his** woods **fill** up **with** snow. (Line 4)
 My **little** horse must **think** it queer (Line 5)
 To stop **without** a **farmhouse** near (Line 6)
 The **darkest** **evening** of the year. (Line 8)
 He **gives** **his** harness bells a shake (line 9)
 To ask if there **is** some **mistake**. (Line 10)
 Of easy wind and **downy** flake. (Line 12)
 And **miles** to go before **I** sleep, (Line 15)
 And **miles** to go before **I** sleep. (Line 16)

Analysis

There is the reiteration of the short high front vowel / i / in the words "His", "is", "in" and "village" in the second line; in the words "will" and "stopping" in the third line; in the words "his", "fill" and "with" in the fourth line; in "little", "think" and "it" in the fifth line; in "darkest" and "evening" in the

eighth line; in "gives" and "his" in the ninth line; in "is" and "mistake" in the tenth line; and in "easy" and "downy" in the twelfth line. This makes the structure of the poem really cohesive. The repetition of the long high front vowel / i: / can be observed in the words "He", "see" and "me" in the third line. The falling diphthong / au / is repeated in the words "without" and "farmhouse" in the sixth line. Similarly, another falling diphthong / ai / gets repeated in the words "miles" and "I" in the fifteenth and sixteenth lines.

3.3 Consonance

Whose woods these are I think I know. (Line 1)
 My little horse **must** think it queer (Line 5)
Between the woods and **frozen** lake (Line 7)
 He **gives** **his** harness **bells** a shake (Line 9)
 To **ask** if there is some **mistake**. (Line 10)

Analysis

We can perceive the repetition of the voiced alveolar fricative / z / in the final position of the words "whose", "woods" and "these" in the first line; the voiceless alveolar plosive / t / in the "must" and "it" in the fifth line, the voiced alveolar nasal / n / in the words "between" and "frozen" in the seventh line; and / z / in the words "gives", "his" and "bells" in the ninth line. Similarly, the voiceless alveolar fricative / s / gets repeated in the words "ask" and "mistake". Such a repetition makes the poem musical and coherent.

3.4 Hyperbole

To watch his woods fill up with snow. (Line 4)
 And miles to go before I sleep, (Line 15)
 And miles to go before I sleep. (Line 16)

Analysis

The fourth line is an exaggerated description of the woods. It would be an exaggeration to say that the entire woods got covered with snow. If the speaker was in the woods, he might also be filled with snow. How could he watch the gorgeousness of the woods?

The verse lines fifteenth and sixteenth retain the same expression. The expression becomes a hyperbolic assertion with the word "miles". Here the term "miles" is not described with a number. Lack of any numerical value before miles is the indication of very long distance or very far. There is not any certitude of the distance.

3.5 Imagery

Whose woods these are I think I know. (Line 1)
 His house is in the village though; (Line 2)
 To watch his woods fill up with snow. (Line 4)
 Between the woods and frozen lake (Line 7)
 He gives his harness bells a shake (Line 9)
 Of easy wind and downy flake. (Line 12)
 The woods are lovely, dark and deep, (Line 13)

Analysis

The poet has employed the images for the sense of sights such as woods (lines 1, 13), house (line 2), snow (line 4), frozen lake (line 7), downy flake (line 12), and lovely, dark and deep (line 13). The expression "bells a shake" (line 9) involves both visual and auditory images. Sound's sweep shows auditory imagery. Similarly, the phrase "easy wind" (line 12) indicates the tactile image, that is the feeling of coldness. These images help readers appreciate the woods a source of

consolation, enchantment and comfort to a lonely traveller.

3.6 Metaphor

The only other sound's the sweep (Line 11)
Of easy wind and downy flake. (Line 12)
And miles to go before I sleep, (Line 15)
And miles to go before I sleep. (Line 16)

Analysis

The lines 11-12 of the third stanza are metaphorical expressions. It suggests the gentle, swift and alluring falling of snow in the breeze too much pleasing. The second metaphor is used in the last two lines with repetition, "And miles to go before I sleep." Here, "miles" imply life's long journey of accomplishing promises and responsibilities, and "sleep" suggests death that is inevitable.

3.7 Personification

He gives his harness bells a shake (Line 9)
To ask if there is some mistake. (Line 10)

Analysis

The poet has personified the horse and treated him as if he retains human characteristics such as curiosity, feelings, desires, and the tendency of asking questions and so on. He shakes his harness bells to ask the speaker if there is some mistake at the moment or inquires if they have to stop.

3.8 Rhyme

Rhyme is one of the most frequently observed sound devices in poetry. This is a complete text of the poem.

Whose woods these are I think I know. (Line 1)
His house is in the village though; (Line 2)
He will not see me stopping here (Line 3)
To watch his woods fill up with snow. (Line 4)

My little horse must think it queer (Line 5)
To stop without a farmhouse near (Line 6)
Between the woods and frozen lake (Line 7)
The darkest evening of the year. (Line 8)

He gives his harness bells a shake (Line 9)
To ask if there is some mistake. (Line 10)
The only other sound's the sweep (Line 11)
Of easy wind and downy flake. (Line 12)
The woods are lovely, dark and deep, (Line 13)
But I have promises to keep, (Line 14)
And miles to go before I sleep, (Line 15)
And miles to go before I sleep. (Line 16)

Analysis

This is a lyrical poem with its mellifluous musical quality. Its musical quality can be realized through its rhyme scheme. The rhyme scheme of the entire poem is aaba, bbcb, ccdd, dddd. The rhyming words are know / though/ snow, here / queer/ near, lake/ shake/ mistake and sweep / deep/ keep / sleep. Very simply, the first, second and fourth lines are rhymed in the first three stanzas, whereas all the lines are rhymed in the fourth stanzas. The rhyme takes place at the end of the verse lines; therefore it is called to have the end rhyme. Rhyming takes place within a single syllable of the rhyming words. It is called to have the masculine rhyme.

3.9 Analysis of Symbolism

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a symbolic poem. It is rich in symbols. In the poem, the poet and his horse wend across snowy woods. "The poet / speaker" symbolizes a traveller. The 'horse' symbolizes companionship and responsibilities towards his family. The "village" and the "farmhouse" are symbols of society and civilization. He must reach home before his death. The "frozen lake" and "the darkest evening" are symbols of difficulties and hurdles on the way to his destination. It also symbolizes the time of disparity and hopelessness in life. The friendless journey of the poet might specify the journey of an individual through life. The "woods" symbolizes a source of enchantment that stops the traveller for a moment. It works as an enchantress in the life of male beings.

4. Conclusion

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a momentous symbolic poem. Figurative language, which includes alliteration, assonance, consonance, hyperbole, imagery, personification, rhyme and symbolism in this poem, makes this poem profound, unique, eloquent and meaningful. These figures of speech heighten the imaginative faculty, sharpen the sensibility and deepen the positive feelings in the readers. These figures of speech are so aptly employed in the poem that they strengthen the themes of responsibility versus pleasure. Though this poem describes a cold but pleasant snowy evening in the woods and its enchantment on the poet, it equally reminds us of our responsibilities in our lives. It is suggested in the last two lines of the poem. It is an open-ended poem that can be interpreted and thematized in multifarious ways. Analyzing it by focusing on its figurative language is one of the ways to approach its thematic aspect.

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