

Essay: "Acquainted with the Night" by Robert Frost

Sometimes a poem can have an immediate hold on us although we're not sure why. Though it sounds contradictory, a powerful vagueness, like a heavy mist, engulfs us when we read or hear the words. This is the feeling I had the first time I read Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night." In fact, I was so captured by the poem that I memorized it. However, I never took the time to formally analyze it to understand what makes it so powerful. So, I've decided to thoroughly immerse myself in it so I can learn why I'm drawn so strongly to it, as are many other people. "Acquainted with the Night" is one of Frost's most loved poems.

A good starting place when analyzing a poem is to search for literal meanings. The literal subject matter of this poem seems obvious and clear, at least on the surface. The following are some of the literal meanings that, for simplicity's sake, I've listed in the order they appear line-by-line. I use a masculine pronoun when referring to the speaker because it feels to me that the speaker is a man.

- * The speaker takes long walks alone late at night.
- * His walks have also been in the rain.
- * He's walked to and beyond the edges of town, beyond the city lights.
- * He's seen the sad parts of town; perhaps the poor, ghetto areas.
- * He's passed a watchman, or a foot patrolman, during his walks.
- * He's averted his eyes when passing the watchman, not wanting to explain something to him.
- * He's stopped to listen when he's heard, in the distance, someone cry out.
- * He can see an illuminated clock face high on a tower somewhere in the distance.

So, the poem literally is of a man talking about his walks late at night. As Laurence Perrine says, "This poem is not the account of one walk; it is the record of many walks" (50), or the composite of many walks at night. The tone and the lack of details tell us that there's a deeper meaning. If the poem were to be taken literally, there would be more details and explanations. Without them, the poem would hold little interest. Thus, the night here is used as a symbol.

The tone of the poem has a somber, sad quality and a strong element of fear. These qualities fit with the symbolic meaning of "night." Conventionally, night is a symbol used to suggest darkness of the mind or soul. So, on a deeper level, the speaker is saying that he is acquainted with an internal darkness of some kind.

The speaker doesn't give details of his own experiences and why he's been acquainted with darkness. However, the darkness in this poem evokes many images, such as sorrow, pain, loss, loneliness, alienation, death, grief, heartbreak, insanity, and terror. Any or all of these could be part of his internal darkness.

The appearance of the watchman, or patrolman, adds a sense of anxiety. Obviously then, there's an element of danger to walk the dark streets of this city. To know that the speaker is out walking late at night produces a chill and a shiver of fear. This image certainly suggests that these night walks are anything but peaceful and calming. This image, then, tells the reader that part of the speaker's experience is one of fear and anxiety. "Fear is an emotion which appears in different forms throughout Frost's work. He sees it as a dominant human feeling and one of the chief factors governing the universe" (Jennings, p 173).

The speaker says he's looked down the "saddest" city lane (line 4). To say "saddest" is to state the maximum. So, his experience goes beyond mere sadness. Looking down the saddest city lane gives a sense of looking directly into the dark depths of sadness. The "saddest" city lane, or the deepest depths of sadness, suggests a profound loss of some kind, perhaps the death of a child or a lover. Thus, his sadness has probably come from the pain experienced by death or heartbreak.

That the speaker has walked "out in rain" and "back in rain" (line 2) says he's probably endured long periods of darkness. Rain accentuates the dismal quality of the dark nights and deepens its meaning. The phrase "out in rain—and back in rain" suggests that he perhaps found it difficult to cope with or to find answers during his darkness. Coming "back in rain" also indicates that during his long walk, or searching, the situation probably didn't change, nor did he find answers. "To read [Frost's] poems as they confront basic human troubles . . . can be unnerving—they offer neither security nor solace" (Howe).

Further evidence of this is seen in the comment, "And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain" (line 6). Is he unwilling to explain his fears or his sorrows? Because he hasn't mentioned his dark experiences, this comment seems to say that he's unwilling to explain them to the reader. Perhaps this is because he is unable to, or that there are no answers.

