

THE TEACHING OF POETRY

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Most students live in constant fear of poetry. They will gladly read a dozen novels before tackling a course on poetry. So it is in the United States and so it is in Brazil. Yet, poetry for students of English as a foreign language, should prove an asset. A poem, more than any other genre, uses words precisely and concisely. Moreover, words with more than one meaning are often presented within the context of a single poem — a good way to learn English vocabulary. English depends a great deal on its vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, grammar being relatively simplified in modern English. For students whose native language is Portuguese, poetry in English presents the frequently used Anglo-Saxon words most difficult to assimilate for its unlikeness to Portuguese. Rhyme in poetry gives the foreign student a key to word pronunciation. Not that poetry is a basic tool for learning foreign languages; no, it is much more than that; but it may teach language while acquainting the student with the literary mode.

One of the major difficulties facing a student reading poetry in English, besides the ever present language difficulty, is his inability to feel the poet's thought in the language. Being a teacher of American Literature, I am always at a great loss to show Brazilian students the importance of the passing of the seasons to an American New England poet — so frequent a theme in the poetry of the English speaking people. However, these difficulties may be surmounted. The English language can be taught and the cultural traits of a foreign people may be elucidated by the teacher before he begins an analysis of the poem. I find that the difficulty in understanding poems in English derives from the prevalent notion that poetry can not

be taught. That it is written under a mystical compulsion understood by the initiated only — the teacher, the poet or the wise man. Thus, poets are untouchable. A student will often think that a poem is beyond his grasp. He is neither a poet nor a wise man. He will learn with gusto the facts related to the poet's life — his loves and sorrows. As far as the poet is a human being he is an object of study. Poems are another thing. They belong to the divine. Yet, a poem obeys certain laws which may be studied, just like any other art form. A poet can only be called by that name if he justifies it in his poetry. The poem should be our ultimate goal in judging a poet, that is — whether he deserves to be called by that name. Beyond the techniques involved in reading poetry, which can be mastered, the best preparation for understanding poetry is the reading of many poems.

The present work is an attempt to show through the analysis of Robert Frost's poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", some of the characteristics of most good poetry in English, as well as to point out a few rules for the reading of poetry.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To see 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 sleep.

One of the first things to keep in mind upon reading

poetry in the English language is that every word has been included in the poem with a specific purpose; the word is not provided in order to solve a difficult rhyme scheme. A good poet doesn't sacrifice anything in the poem, not even the meaning, for the sake of technique. A complete poem is an harmonious whole where all its component parts act their specific role toward making the poem a work of art. A poem is not rhythm, rhyme, meter, the author's life told in poetical language or a message to better our moral lives. Yet, it is all of these things, too; yes, even the narration of the poet's experience. After reading a poem, we might have to invoke the poet's life in order to better understand the poem. Oftentimes, other poems by the same author will elucidate the one under scrutiny. To get at the meaning of a poem, I propose the following steps. They may be used with almost any kind of poetry, either in English or even in Portuguese. They are basic principles for reading poetry in any language.

- A. Read the poem twice out loud.
- B. Look up new, unfamiliar vocabulary.
- C. Paraphrase the poem.
- D. Get the literal meaning — the story.
- E. Get the transcendental meaning.
 - a) the last stanza
 - b) the title
- F. Read the poem as a whole once more for appreciation.

First read the poem twice out loud; I say read the poem twice because much of the meaning of the poem is contained in the last stanza (a stanza in English is a separate group of lines). Only when reading the poem twice can one see what the poet has in mind and how he succeeds in putting it across. We should read the poem and if it doesn't mean anything to us, discard it, without discarding poetry all together, naturally. But it is important that a poem should appeal to us. The first premise is, therefore, love. Should a poem not

Speak to the students, after reading it aloud, it should be set aside in favor of one more appealing. Naturally, a poem's meaning and full impact can only be derived after detailed analysis. However, it is important that its music and superficial meaning hit the student right from the start. Without that, there can be no further investigation. The most successful effort in poetry is the poem which is outwardly simple and clear, but hides in itself overtones of transcendental meaning so powerful, that once grasped it forever stays in the mind. Besides, the student being a different, unique personality, may respond to a poem unlike anybody else. Thus, it is important that this first reading of a poem be one of entailed rapport.

