Painting with Words: Imagery in Selected Poems by Robert Frost

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on the types of imagery Robert Frost uses in his poetry with particular reference to “After Apple Picking” “Out, Out_”, “The Road Not Taken”, and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. The paper is an in-depth analysis of the poet’s artistic ability to paint with words utilizing all types of sensory imagery namely visual imagery, auditory imagery, olfactory imagery, gustatory imagery, tactile imagery, organic imagery and kinesthetic imagery. The poet’s artistic creativity is extraordinarily grand and the verbal colors he uses in his poems are versatile. Although the paper is primarily concerned with discussing the poet’s use of the major types of imagery mentioned above, other specific types of imagery will also be discussed.

Keywords: Robert Frost, Imagery, Visual, Auditory, Olfactory, Gustatory, Tactile, Organic, Kinesthetic.

INTRODUCTION

Imagery is one of the most important elements of poetry that poets use to evoke vivid experience in their readers. Through imagery poets not only convey emotions, desires, wishes, and thoughts, but also create mental reproduction of sense impressions in their readers’ minds. Perrine (1984) defines imagery as “the representation of some experience through language” (552). Daniel (1973) defines imagery as “the complex of words and phrases designed to produce in the mind of the reader a sense impression similar to that in the mind of the poet” (3). The language of poetry is highly figurative and is fraught with images of all kinds. Unlike ordinary language, poetic language is sensuous, metaphorical and figurative. It is a language fraught with figures of speech and sense impressions. What distinguishes ordinary language from poetic language is that while the former is straightforward and denotative, the latter is metaphorical, connotative and is full of imagery of all types. This poetic language indirectly appeals to the readers’ senses and arouses in them sensational experiences that transform the words of the poem into a colorful painting and a piece of music reflecting a variety of melodies and sounds. A poetic image might appeal to one of the five senses though it might appeal to a composite of senses. An image constitutes both the mental picture engraved in the reader’s mind and the poetic words used to produce that image. The two are inseparable and are understood in relation to one another. The mental image is that produced by the poetic words and phrases, whereas, the verbal image consists of the words that produce the image in the mind of the reader.

Poetic mental pictures created in the reader’s mind appeal to one or more of the physical senses: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and kinesthetic. Although these are the basic major images that pervade English poetry, poets generally use other types of imagery that are restricted to certain themes. In fact, any theme in poetry can be associated with certain imagery. Therefore, nature, time, aging, death, and many others constitute an unlimited open set of images that enrich the content of a poem.

Although the aesthetics of Frost’s poetry is apparent in all aspects of his poetic craftsmanship, it is his artistry in the use of imagery that has distinguished him from his contemporary poets. Frost himself is a keen observer of nature whose senses, as Reginald Cook notes, “directly relay the nerve-tip experience of the natural world” (16). In fact, what makes Frost’s realistic imagery fascinating is the way he skillfully weaves the images into the fabric of his poetry rather than just jotting down the images for their own sake. Images in a poem should be integrated into the structure of the poem for the purpose of expressing an idea or communicating a human experience. In their book Poetry: From Statement to

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Visual imagery is that kind of mental picture the poet creates in the reader’s mind by appealing to his sense of seeing. The reader of poetry can discern such visual images through seeing or forming an imaginary picture of the poet’s experience in his mind. Most images in poetry belong to this kind of imagery for it occurs most frequently in most poetry. Frost’s “After Apple Picking” is replete with visual images. The poem starts with depicting a rural landscape in which we see an apple tree and a ladder sticking through it with nobody standing on the ladder. Beside the apple tree and the ladder we see a barrel half-filled with apples. Close to this scene we see a motionless old farmer crouching on the grass and looking upward towards the apple tree. Then the poet takes us directly from this rural landscape into the mind of the old farmer to trace his stream of consciousness and the way he feels towards life and death. The poet paints a picture saying, “My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree toward heaven still /And there's a barrel that I didn't fill” (qtd. in Perrine, 1984, p. 556 lines 1-3). Frost paints his pictorial landscape very precisely and even includes very minute details in the painting. There are still two or three apples on one branch in the tree that the old farmer could not reach. Therefore, he left them unpicked. The farmer says, “and there may be two or three/ Apples I didn’t pick upon some bough” (lines 5-6). Frost’s “After Apple Picking” tells the story of an old farmer who experiences a very strange feeling shortly before he dies. The aging man has been planting and picking apples in his orchard for so many years; maybe since he was a small kid. Today, like all the other days of his long life, he has been picking apples from the early morning till the evening. By the end of the day, the old man becomes completely exhausted and fed up with the routine work of apple picking. He sits down under an apple tree to have a short rest. During this short rest he feels drowsy and falls into a trance; a strange state between sleep and awakening. The old man is neither awake nor asleep. He is even not sure whether what he experiences is an ordinary human sleep for one night, winter hibernation like that of animals or even an everlasting sleep or death.

Frost’s imagery, in general, appeals to the reader’s five physical senses. Every image appeals to one of the five senses, though an image might appeal to more than one sense simultaneously. Frost, as Daniel notes, skillfully produces simultaneous images and it is sometimes difficult to address these images separately (195). Such simultaneous imagism creates in the reader more than one sense impression, and therefore require his or her response to a variety of sense impressions at the same time. For example, in his sleep-wake condition the old farmer in “After Apple Picking” smells the scent of apples and the cider or apple drink. The olfactory image “The scent of apples” which represents a smell that can be sniffed goes harmoniously hand in hand with the organic image “I am drowsing off” (line 8). Moreover, in the line that reads “Essence of winter sleep is on the night” (7) Frost combines the visual image of animals hibernating throughout winter with the olfactory image of the scent of winter sleep in which hibernating animals are smelt and seen in a torpid state.

