



The Psychological Journey of “I” in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

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Abstract

Robert Frost's poems are full of psychological ideas, which serve as a kind of perfection against losing oneself for the chaotic modern man. Freudian theory of the id, the ego and the superego is employed to analyze the psychological journey of “I” in his “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, which helps to understand its themes and Frost's composing purposes.

Keywords: Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening, Freudian theory, I, Psychological journey

1. Introduction

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was one of the most famous American poets in the 20th century. He won the Pulitzer Prize four times and received honors from forty-four institutions, and became the nation's unofficial Poet Laureate when invited to read his poem at President Kennedy's inauguration in 1961.^{2P267}

For Frost, “nature appears as an explicator and a mediator for man and serves as the center of the reference of his behavior and it stands as a kind of perfection against confusion”^{2P268}. “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” was written in 1923 by Robert Frost with simple but beautiful poetic lines. The air of this poem is attractive, peaceful and harmonious. The natural beauty described in this poem is charming, and yet, by appreciating the natural beauty, readers can taste the arts of this poem and get its philosophic idea to help them in their life journey. Scholars inside and outside of our country have explained this poem mostly from the angles of stylistics and linguistics. This paper will employ Freudian theory of the id, the ego and the superego to analyze the psychological journey of “I” in this poem, which helps to understand its themes and Frost's composing purposes.

The following goes this poem:

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. (Dong, P51)

2. Freudian Theory of the Id, the Ego and the Superego

Freud assigns the mental processes to three psychic zones: the id, the ego, and the superego. The id is irrational, the source of all aggressions and desires. It has dangerous potentialities. So it is necessary that other psychic agencies protect the individual and society. The first of these regulating agencies, that which protects the individual, is the ego. This is the rational governing agent of the psyche. As Freud points out, "In popular language, we may say that the ego stands for reason and circumspection, while the id stands for the untamed passions." Whereas the id is governed solely by the pleasure principle, the ego is governed by the reality principle. Consequently, the ego serves as intermediary between the world within and the world without. The superego is the moral censoring agency, the repository of conscience and pride. It is the anatomy of the mental personality, the representative of all moral restrictions, the advocate of the impulse toward perfection, in short it is as much as we have been able to apprehend psychologically of what people call the "higher" things in human life. It is dominated by the morality principle. We might say that the id would make us devils, that the superego would have us behave as angels, and that it remains for the ego to keep us healthy human beings by maintaining a balance between these two opposing forces.^{3P130-131} In the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost, there is a character "I", whose psychological journey just reflects Freud's theory of the id, the ego and the superego.

3. The Character "I"

In this poem, the character "I" alone passes the woods on a snowy evening and stops to enjoy the beautiful and peaceful snowy scene but after a short-time relaxation in the snow, he has to hurry on with his journey to keep his promises and fulfill his tasks. "I" imposes his ideas on his horse but his horse could not understand why he stops in "the darkest evening of the year" and "between the woods and frozen lake" by hiring its harness bells a shake. At that moment, the character "I" is entangled in two ideas: one is that he likes the natural beauty and desires to enjoy it; the other is that he clearly remembers his responsibilities on his shoulders and his promises to keep.

This small contradictory actually stands for a bigger one of human's life. On one hand, the character "I", impressive and sagacious, hopes to be drunk with the natural beauty. On the other hand, "I", with a sense of responsibility, knows that he has many heavier tasks and responsibilities to shoulder and he must keep his promises. In our life, it is common for us to make choices, and yet, usually, we can only choose one of them in the end, although in the process of making decisions, we may hesitate and reconsider them many times. However, when we take a back look, we may regret not to choose others and guess what will happen if we take another one. Everybody hopes the past time can return and everything can happen again, which is complicated but common experience and just caught by Robert Frost. This may be one of the most important reasons for his composing this famous poem, which offers us not only a charming world but also a way against losing ourselves in facing allure in the modern world.