The second step in analysing a poem is to look up unknown vocabulary. For a Brazilian student, the words which are apt to give him the most trouble are those of Anglo-Saxon origin. The words with a Latin root are most likely to have cognates in Portuguese. Thus, he has an advantage over his American colleague for whom the Latin rooted words present the greatest difficulty. Nevertheless, poets are most likely to use Anglo-Saxon words in their poetry, not only for units of sound, but also for the connotations associated with these words. Frost's poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", should give the student almost no trouble. In the third stanza, he meets the word **harness** and later in the last line of the last stanza (what in Portuguese is called *verso*, in English is referred to as a line), he might have trouble with the word **downy**. Looking them up in a good, standard English dictionary, he finds that harness is the tackle or gear on a draft horse. The teacher may supply the Portuguese word, *arreio*, to remove any doubts. Looking up the word **downy**, he finds that it is something soft, covered with soft hairs, hence in Portuguese *penugem*.

The third step is paraphrasing the poem. To paraphrase means simply to change the words from a poetical syntax into normal speech. In short, to put the poet's words into the student's own. Per example, in the first line, one would normally say, "I think I know whose woods are these", or, perhaps even

“I think I know who owns these woods”. Yes, that would be more habitual speech. To go on, “However, his house is in the village (and) he won’t see me stopping here (practically no change, since the line is already in the colloquial order of speech) in order to watch the snow falling on his woods.”

Now for the second stanza. “My little horse must think it strange to stop without a farmhouse in sight, between the woods and frozen lake, the darkest evening of the year”. There’s little change again. The third stanza may be paraphrased like this: “The horse shakes the bells from his harness to ask if there is some mistake. The only other sound is the sweep of the easy wind and the fluffy flake of snow. The final stanza concludes, “The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have to keep some promises. And miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep.” To change the word sleep, for instance, to **retire** or **rest** would not be paraphrasing. **Sleep** is really the word an American would employ and thus it must stand.

In a class made up of foreign students, an instructor might let his students attempt a translation of the poem. It gives the student a chance to really understand the poem’s literal meaning, our next step. It should be kept foremost in the student’s mind, however, that a translation or paraphrase is only an attempt at understanding the story. It can never reproduce the poem as a whole. As Robert Frost has said in his famous definition of poetry, “poetry is what remains after translation”.

We are now ready to move into our next step — to understand the story or the literal meaning of a poem. In order to do this, we have to take in consideration every word employed by the poet. What is then the story? Let’s once again take each stanza separately. A man — it may or may not be the poet — looks at the woods and recalls knowing the owner. We are immediately aware of the profound contrast between the two, let us say, protagonists of the poem. One is out in the woods, the other is home in the village, not in the country, and he owns the woods. He is, therefore, prosperous. Our man in the poem, for some unknown circumstance, is out alone — we

learn afterwards he is on a buggy pulled by a horse — and it has begun to snow, indicating that it has been snowing for a relatively short time. The fact that the second man is not there, may also indicate that he, owning the woods, does not watch them. This lack of sensitivity toward beauty, further sets them apart. The man in the poem has stopped to look at the “woods fill up with snow”, in the midst of his journey, under dismal weather, while the other man, the woods' owner, is at home.

We learn in the second stanza that the little horse is uppermost in our man's mind. He thinks that the horse will notice that he has stopped to look at the beautiful scene; being an animal, he will not understand. The word **little** is included in the poem to again describe the scarcity of his means and the affection he holds for the horse — it is a term of endearment. At any rate, the horse is accustomed to going on its merry way, stopping only at the man's house, or any other house. But there is no house. We find that it is the “darkest evening of the year”. This could only be Christmas Eve. As **São João** (June 24th) is the darkest night in Brazil, so Christmas Eve is the darkest night in the United States, at least in the people's mind. We are suddenly aware that our journeyman is alone indeed. It is evening. In Winter, in northern regions, such as the states which make up that section of the United States called New England, the sun sets at three in the afternoon. He will spend Christmas Eve in the woods. He will be having his own “White Christmas”. Every American wants to spend his Christmas cozily by the fire in great merriment with his family, while in the outdoors the snow glistens from the church steeples. So is Christmas for the woods owner. He is in the village amongst his family. Now we know it is Christmas and, therefore, in our mind the owner's house becomes a **home** — a further contrast to our poet's condition. The man in the poem will spend Christmas Eve near the woods alone with his horse, in the darkest and consequently longest evening of the year. Before leaving this second stanza, one should consider that our man has stopped “between the woods and frozen lake.” He is not in the woods themselves, but he is looking at them from a point equidistant to the woods and frozen lake. He is in a clearing.