Kinesthetic imagery is a sense impression that represents movement of people, animals and objects through poetic imagery. The old farmer picking the apples in the orchard and filling them in the barrel represents a kinesthetic image. In lines 9-11 the speaker’s words “I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight / I got from looking through a pane of glass/ I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough” represent a kinesthetic image. In which we create a mental picture of the old man bending over the drinking trough, skimming a sheet of ice and looking through it. The kinesthetic image is also mingled with a visual image in which we can create the sense impression of both movement and sight. The scenery is acted as if from behind soundproof glass in the form of pantomime. The sheet of ice melts through the old man’s fingers and he does not hesitate to “let it fall and break” (14). O’Connell (2006) argues that what sends the old farmer into his reverie is looking at his orchard through the pane of glass he skimmed early in the morning from the drinking trough (97). Nash notes that Frost uses the sheet of ice imagery to reveal that the time of year or season in the poem is late fall (61).

Organic imagery is a mental sensation that represents an internal organic feeling such as hunger, thirst, fatigue, or nausea. Having worked all the day picking the apples, the old farmer in “After Apple Picking” becomes
exhausted and fed up with apple picking. He says, “For I have had too much/ Of apple-picking; I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired” (lines 26-28). In line 8 the poet combines an olfactory image “The scent of apples” with an organic image “I am drowsing off”. Gustatory imagery represents a taste of something. Gustatory images can be found throughout “After Apple Picking”. For instance, the taste of apple and the taste of the cider or apple drink.

Tactile imagery is an image that represents touching such as hardness, softness, wetness, heat or cold. Tactile images are also plentiful in “After Apple Picking”. In his visionary dream, the old farmer sees thousands of apples and starts touching them to classify them into spiked or bruised apples. He says, “There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch/ cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall / for all / that struck the earth/ no matter if not bruised, or spiked with stubble / went surely to the cider-apple heap / As of no worth” (lines 30-36).

Imagery in Frost’s poetry is multilayered, sensory, rural, metaphorical and symbolic. Some Frostian images are so creative in the sense that they undertake symbolic meaning or meanings. Duvall argues that what makes Frost’s imagery so particular is its “extension into metaphors” (488). On more than one occasion Frost spoke of “double hints” or “first and second layers in poetry” (qtd. in Cook 119-120). For instance, in “After Apple Picking” Frost uses many symbols and clusters of nature images of all types to convey his message to his readers. The first two lines of the poem portray a ladder nestled in the apple tree and heading toward heaven. The apple tree is symbolical of the Garden of Eden and the ladder represents man’s life which the poet describes merely as a path to heaven and eternal life. The ladder sticking through the apple tree toward heaven represents the old man’s willingness to die and go to heaven. Having got tired of life and life’s troubles and cares, the old man expresses his desire to die and rest in peace. He says “But I am done with apple picking now” (line 6). Then he expresses his desire to sleep, but we are not sure whether he desires the normal human sleep or death. While the old man is reflecting back on his life, he smells the scent of apples and consequently becomes drowsy and falls in a slumber. At this moment of strangeness, he sways between sleep and awakening, between life and death.

Entrapped in a wake-sleep condition, the old man has a reverie. He tells us about his reverie using different types of imagery. Using visual imagery the poet-narrator creates a sense impression in the readers’ minds of many apples of enormous size rolling and rolling on the grass. During his daydream the old man sees “Magnified apples appear and disappear/ Stem end and blossom end” (lines 18-19). Some of those huge apples were ripe, while others were not. Then Frost incorporates religious imagery into the entire sensory image. The apple picker even knew what kind of dream he would have even before he fell in the trance for he says, “And I could tell / What form my dreaming was about to take” (lines 17-18). The religious image implied here means that the persona will see all his life’s work displayed before him in the afterlife or on the Day of Judgment. Then the persona mingles organic, visual, kinesthetic and auditory images together to make the reverie vivid and lifelike. While in the trance, the aging man sees the ladder sticking through the apple tree “sway and the boughs bend” (23). This kinesthetic image is mingled with another organic image when the old man says, “My instep arch not only keeps the ache” (21). The old man feels the pain in the arch of
his foot as he keeps climbing up and down the rungs of the ladder. To convey his trance experience so gaudily, the persona tarnishes the pictorial image with an auditory image. While in a trance, the old farmer not only hears, but keeps “hearing from the cellar bin”(24) the sound of loading and unloading of apple boxes. He exclaims, “The rumbling sound of load on load of apples coming in” (lines 25-26).

Using organic imagery the old man frequently and repetitively expresses his exhaustion in life and the tediousness of apple picking. In line 6 he says, “But I am done with apple picking now” and in lines 27 and 28 he says, “For I have had too much/ Of apple picking”, then in he elaborates “I am overtired” (line 28). He tells us that he is very tired of apple picking. Although the apple harvest was great and the quality of apples was excellent, he became very tired of picking the apples, loading them and unloading them in the cellar. The bricolage of the different types of images extends throughout the reverie. The visual image the old man describes here is so hyperbolic. In his daydream his exhausted mind conjures up the visual and tactile image of thousands of apples and starts touching them to classify them into spiked or bruised apples. He says, “There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch” (30). Then the visual image is mixed with a kinesthetic image when he describes how the apples that fell from the tree “struck the earth” (33). The tactile image depicted in the line that reads “Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall” (31) reveals how much the old farmer treasures his harvest of apples “No matter if not bruised, or spiked with stubble” (34). He cherished all apples regardless of their external shape and color because for him they were equally the same and all “went surely to the cider-apple heap / As of no worth” (lines 35-36) to be squeezed into apple juice.

Although the old man is entrapped in a wake- sleep condition, his senses are still quite vivid for he can see the apple tree and the ladder sticking through it; he can see the barrel that was half-filled with apples; he can smell the scent of apple and winter; and he can hear the sound of the loading and unloading of the apples in the cellar. He even touches some of the apples for he says “There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch/ Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall” (lines 30-31). He even could tell which apples were bruised or spiked and which were not. He tells us that all apples whether bruised, spiked or not were all gathered on a heap to be made into cider or apple drink in the cider mill. It is only through imagery that the poet communicates his persona’s senses to the readers.

