

# Exemplar 6

## An approach to *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost

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### *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

*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.*

It is sometimes a good idea to allow children to experience a poem in a context where comment and discussion are kept to a minimum and where the poem itself is allowed to speak. This is particularly true of a poem where the subject matter expresses a sense of magic or mystery, both of which can be diminished by an attempt to 'explain' them through a process of close textual analysis. Similarly, too much attention to the technicalities of the poem can often detract from the potency and suggestiveness of its language.

Robert Frost's well-known poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* provides an example of the sort of poem where a simple presentation in class can encourage children to focus on the fascination of the questions left unanswered by the poet. The teacher's role is not to persuade the children to speculate about what might be happening; instead, they should be encouraged to marvel at how the poet's use of language, atmosphere and selected detail combine to convey the haunting and tantalising anecdote on which the poem is based.

If, of course, the children themselves raise questions about specific details that intrigue them, the teacher will want to

respond to them, but in a manner which conveys the notion that poets often deliberately leave things unsaid and that many different interpretations of their words are therefore possible.

In order for the spell of the poem to be allowed to work in class, the teacher could usefully start by reading it aloud while the children follow the reading in their own copies of the text. The reading needs to be well prepared and to take account of the poem's mood, atmosphere, rhythm and rhyme.

Indeed, there is every reason for the poem to be read at least twice by the teacher in this way. Individual pupils can then be asked to read either the poem as a whole or selected stanzas. If these readings reveal different interpretations of mood and atmosphere from the teacher's, the teacher may wish to explore the reasons for this. The children might also be asked to nominate their favourite lines and to give reasons for their preferences.

These quotations could later be copied into their poetry notebooks and, perhaps in a subsequent art lesson, serve as the opportunity to provide appropriate illustrations for the poem.

## Presenting two related poems to children

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*The Lake Isle of Innisfree* by W. B. Yeats

and

*He Refuses to Read His Public's Favourite Poem* by U. A. Fanthorpe

Do you know what an exile is? Do you know anyone who is an exile? Do you know any popular songs about exiles? Sometimes the feeling expressed in them is a wish to return home, isn't it? Can you sing any of these songs? What things remind you of home?

Here is the poem written in exile. It's a poem written by the famous Irish poet William Butler (WB) Yeats who lived from 1866 to 1939. It was written in 1890, in London, where he spent some time as a young man. He found his inspiration for the poem in a jet of water which was playing in a shop window. The stark contrast between the cool, peaceful jet of water and the hot, busy London streets reminded him of the peaceful countryside round his home near Lough Gill in County Sligo. Here is the poem

### The Lake Isle of Innisfree

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:  
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*

*And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the vales of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight's all aglitter, and noon a purple glow,  
And evening full of linnet's wings.*

*I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavement grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.*

Did you like the poem? Why? Did any of you not like the poem? Why? Basically it tells the story of a rather romantic young man's desire to leave the city to return to the peace that once was home—to the Isle of Innisfree which is in Lough Gill.

Does the name Innisfree suggest anything? Maybe you get a sense of its being free, do you? It might suggest that in English. But Innisfree is a corruption of the Irish name *Inis Fraoigh* which means Heather Island. Doesn't that suggest something rather different?

Let's look at some things in the poem. I'm going to read it again, so listen carefully. It sounds well, doesn't it?—like a good song. This kind of poem is called a lyric which is a kind of song; originally lyrics were poems accompanied by a lyre. Look at the rhymes: 'Innisfree' in the first line rhymes with 'honey-bee' in the third; 'made' in the second line rhymes with 'glade' in the fourth. This is a rhyme scheme called a b a b: free (a) made (b) bee (a) glade (b). Does this rhyme scheme continue throughout the poem? Yes, it does.

Listen to the rhythm—can you hear it? Imagine you're a drummer—tap the beat with your finger on the table in front of you. Can you count the strong beats in each line? Are they all the same? No! but it's interesting, isn't it? (In some poems and songs, the rhythm is regular—do you know any poems or songs like that?)

Look at the phrase 'bee-loud glade'. Isn't that a very fine way of saying that there are bees in the glade, and the glade is loud with the sound of their buzzing? Good poets can say things in a few memorable words where others would meander all over the place. Look

at the l's in the line 'And live alone in a bee-loud glade'. Some people think that all these l's create a calm, peaceful feeling. Do you? Say them slowly, fully, gently. They do, don't they? Can you find other lines with l sounds? Yes! The poem is full of them, isn't it? It creates a very musical effect. Now listen for 's' sounds. Don't they also add to the music?

What age are you now? What sort of things do you like to do? Could you always do these things? There are things you can do now that you couldn't do some years ago, aren't there? Are there things you did then

that embarrass you now? (There are, aren't there?) Well, apparently 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' embarrassed Yeats as he got older. Also, we are told, many of the people who liked his early poems like 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' weren't happy about later poems and plays about Maud Gonne, Byzantium, Crazy Jane and Cuchulain. The English poet U. A. (Ursula) Fanthorpe has written a poem about this. She calls it 'He Refuses to Read His Public's Favourite Poem'. The Senator is, of course, Yeats, who was a member of the Irish Senate. Here is the poem:

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### He Refuses to Read His Public's Favourite Poem

'I think Yeats hated all his early poems, and "Innisfree" most of all. One evening I begged him to read it. A look of tortured irritation came into his face and continued there until the reading was over.' —Dorothy Wellesley

*They always asked for it. He knew they would.  
They knew it off by heart: a b, a b,  
Reliable rhymes, thoughts they could understand.  
But dreams, as well. Their own, their Innisfree.*

*So why refuse? He knew the rest were better,  
His serious bid for immortality.  
What man defends the tenets of his twenties?  
Who would be tied for life to Innisfree?*

*"Give us Arise and go in your Irish accent,  
Give us the cabin, the glade, the beans, the bees.  
Not Maud, Byzantium, Crazy Jane, Cuchulain.  
We are your public. Give us more Innisfrees."*

*"A poem heard twelve times in public is dead and finished."  
"Ah no! Too much of a good thing there cannot be.  
Too much of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Milton, Shelley,  
There is. But not enough of Innisfree.*

*I will arise and go now—Senator, please!"  
"I won't. I can't. I'm not him anymore.  
Young fool who prattles of crickets and wattles and linnets -  
I hate him in the deep heart's core."*

He Refuses to Read His Public's Favourite Poem is published in U. A. Fanthorpe's *Safe as Houses* (Peterloo Poets, Calstock, Cornwall, 1995).