We find once again in the third stanza the bewildered horse unable to comprehend his master's momentary indulgence in beauty. The horse becomes impatient. The story has reached a long pause and the next two lines become intensely musical, as if answering the horse's incomprehension. These stirring lines invoke the deep lull of a White Christmas, the journeyman's White Christmas alone in the woods, "The only other sound is the sweep/of easy wind ad downy flake".

We have now reached the last stanza. It is the most important stanza in a poem, for it gives the poem away. Robert Frost has said, that, "a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom". Wisdom is the last stanza. Ordinarily this stanza also makes the connection between the literal (now under discussion) and the transcendental meaning of the poem, our next step.

From where he is the woods are mysterious, deeply mysterious and unknown. His desire to penetrate and know their mystery is curtailed by his sense of duty brought about through the horse's impatience. He is awakened from his dream, as it were, by the harsh reality of the journey ahead and the awareness of the long road he must ride before he sleeps. After a pause, he ponders again, "And miles to go before I sleep."

When Robert Frost in 1956 lectured at the University of Rhode Island where I was a student, he was asked by someone in the audience as to the meaning of that last line and if it meant that he had a long way to go before he died. We were chatting amiably and Frost replied that he hadn't meant anything by it. "What did it mean to you?", he asked. Then, coupling his hands and joining the tips of his fingers in a gesture peculiarly his own, he continued. "It is just like now; I would love to be here with you, but I must be in Boston by two o' clock". And that was the last we saw of him.

Was Robert Frost hiding something? He was no doubt aware that his poem was being interpreted in that way. So why the ellusiveness? It doesn't matter so much whether Frost

intended the poem this way or not. The poem didn't really belong to him anymore. It belonged to us and to each of our distinct personalities.

But supposing the last line did mean the sleep of death and the journey still left to him before the final rest. Let us begin again at the first stanza and try to interpret the poem. The poem's title is always an aid in deriving the poem's meaning. It yields us the three symbols in the poem — woods, snow and evening.

It is important to realize that it is evening; not yet dark, but the twilight of a day or of a life. The journeyman stops between the woods and the frozen lake and looks at the woods. He is not in them, he is away from them. **Woods**, in Robert Frost's poetry, have always stood for confusion, chaos, life in the raw. Knowledge is begotten through immersion in the woods. Frost's early poem, "Into my Own" brings to mind the desire to penetrate the woods and find out about life. "Into their vastness I would steal away, fearless of ever finding open land", or in "Birches" where the trees "bend through straighter darker trees" or "I like to see some boy swinging them." On the other side lies the frozen lake. Woods and snow juxtapose themselves in the first stanza, only to be opposites in the second. The two symbols fade and stand apart. On one end, the dark woods and on the other, the pure, white, but uncertain and inconsistent snow. He is standing in a **clearing**, since there are no roads where he is. Again, a clearing is an important symbol in Frost's poetry, so much so, he named his last book of poems, **In the Clearing**. The clearing seems to be those moments of enlightenment a poet achieves momentarily when he is away from the woods. On such moments he writes poems which are "a momentary stay against confusion". The first stanza identifies the man in the poem. He is alone, poor, miles away from any human contact. He may be a poet, but not necessarily. However, the contrast established with the woods' owner, clearly indicates he is a kind of Emersonian "man thinking" — not a farmer, but Man on the farm. The glimpse of understanding the poet has had is manifested in his vision