The final lines of the poem stress the old man’s inability to distinguish between dream and reality; between sleep and awakening; and even between life and death. While in the trance, the old man does not know what kind of sleep he has fallen in. Was it a short normal human sleep or a long sleep similar to that of the woodchuck or marmot which hibernates during winter? Or was he breathing his last breath and will die shortly? Frost uses the woodchuck or the marmot as animal imagery. The woodchuck hibernates underground for a long period of time in winter. Its winter hibernation is sepulchral, long-lasting and underground, and is often used in poetry as a metaphor for death. Having reflected back on his past experiences, the speaker comes to realize how significant some of the experiences he had had and how trivial other experiences were. But at the time of living the experiences, he was ignorant of their significance. Having looked at his past experiences through the pane of glass to magnify them and reflect back on them, he sees through the mistakes he committed in his life and now regrets having made such mistakes. Thus, it is clear that the “russet” parts of the skin or the wrinkles or bruises on the apples” symbolize the man’s mistakes in life.

The speaker’s words “I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight/ I got from looking through a pane of glass / I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough / And held against the world of hoary grass” (lines 9-12) indicate the man’s dissatisfaction with old age. When he saw the reflection of his aging and wrinkled face in the drinking trough and realized how old he turned, he became perplexed. He saw that his face was wrinkled and his hair was hoary and grey. Taken literally the melting of the ice in the poem would mean nothing and would not be related to apple picking. But read figuratively, it would go smoothly into the fabric of the poem. The melting of the ice represents how experiences become comprehensible when looked at through the pane of glass or through contemplation and reflection. While people are living certain experiences, they might neither understand them nor realize their significance in their life, but when they reflect back on them, they become clearer and more understandable. Then, they can see what lies below the melting snow. The glasslike sheet of ice which the old man saw in the drinking trough early in the morning represents the transparent glass wall that
separates the dreamlike world and the real world. The glassy wall was shattered and the two worlds mingled thus allowing the drowsy old man to live in both. Thus, the melting of ice could also represent the breaking of the boundaries between the world of reality and the world of illusion. Having stepped out of the hallucinatory world of daydreaming, the old man becomes baffled, and could not tell whether his sleep was normal, hibernation or even encroaching death. The poem is replete with references to incomplete and unfinished projects “a barrel that I didn't fill”(line 3), ”and there may be two or three apples I didn't pick upon some bough” (lines 4-5). Although the speaker has done his utmost in picking the apples, he could not pick the apples that were out of his reach. This is indicative of humans’ incompleteness and the imperfection of their work no matter how hard they work. In “The Road Not Taken” Frost presents a visual image through painting an early morning pictorial landscape of a lonesome walker in the woods who reaches a crossroad where “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood” (Perrine, 584 line 1). The visual image Frost depicts here includes images of vegetation and blossoming floral life. The two roads are both grassy and look exactly the same. The walker contemplates the two roads one after the other before he finally makes the choice to travel through one of them. The persona says, “And be one traveler, long I stood” (3). For the walker the two roads in the woods were equally attractive and he wanted to travel through them both. Both roads were virgin and untrodden by any passers by. The poet narrator says, “And both that morning equally lay/ In leaves no step had trodden black” (lines 11-12). The persona prefers to travel through one road and convinces himself that he will come back to the fork of the two roads later and travel through the road not taken. He says, “I kept the first for another day” (13). The walker seems quite aware of the fact that having taken one road entailed that he would not be able to travel through the other. He remarks, “I doubted if I should ever come back” (15). He confesses that in the future he might regret not having taken the other road. Later in his life, when he has become an old man, he would regret not having taken the other road for he is still eager to know what he might have seen on the road not taken. The walker regretfully says, “And sorry I could not travel both” (2). The only other image Frost uses in the poem is the auditory image of the sigh the walker makes when he tells us that he regrets not having traveled through the road not taken. The walker regretfully remarks, “I shall be telling this with a sigh /Somewhere ages and ages hence” (lines 16-17). The visual image of sameness recurs throughout the poem. The persona, Bassett argues, frequently acknowledges that the two roads diverged in the yellow woods look exactly the same (42). For instance: he says, each road is “as just as fair” (6) as the other, regular passing “Had worn them really about the same”(10), “And both that morning equally lay in leaves” (11-12).

Image, metaphor and symbol, as Perrine states, “shade into each other” (585). He further elaborates that images do not cease to be images when they are integrated into metaphors or symbols (585). In “The Road Not Taken” images are indeed incorporated into symbols. Although the poem comprises only one visual image of a walker contemplating a crossroad where two leaf-strewed roads are diverged in the woods, the symbols in the poem act as extended images. It is apparent that the fork in the two roads is symbolical of man’s position between fate and free will. It also represents the decision everyone makes in times of crises and perplexing situations that require taking a decision and making a choice or preference. Identical forks, in particular, symbolize for us the nexus of free will and determinism. People have the free will to choose what to do, but they are never sure whether they have made the right choice or not. Years later, their choice might be evaluated and they will realize whether they have made the right or wrong decision. When people get old and look back at what they have done in their youth and manhood, they reflect on their experiences on life and contemplate the decisions they have made. They will come to realize that some of the decisions they have made were right, while others were wrong and have led to serious consequences. This kind of realization is ironical and in some cases pathetic. Regret and remorse seem to be the central theme of the poem. When old, people look back in anger at some of their past experiences and the mistakes they have committed in their youth and they even fail to find a justification why they have committed such serious mistakes and why they have made such wrong decisions.