4. The Psychological Journey of "I"

In the first line of this poem, there is an image "woods", which usually stand for desolation, wildness, darkness, irrationality or dimness. However, the "woods" in this poem are not desolate but belong to somebody--- "his house is in the village". In "the darkest evening of the year", the owner of the woods stays in the village as all other wise people often do. Here, "the village", which can stand for civilization, light, rationality, responsibility, or our society, and the "woods", which mean wildness, darkness, irrationality, or the outside world of our society, form two different worlds. The "woods" are close to "the village", our civilized society, and they are so attractive that "I" couldn't help stopping to enjoy them. The "woods" are not only attractive but also peaceful and quiet, because in addition to his horse's harness bells, "the only other sound's the sweep of easy wind and downy flake". In the second and the third stanzas, "the woods", "easy wind", and "downy flake" (snow), not only represent the freedom of nature but also symbolize a world without control and forbiddance, in which human is as free and leisure as the easy wind. Therefore, in such a world, "the woods" must be "lovely, dark and deep" for the lonely character "I" instead of being desolate, wild, and terrible, although in "the darkest evening of the year" and near a "frozen lake".

Undoubtedly, the woods are a kind of seduction for the character "I". They might be dangerous and stand for all kinds of allure in the world. Facing them, any individual's mind might be disturbed temporarily. Therefore, facing the attractive and peaceful scene, the lonely id of "I" is lured by the air of harmony and peacefulness. He really desires to stop and enjoy it. However, in the last stanza, "I" realizes that "I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep,

and miles to go before I sleep". Here, the last "sleep" is a metaphor, which can symbolize the death and suggest that "I" still has many tasks or responsibilities to shoulder before the end of his life. The last two repeated lines lead this poem to its climax. The social morality principle requires him to keep his promises and being a person with a sense of responsibility. The superego of "I" asks him to stop enjoying the woods and go on keeping promises and fulfilling his tasks on his shoulders. At this time, the superego and the id of the character "I" are opposite. The character "I" has to make his final decision. From the poem, we can clearly see his psychological conflict through his horse. His horse is "queer" when he stops "without a farmhouse near" but "between the woods and frozen lake" in "the darkest evening of the year". The horse questions why he does not hurry on with his life journey but stop by woods on this snowy evening as most human beings do. Accordingly, it stands for the civilized society because the horse is domesticated by human civilization. The horse's blaming stands for the blaming given by the civilized society, though it is only the imagination of the character "I". The imagination of "I" just reflects his psychological conflict and he must quickly make his decision to end this conflict. Only in this way can he balance his inner world.

The ego keeps us healthy human beings by maintaining a balance between the two opposing forces: the id and the superego, and it is governed by the reality principle. The reality allows the character "I" to have a short-time rest and so he stops by the woods for a while on the snowy evening and then continues his life journey. The reality will not permit him to spend all his time in longing for the natural beauty at all costs, because if he throws away his sense of responsibility, to some extent, he may be dead, since realizing value is the most important thing in the whole life. The reality asks that he must hurry on with his life journey to shoulder all his responsibilities, fulfill all his tasks and keep all his promises. Therefore, the last line "And miles to go before I sleep" suggests that he stops by woods only a short time and then hurry on with his life journey. That is to say, finally, the ego of "I" balances both the id and the superego. The id, the ego and the superego of "I" work harmoniously together.

5. Conclusion

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a poem full of the air of harmony and beauty. No wonder, there is a literal interpretation about it, which can be that "it represents a moment of relaxation from the onerous journey of life, an almost aesthetic enjoyment and appreciation of natural beauty which is wholesome and restorative against the chaotic existence of modern man"^{2P268}. The poetic imaginary is really beautiful. However, the poem has not only the beautiful artistic conception but also deep and helpful philosophical ideas or the themes, that is, the realization of value is the most important thing in our life and everybody should shoulder his responsibilities and hurry on with his life journey instead of only enjoying the life at all costs. The psychological journey of "I" in this poem just reflects the psychological conflict of modern people between shouldering their responsibilities and enjoying the natural beauty and helps them against losing themselves in facing kinds of allure. This is just one of Robert Frost's intentions of composing this poem.

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