of beauty in the clearing. He is past the woods, that is — he is in the middle of his life; the frozen lake symbolizes the ephemeral, hazy, unknown approach of his death. This circumstance reminds us of another poet who has confronted life (and therefore death) in the middle of his life. Dante Alighieri in the **Divine Comedy** also begins his journey through hell on the evening of Good Friday and emerges in Paradise on Easter Sunday. Certainly our poet has also had a vision, not on Easter Sunday, but on Christmas Eve, when the invocation of Christ's birth has caused him to see His works in the lovely scene before his eyes. The poem moves on. The poet is awakened by the realities of life — his horse that feels not God's presence, being devoid of soul and the promises he has to keep before the time for final reckoning arrives. The poem thus rushes on like a catapult into a lyrical vision of final beauty.

The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

It is based on these purely visionary glimpses, that Robert Frost has said that "the artist touches the hem of eternity".

This vision of beauty has given him a glimpse of eternity but he must go on, because he is reminded by his horse that he has still a long time to live. However, like Dante returning after his splendid voyage, he is transfigured by the experience and murmurs silently, "And miles to go before I sleep".

Reading the poem once again, we notice its full meaning. The man, unlike other men — the owner of the woods — the artist, stops to watch a vision of beauty. It's Christmas Eve and this factor lends to the enchanted scene religious overtones connected with Christ's birth and works. The journeyman is in the middle of his life. He has passed the woods, while ahead lies the frozen lake — the hazy, deceptive snow symbolizing life and death to come. His horse, being unable to appreciate the man's mood being an animal, stirs impatiently, reminding him that his time has not yet come to comprehend fully what,

on this Christmas Eve, he has been given to glimpse. The woods are lovely, but defy penetration. He yields to the horse, but is pondering over the experience.

Robert Frost has confessed: "All I know is contained in that poem." In spite of the number of pages it has taken to explain it, it seems that there is a lot more to it. So it is with good poetry. Every reading yields new discoveries. Nevertheless, I hope I have shown what such a short poem may reveal to an attentive ear.

It is all important that the student will get the story — our first step. Only after he has been able to decipher what is happening in the poem, can he aspire to go on to the transcendental meaning. Usually, the last stanza will defy comprehension. It is generally the flying trapeze which begins to ascend taking the all important title in its flight.

A word about technique. The rhythm in the poem is iambic, that is — an unaccented followed by an accented syllable. The lines have four feet. A foot is a rhythmic unit of sound. Although a poet will normally vary his lines to avoid monotony, in this poem the equal number of feet in every line and the iambic foot found throughout the poem, succeed in giving it a heightened musical quality. Let us scan (how we should read the line) the first stanza.

— / — / — / — /
Whose woods these are I think I know
— / — / — / — /
His house is in the vil lage though
— / — / — / — /
He will not see me stop ping here
— / — / — / — /
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

A good dictionary should give the student the division of syllables, i.e. syllibication. This pattern of sound, that is — one unaccented followed by an accented syllable in lines of four feet creates a musical harmony perceived by our senses. Other technical devices are the alliteration contained in the lines,

The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

which, by the repeated s sound, give the reader the impression of a long sweeping thrust of a broom, as well as the hiss of the wind. To heighten this vision of beauty contribute also the open, high-pitched vowels, e, i, o, a, and the soft consonants, f, w, and d.

Noticing the rhyme scheme we find that the first stanza reads: a, a, b, a; in the second, the secondary rhyme begins the major rhyme scheme and thus throughout the poem. The second stanza reads: b, b, e, b; the third: e, e, d, e, till the secondary rhyme on the third stanza becomes predominant in all four lines, for the grand finale: d, d, d, d. There is no doubt that accommodating his idea into the form he chose to give the poem, Robert Frost has really "begun in delight and ended in wisdom".

By enumerating a few rules for reading poetry in English, which may be applied to the reading of poetry in any language, I have hoped to lessen some of the fears Brazilian students have of poetry as a literary form.

By analysing a great poem, on the surface deceptively easy, I have tried to show some of the basic techniques for reading poetry in English. It follows, of course, that to feel at ease in understanding poetry one has to read many poems of various types and variety of theme.