Symbol is the most difficult figure of speech to understand and interpret because it might represent a variety of meanings. The two roads in Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” symbolize the choice between two alternatives that are equally attractive. It can stand for any choice in life; a choice of profession, a choice of residence, a choice of spouse or any kind of choice in life.
Frost wants to say that possibilities and choices in one’s life are many, but one can not experience them all due to the limitations of time and place. The speaker in the poem would have liked to explore both roads, but could explore only one, and thus leaves the other unexplored. Later in life, he regrets not having explored the other road which might have been better than the one he has taken. The poem highlights man’s position between free will and determinism.

The literal meaning in Robert Frost’s poem “the Road Not Taken” is that of a man walking in the woods and passes through a fork of two roads. The walker has to make a choice which road he must explore and he knows that if he explores one road, he will not be able to explore the other. Despite this fact, he convinces himself that he will explore the road not taken later in life. By the time we reach the last stanza, we realize that the poem is not only concerned with the choice between merely two roads in the wood, for such a choice is insignificant when taken literally. Figuratively, the two roads symbolize the choice between any two alternatives in life especially when the choice made makes a big difference later in life. The choice not taken will be remembered with a sigh, remorse and regret. Therefore, the fork of the two roads symbolize any choice in life between two alternatives which are equally attractive but will result through the years in a big difference in the experience one passes through. The persona in “The Road Not Taken”, as Winters argues, is like all Frostian personas “a loner, isolated, and a spiritual drifter” (201) filled with uncertainty and purposelessness and depressed by the melancholy that fills his soul as he faces the barren and terrifying truths of life (61-63).

In “Out, Out_” Frost recounts the shocking and violent death of a young boy while chopping wood on the family farm. While the boy is sawing the wood with an electric saw to make sticks of wood for the winter stove, he accidentally cuts his hand with the saw. The title of the poem is an allusion to a quotation from Shakespeare’s Macbeth; one of the most memorable quotations in English literature. Having been informed of his wife’s death, Macbeth says a very shattering and shocking soliloquy in which he mourns the premature death of his wife and spells out his perception of life and death.

Macbeth’s soliloquy reads:

*Out, out, brief candle!*
*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,*
*That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,*

Macbeth metaphorically compares life with a brief candle that gives light for a short period of time before the light finally vanishes and is snuffed out. Then, he metaphorically liken life to a walking shadow or something abstract rather than something concrete. He believes that man is merely a player or a performer in a theatre who plays his part on the stage for an hour, then he leaves the stage and then is heard no more. In his soliloquy Macbeth stresses the brevity of man’s life and its meaninglessness. For Macbeth life is cruel, uncertain, unpredictable, signifies nothing and it may be accidentally ended at any moment. The soliloquy also reveals man’s insignificance, littleness and nothingness in the huge universe. Frost uses allusion to reinforce the emotion in his poem and to help state its main theme. The title of Frost’s poem “Out, Out_” which is an allusion to Macbeth’s soliloquy stresses the shortness of the boy’s life. The boy’s life is untimely snatched away from him by an electric buzz saw. What makes the boy’s death sentimental is the fact that it is premature and untimely. However, the poem lacks any rational justification for the accident and the death of the boy.

“Out, Out_” reveals the harsh living conditions of American farmers in the early twentieth century. All family members including women and children worked hard on their farms to make enough money to cope financially. Certainly all the family members in the poem are hard at work and everyone is doing a certain farm task. The boy is in charge of chopping the wood sticks for the winter stove with an electric buzz saw which “snarled and rattled in the yard”(qtd. in Perrine, p. 624, line 1) in a menacing way. The scent of the chopped wood can be smelt from a distance, and the dust of the chopped wood covers the farmyard. The result of the laborious work of the boy who is “Doing a man's work, though a child at heart” (24) is five heaps of sticks of wood piled one after the other.

Although the farm, which is located in the beautiful countryside of Vermont, is a pretty one, the workers on the farm have no time to contemplate the beauty of the place since they are all busy at work. The scenery around the farm is a beautiful and pictorial one, but the farm
workers seem to have no time to admire and appreciate the beauty of the scenery around their farm. They are busy working on the farm and seem to have no time to enjoy the beauty of the scenery and vegetation around them. While the boy is chopping the wood into small sticks with the buzz saw, his sister calls him to have supper. Having heard his sister calling for him to have a rest for half an hour to have supper, the boy becomes happy to have such a short rest from work and therefore, he momentarily loses control over the buzz saw which cuts his hand within a second. Like a hungry monster, the buzz saw leaps at the boy’s hand, and devours it with its sharp metal teeth. Unaware of the injury, the boy cries at the top of his voice with a loud hilarious laugh. As he is running toward his parents, brothers and sisters holding his swaying blood-stained hand as if to prevent the blood from spilling, he does not even know that his hand has been cut. The boy seems to realize the hard fact that even if he recovers from this accident he will be unable to work once again on the farm to help his family, and will therefore become a burden to them.

When the doctor arrives, the boy appeals to his sister not to let the doctor cut off his hand, “Don’t let him cut my hand off / The doctor, when he comes. Don’t let him, sister!” (lines 25-26). He seems to be unaware of the fact that his hand has already been cut off by the buzz saw. The doctor puts the boy on the table in the open air to feel that his hand has already been cut. The boy seems to be unaware of the fact that his hand has already been cut off by the buzz saw. The doctor turns to his sister and says, “My poor boy! What you have done / is not something that can be reversed. Every time you look at that hand / you will remember what you did/ to me.” (lines 27-30). The boy, now aware of the fact that his hand has been cut, cries and says, “My hand off / The doctor, when he comes. Don’t let him, / cut my hand off / The doctor, when he comes. Don’t let him, / cut my hand off / The doctor, when he comes.” (lines 27-30). The doctor, when he comes.

The way the family members reacted to the tragic and sudden death of their son is shocking. They seemed coldhearted and uncaring on first reading. “And they, since they were not the one dead, turned to their affairs” (lines 33-34). Being not the one who died, all the family members went back to work as if nothing serious happened. However, this is not the case. The family members felt sad for the tragic and sudden death of their son, mourned his death for sometime, but unable to do anything, they accepted to let life go on. They all know that they could not mourn the lost child forever, for that reason every one went back to work as if nothing happened. The situation described in the poem is not exceptional, but can rather be generalized to all human beings. The end of the poem seems realistic rather than callous for after the death of one family member, the rest must go on living. Life goes on despite the death of a family member.

In “Out, Out,” Frost advances the plot of the narrative poem through a web of images of various types. The poem starts with depicting a rural landscape in a distant farm in Vermont. Unlike other Frostian poems which usually start with a visual image, “Out, Out,” begins with an auditory imagery in which the buzzing of an electric saw chopping woods in the farm is heard everywhere “The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard” (1). The auditory image of the buzzing sound of the saw takes the form of onomatopoeia and recurs throughout the poem. However, this auditory image does not stand alone and would be senseless without being combined with olfactory imagery. In fact, all types of imagery have to be coated with and engulfed in an engrossing visual image to give meaning. Visual imagery is the only type of imagery that can stand alone and give meaning. The auditory image of a saw buzzing in the farmyard is mingled with the olfactory image of the wood dust that resulted from the chopping of wood in the farmyard “And made dust” (2). The kinesthetic image that follows “And dropped stove-length sticks of wood” (2) makes both the auditory and olfactory images more vivid and makes the entire visual image full of sound and fury. Thus, the buzzing of the saw and the scent of chopped wood comprise the central visual image in the poem. In the line that follows which reads “Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it” (3) the poet narrator uses olfactory imagery once again to describe how the breeze spreads the odorous smell of the chopped sticks of wood all over the yard to the extent that it can be smelt from a distance. Marie Barroff notes that religious imagery does exist in the lines that read “those that lifted eyes could count / Five mountain ranges one behind the other / Under the sunset far into Vermont” (4-6). These lines allude to psalm 121 “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help” (qtd. in Barroff 76). This biblical reference seems applicable to the boy who seeks divine assistance that might descend to him from behind the beautiful mountains. Only divine assistance can help the boy and relieve him of the bad work conditions he works in. Schakel argues that Frost’s biblical allusion ironically stands in sharp contrast to the following verse in the same psalm which reads “The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil” (qtd. in Schakel, 48) to reiterate the view that the universe is indifferent to man’s suffering and fate.
Although the visual, rural landscape Frost engulfs his farm tragedy in is so majestic and attractive, it is stained with blood and hilarious cries. The scene in which the saw, like a ferocious beast, keeps snarling and rattling in the yard as it chops the sticks of wood and how the boy accidentally cuts his hand with the saw is depicted using both visual imagery and auditory imagery. The auditory image of the saw that “snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled” (7) in the yard is followed by the visual gustatory image of the boy’s sister calling him for supper. The visual image of the sister dressed in a kitchen apron calling the family members for supper and the gustatory image embodied in the word “supper” trigger the entire tragedy. As soon as the sister mentioned the word supper, the saw “As if it meant to prove saws knew what supper meant/ leaped out at the boy’s hand”(lines 16-17). This visual image of a saw leaping at the boy’s hand is accompanied by two auditory images; the buzzing of the saw and “the boy’s first outcry” which took the form of a “rueful laugh” (20). The most shocking visual image in the entire tragedy is that in which the boy is seen swinging toward his family “half in appeal” (22) and asking for help. The boy approaches his family members while “holding up the hand/ as if to keep/ The life [blood] from spilling” (lines 21-23).

The auditory image recurs at the end of the narrative. The boy pleads to his sister to prevent the amputation of his injured hand “Do not let him cut off my hand/ The doctor when he comes” (lines 25-26). The boy seems ignorant of the fact that he can not make such petition as his “hand was gone already”(27). Frost finishes his painting by using a visual image thus giving it a final brush. The sense impression he creates in his readers is so ominous and tragic and even unjustified. The doctor puts the injured boy on a table “in the dark of ether” to feel his pulse and listen to his heartbeat. The visual image takes a sudden frightening twist when the doctor and his medical attendants who have listened to the boy’s heartbeat become frightened of what has happened to the boy. “They listened to his heart/ Little - less - nothing!”(31-32). The auditory image disappears gradually as if to mirror the boy’s heartbeat which also stops gradually. The painting is complete and the entire tragedy ends with the unexpected departure of the whole family, the doctor and his medical attendants thus leaving the boy’s corpse lying motionless in the dark open air. The poet narrator exclaims, “since they were not the one dead, they turned to their affairs”(33-34). They all got back to work as if nothing serious happened.

This view of the narrative poem as a tragedy supports Weldon Thornton’s reading of the poem as “a psychological drama” culminating in the boy’s losing his hand willingly rather than accidentally (72), Peter Schackle’s reading of the poem as a “scene in cosmic drama” (48) and Marcia Bruels’ perception of the poem as a “retrospective narrative” (86) that stresses life’s nullity. According to Thornton, the drama differentiates between the innocent, young boy who has been forced to work long hours under the burning sun and the insensitive parents who have labored their child and have denied him the chance to play and enjoy the beauty of nature around him (72).

In “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” Robert Frost uses different types of imagery to nostalgically evoke a bucolic and rural New England winter scenery. The poet uses visual imagery to create a sense impression in the reader of an anonymous rural traveler traveling on horseback who stops by the woods on a snowy evening to contemplate the beauty of the landscape. Using a narrative soliloquy written in simple and plain language Frost puts both readers and the persona in the narrative and even his horse in a state of mystery and suspense. The poet starts the poem with a rural landscape in which the horseman stops by some woods on a snowy evening. It is mysterious why such a horseman should stop by the woods in such harsh weather conditions. It is night and snow is falling from the sky in flakes. There is not even a farmhouse in the woods where he can have some rest from his seemingly long journey. The woods are not like any other woods we know for unlike other woods they have an owner. It is also strange why the persona does not want the owner of the woods to see him stopping by his woods on such a snowy evening.

In the first stanza, Frost uses visual imagery to paint pictorial scenery in which the reader can envision a mental picture of a travelling horseman on a snowy evening. The unnamed travelling horseman stops by an isolated patch of woods to watch the snow while falling in flakes. From the moment the traveler stops by the woods, he raises a self-contradictory question “Whose woods these are I think I know”. The traveler raises the question and answers it himself. He says he knows the owner of the woods who lives in the nearby village “His house is in the village though” (2). The persona treats nature as property rather than a vacant natural landscape. The woods are, as Wakefield points out, “part of the man-
made world” (361). The persona seems to enjoy watching the snow flakes falling on the woods at night and even finds comfort in being there alone without being seen by the owner of the woods. The owner of the woods, he tells us, will not see him stooping there “to watch his woods fill up with snow” (4).

In the second stanza, the poet introduces the persona’s companion which is a “little horse” (5). Frost personifies the horse thus giving it human attributes. The horse can think and speak just like a faithful companion. In fact, through visual and animal imagery the poet not only paints the picture of a little horse shaking his “harness bells” (9) to inquire why the horseman is stopping by the woods on such a snowy evening “without a farmhouse near” (5), but also establishes the relationship between the horse and the traveler. It is a relationship characterized by intimacy and familiarity. The persona spoils his horse and calls it “little horse” (5). Both the horse and the traveler are close acquaintances and both understand each other’s feelings and thoughts. But, tonight, unlike any other night, the horse fails to understand the horseman’s thoughts and intention. The horse, the proxy for society, can not grasp what makes the horseman stop by the woods on such a very cold and dark evening and there is not even a farmhouse nearby.

To make the picture more flamboyant, Frost combines visual imagery with auditory imagery. Having failed to realize why the traveler has stopped in the forest in the dark evening and there is not even a farmhouse nearby. To make the picture more flamboyant, Frost combines visual imagery with auditory imagery. Having failed to realize why the traveler has stopped in the forest in the darkness of the cold snowy night, the horse “gives his harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake” (9-10). Thus, the sense impression Frost creates in the reader’s mind is not only visual, but is also auditory. In harness bells a shake / To ask if there is some mistake” (7-8) indicates that darkness dominates the whole scenery.

In the third stanza, Frost once again mingles visual imagery with auditory imagery. Here, the poet creates a visual image of snow falling down from the sky in the form of “downy flake” (12) and an auditory image of the sound of “the sweep of easy wind” (12) that usually accompanies the snowflake. The persona tells us that the whole scenery is engulfed in silence except for the sound of the horse’s harness bells, the sound of the calm wind and the snowflakes. The snow image, Daniel argues, suggests loneliness and a mood of pessimism (40). Daniel’s perception of the lonely traveling horseman is in agreement with Winters’ classification of all Frostain personas as “loner, isolated, and spiritual drifters” (201).

In the fourth stanza, Frost gives his painting a last brush. The painting of the rural landscape is complete and the persona passes his judgment on the painting “The woods are lovely, dark and deep” (13). Having enjoyed the beauty of the scenery and having praised its majestic splendor, the horseman turns his back and starts departing the place. The poem, as Wakefield remarks, is not about the beauty of natural landscapes, but simply about separation from them as man in an industrial society dominated by machines almost experiences nature in glimpses and glances; “in moments stolen from pressing obligations” (632). Although he has found the woods interesting and thrilling and he is tempted to stay, he could not stay there any longer. He has obligations that he must fulfill. He has to keep the promises he seems to have made to other people, maybe to his family or fellow countrymen. Maybe he has promised them to return after having accomplished a certain mission. He says, “But I have promises to keep” (14). Bassett states that in both “Stopping by Woods on a snowy Evening” and in “After Apple Picking” the speaker alludes to his obligations and responsibilities “the harvest” and “the promises to keep” and resolves merely to pause “sleep” before resuming his duties (42). For the horseman the woods are lovely and menacing; exciting and frightening; comfortable and deep. The horseman’s journey seems to be so long and he still has to travel many miles before he reaches his final
destination for he says “And miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep” (15-16).

Taken literally “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is a very simple poem. The language is plain enough and the images can be clearly identified. But, metaphorically and from an existentialist point of view the poem has multiple-layered meanings. The last two lines in the poem sum up Frost’s existentialist philosophy regarding the human condition. Before man dies he must fulfill his dreams and accomplish his mission in life. He has commitments and obligations to other people that he must acknowledge. Obligations toward his family, friends, acquaintances and his country fellowmen. Above all he has obligations toward God. Man must not leave this world without having fulfilled all his obligations. On the surface, the last line “And miles to go before I sleep / And miles to go before I sleep” (15-16) which is repeated twice stresses two facts. On the on hand, the horseman says that he still has a long distance to travel before he can have a rest in a house. On the other hand, he must keep on travelling and go back home. Frost’s poems, as Lisa Hinrichsen remarks, play upon clever metaphors that suggest simultaneous interpretations, and upon repetition with a difference that constitutes the mirroring structure of chiasmus (52). Metaphorically, Frost wants to say that man must work hard in life and fulfill his obligations before he dies. Nat Henry (1978) stressed the same idea when he pointed out that the speaking persona is torn between the urge to prolong his “soul soothing relaxation” (p.38) while watching the snow falling on the woods and “the stalled nag of obligation” (p.38) suddenly summoned forth by the horse shaking its harness bells of duty. Evans notes that the “promises” the horseman wants to keep imply his sense of ethical responsibility and moral commitment to other people (8). The horse’s harness bells remind the persona of the sounds of duty coming from the nearby town (Wakefield, 362).

Symbolically, the horseman’s journey at the edge of the dark woods on a snowy evening might represent man’s search for his identity. It is an inward journey for understanding the inner self. Frost seems to believe that the inner self is still vague and needs to be unearthed. The horseman is not travelling through the woods but rather by the woods. He looks at them from a distance not from inside. Thus, “The darkest evening of the year” (8) might stand for the vagueness of man’s inner self. The poem seems to reflect man’s attraction to and repulsion from life while it is swaying between happiness and misery, between hope and despair, between playfulness and responsibilities.

The traveler seems attracted to the woods and he would like to stay longer, but he must fulfill his obligations in life. The dark woods might also represent man’s escapism through which he can get rid of the pressures he suffers from in fulfilling his obligations. In this sense, the poem might express a death wish, contemplated and then abandoned (Ciardi “Way to the Poem” 15; McLaughlin 313; Nash 17). And Kearns (“The Place is the Asylum” 191) argues that nature in Frosts’ poetry is in general “enticing, provocative at once of both desire and death”. Though Frost himself, on more than one occasion, rejected claims that the poem implied any kind of “death-wish” (Henry, 69). For the horseman death is a kind of eternal rest. The woods might also represent for the horseman a kind of shelter which he wishes to take refuge in since for him they look attractively “dark and deep” (Unger and O’Connor, 599-600).

The woods stand for the irrational, the wild, and the sensuous side of life that man yearns for when he feels burdened with life’s obligations and responsibilities. The persona seems to be torn between a feeling of repulsion for civilization and all that it represents and attraction towards the countryside and wilderness with all their peculiarities. The whole poem, as Frank puts it, is “an ode to the beauty of nature” (p.43). It is a paradox that the horse, which is a representative of the world of beasts, is more practical than its rider. It finds it queer to pause during the journey by the woods in such freezing weather without a nearby farmhouse. But still it is an animal which can not enjoy the beauty of the scenery and can not feel the comfort its rider finds in the aesthetic contemplation of the beauty of nature.

Several critics have even compared Frost with famous painters. While Kearns (“Poetics of Appetite”186) compared some of Frost's alien landscapes to those of the Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dali, Richard Wakefield likened Frost to the American nature painter Thomas Eakins. In fact, Frost’s rural landscapes resemble the paintings of Thomas Eakins more than the bizarre paintings of Salvador Dali. In his seminal article “Thomas Eakins and Robert Frost: To Be a Natural Man in a Man-Made World”Richard Wakefield astoundingly compares between the paintings of the American painter Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) and the poems of Robert Frost. Though the comparison between a poet and a painter might seem odd at first glance, scrupulous
analysis of Eakins’ paintings and Frost’s poems might reveal several similarities. Although Eakins used a brush, oils and water colors to depict nostalgic feelings for rural landscapes in an industrial society largely dominated by machines in his famous paintings namely “The Champion Single Sculls”, “The Gross Clinic” “Cowboys in the Badlands”, “Tending the Fishing Nets”, and “A May Morning in the Park”, Frost painted similar themes with words, metaphors and imagery. In fact, some of Frost’s poems are verbal equivalents of Eakins’ visual paintings. Both the portrait painter and the imagist depicted rural scenes though with different tools. According to Wakefield, both Frost and Eakins “tell us what American men gained and lost in the period of industrialization”(354). Their works though belong to different genres, have depicted how “specialization and industrialization” (354). Their analysis of Eakins’ paintings and Frost’s poems might reveal several similarities. Although Eakins used a brush, oils and water colors to depict nostalgic feelings for rural landscapes in an industrial society largely dominated by machines in his famous paintings namely “The Champion Single Sculls”, “The Gross Clinic” “Cowboys in the Badlands”, “Tending the Fishing Nets”, and “A May Morning in the Park”, Frost painted similar themes with words, metaphors and imagery. In fact, some of Frost’s poems are verbal equivalents of Eakins’ visual paintings. Both the portrait painter and the imagist depicted rural scenes though with different tools. According to Wakefield, both Frost and Eakins “tell us what American men gained and lost in the period of industrialization”(354). Their works though belong to different genres, have depicted how “specialization and self-consciousness of the man-made world turned men from nature, both within and without” (Wakefield 354).

In The Champion Single Sculls Thomas Eakins depicts a champion oarsman, presumably his boyhood friend Max Schmitt, half naked in a scull on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. The painter himself is seen rowing away in a distant rowboat. Behind the two rowers two bridges stand majestically in the middle portion of the painting. The expansive painting is engulfed in a bright afternoon on a still river. Clumps of trees on both banks of the river are reflected on the surface of the water below. Dark shadows are scattered over the whole scenery and the entire painting is reflected in the water of the river. After momentary enjoyment in nature embodied in the river and the trees on both banks of the river, the natural man turns suddenly to the man-made world turned men from nature, both within and without” (Wakefield 354).

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Wakefield argues that the horseman in Frost’s poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is exactly like the rower in Eakins’ painting The Champion Single Sculls in the sense that both natural men are turned from nature by the demands of the man-made world (361). The horseman in Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” has just stopped by the woods on a snowy evening to enjoy the beauty of nature, but is reminded by his horse that he can not stay there for so long and he has to keep travelling since he has many obligations he must fulfill. Similarly, the oarsman in Eakins’ painting is momentarily enjoying rowing his scull in the river, but is reminded that he lives in a man-made world by the noises made by the steamboat in the river, the train and the locomotives on the two bridges that are positioned in the middle portion of the painting. Frost’s admiration of the paintings of Thomas Eakins is undeniable and well-documented in his biography. Lawrence Thompson, Frost’s official biographer, states that when Frost was appointed Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, he demanded that Eakins’ painting The Champion Single Sculls to be placed on the wall in his office in Washington (428-29).

Mending the Net pictures a single moment in an ordinary fishing day. The painting incorporates images of a group of rural fishermen mending a huge fishing net on a small hill close to the bank of a river. A gentleman, presumably a city dweller holding a newspaper or seemingly absorbed in taking notes, is seen sitting on a wooden bench under a huge tree. Two girls are seen approaching their mothers who are busy conversing with each other. On the right portion of the painting another fisherman carrying a basket of food is seen walking towards the other fishermen. The painting seems to incorporate many images captured from different locations and camouflaged together in the form of pastiche. Frost’s “After Apple Picking” depicts a similar rural landscape of an old man sitting under an apple tree. However, while the fishermen in Eakins’ painting Mending the Net are busy mending a fishing net after along fishing day, the old man in Frost’s “After Apple Picking” is fatigued after a long day of apple picking. The two works depict similar themes “rest after along working day” though they have different locales; a beach and an apple orchard respectively.

In The Gross Clinic Eakins portrays Dr. Samuel Gross, an old professor of medicine, dressed in a black frock coat. He is the object of admiring gaze for both a gallery of spectators and a team of medicine college students who have gathered to watch a medical breakthrough. Having just made an incision in the patient’s thigh, the professor steps out of the amphitheatre and pauses in
mid-operation to address a group of college medicine students. He is holding a scalpel with his blood-stained hand. Behind Dr. Gross, a clinic clerk is seen taking notes on the operation. The Gross Clinic is a documentary painting which was intended to document a revolutionary surgery in the history of American medicine. The painting portrays surgery of osteomyelitis which was formerly treated by amputation. Amazingly, what makes the painting mysterious is the fact that the sex of the anesthetized patient lying motionless on the surgical table is unknown though part of his or her body is naked and exposed. Another ambiguous portion of this painting is the lone woman portrayed in the middle ground of the painting crying in distress. She might be the patient’s mother. The woman’s depressed figure and frightened looks sharply contrast with the calm mood of the physicians. Although Dr. Gross has come up with a breakthrough in American surgery, his triumph in surgery has lead to his separation from nature. His devotion to his profession has made him a prisoner in the operation theatre, and thus has deprived him the chance to enjoy the beauty of nature. Wakefield’s comparison between a poem and a painting might look obscure at first glance, but thematically they share much resemblance. According to Wakefield, both Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” and Eakins’ The Gross Clinic are about “the experience of observing nature from the distance imposed by modern life” (366). While Frost’s horseman is watching the woods, the master surgeon in Eakins’ The Gross Clinic is merely watching the patient’s inner nature. This gathering of medical attendants and relatives around a patient displayed on a table bears much resemblance with the injured boy in Frost ‘ “Out, Out _”. The way Dr. Gross steps out of the amphitheatre away from the anesthetized patient is very similar to the way the Doctor ,the medical attendants and the family members leave the boy’s corpse that lies motionless on the table in Frost’s “Out, Out _”. In both works the two doctors leave a patient behind though for different reasons.

Eakins’ Cowboys in the Badlands is a quiet painting that portrays a typical western landscape in which two horsemen stop during their journey to contemplate the beauty of the scenery or maybe for another reason. The picture shows two horsemen stopping in the Badlands, an arid terrain with sparse vegetation which impedes both travel and dwelling. One horseman remains seated on his horseback, while the other is seen on foot fixing the saddle on the horse. Badlands is realistically depicted as a barren land with sedimentary rocks, steep slopes, loose dry soil, slick clay and gullies. The region seems too difficult to navigate even on foot. These arid lands with infrequent, but heavy rain might have seen massive erosion. Although Badlands constitute tough terrain, they have a spectacular display of amazing colors namely dark black, yellow, blue and red. Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” bears much resemblance with this painting in the sense. Both the two travelers in Eakins’ painting who stop in an arid terrain and the horseman in Frost’s poem who stops by the woods on a snowy evening stop in nomads lands inimical to travel and rest in a seemingly long journey without any justified motive.

Eakins’ A May Morning in the Park depicts Fairman Rogers’ coach ride through Philadelphia's Fairmount Park early in a summer morning. Fairman Rogers, a prominent, wealthy Philadelphian thinker, is seen riding the four-horse driven coach accompanied by his beloved mare, Josephine and other fellow countrymen. The coach is seen through a rural landscape engulfed in the bright red sunshade. This early morning ride in a park is very much the same as that of the walker who comes across the two grassy, virgin roads diverged in the woods in Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”. Both journeys take place in a rural landscape early in the morning. Robert Frost in his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes” points out that all poetry should have a message or purpose as “theme alone can steady us down” (p. vi). According to Frost, “all poems sound as different as possible from each other” (p. v) in the sense that they all approach a central truth though they differ in the ways their poets achieve that.

In general, Frost’s poems, as Patricia Wallace notes, include solitary figures placed in “cramped geography and harsh climates” (p.1). The horseman stopping by woods on a snowy evening, the old man who is exhausted after a long day of apple picking, the traveler standing at the fork of two diverged roads in the wood are all solitary figures placed in cramped, silent and deserted land spots. The regions portrayed in these poems reflect man’s confinement within suffocating boundaries that limit his freedom. According to Wallace, these boundaries resemble the ones that exist between people from different races, the boundaries between ourselves as humans and nature, or even those within ourselves (p. 1). Another point Wallace raises is the fact that Frost’s personas are solitary figures who are aware of their solitude and separateness from society. Even when they talk, they know that they are talking to themselves often
realizing that nobody listens. The horseman in “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”, the old man in “After Apple Picking”, and the solitary walker in the woods who stands at the crossroads where two roads are diverged in “The Road Not Taken” are all solitary figures whose talk takes the form of a soliloquy on a barren stage without an audience. In “Out, Out” separateness, seclusion and loneliness amount to the worst level and readers are left to contemplate their separateness from society even from those who love them most. (Wallace, 3). As the dead child’s corpse lies motionless on the table in the farm, the doctor and even his family leave him unattended “And they, since they / Were not the one dead turned to their affairs” (33-34).

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