"Outwalk[ing] the furthest city light" (line 3) seems also to express the depth of his darkness. To walk beyond the lights is to be beyond the perimeter of the city. It gives the feeling of being lost, or perhaps of being on the brink of insanity. Inherent in the image is also a suicidal element. Being out in the dark beyond the lights is to be outside of the rest of humanity. Such a feeling of alienation usually causes a person to question the continuation of his life.

Feelings of loneliness and alienation are very strong in this poem. The speaker takes walks alone at night—in the darkness. Being in the darkness alone gives the feeling of disconnectedness. So, it seems that he has been disconnected from humanity at some time in his life, which is suggested in line 3, "outwalked the furthest city light." This adds to the idea of a suicidal tendency. Living in a city, especially a large city, can in itself be alienating. The paradox of living in a city is that the

larger the city—the more people there are—the more alienated the individual becomes from others. Symbolically, walking the city streets alone at night makes him appear estranged from others.

There's also a feeling of alienation in line 10. The person who cries out doesn't call him back or say good-by. If emphasis is placed on the word "me," ("but not to call ME back or say good-by"), it could infer that no one is in his life to call out for him, and he expresses a desire to be with someone. He's so alone in the world that there is no one to call to him, to need him, or to want him. But this cry isn't to him, the feeling of loneliness and alienation from others would seem even more pointed.

There could be a second layer of meaning to this same stanza. He stops "the sound of feet" to listen to the "interrupted cry" far away. The image of the cry is eerie, a sound of distress. Perhaps he is listening to his own inner voices, crying out and searching to make sense of his world. Given the overall fearful, lonely, and sad tone of the poem, this seems a plausible explanation. But, because the voice doesn't call him back or say good-by, it seems that he doesn't find answers for which he searches.

The speaker's mention of the luminary clock against the sky at an unearthly height has stirred considerable debate as to the actually meaning. The debate primarily centers around whether the speaker is talking about a real clock, or about something cosmic, such as the moon or stars. I feel that the clock is real, which would be consistent with the rest of the poem. Perrine supports this view: "This is a city poem. The imagery is city imagery. . . [which] all lead toward the clock on the tower as an appropriate climactic image." All of the elements in the poem are real, but they are an extended metaphor for something else. In talking about his walks, the speaker mentions actual elements one would encounter during a walk late at night: The rain, sad city lanes, the watchman, listening to sounds. It doesn't make sense to me that in this one instance he would change the nature of the metaphor by looking at the moon and calling it a clock.

However, whether the clock is real or not doesn't change the deeper symbolic meaning. As Robert Fleissner says, "the effect of an illuminated tower clock against a pitch-black sky . . . was the secondary, not the primary meaning." The speaker is a man who has been deeply troubled and who is trying to make sense out of his internal darkness. Except in one brief instance, the speaker is noncommittal and makes no value judgments. The only time he does is in line 4, "I have looked down the *saddest* city lane." But even here, the reader is not sure why it's sad. The clock, too, makes no value judgments on the time. It tells the time but proclaims that the time is neither wrong nor right.

The concept of wrong and right are human attributes. The darkneses in our lives merely happen—they are products of earthly (human) and unearthly (universal) forces. It is the human act that is wrong or right, not time, nor anything unearthly. Man's conception of wrong or right is everything.

Because the time is neither wrong nor right, the speaker is saying that there is no divine plan or divine intervention. Rather, things merely happen. There is no wrong nor right time to be here. It just is. The matter-of-fact tone of the comment about time, as well as the matter-of-fact tone and the lack of judgment throughout the poem, suggests that the speaker accepts this assessment of life. He may be acquainted with darkness, but he realizes too that to live is to know darkness. It is inescapable. But to this, too, he gives no value judgment. Randall Jarrell tells us that Frost's "best known poems start with a flat and terrible reproduction of the evil in the world and end by saying: It's so; and there's nothing you can do about it" (110).

The popularity of this poem lies in its elusiveness. There are no details of the speaker's darkness, but many emotions are brought out in the reader by the various images. The reader, then, puts into the poem his own dark experiences and relates to those emotions evoked. No one escapes some kind of sadness, fear, or loneliness in their lives. It's all a matter of degree, but each person's darkness is just that—darkness—just as the night is dark. Each person feels the pain of their own darkness, as others feel their own. One cannot pass a value judgment on another's pain.

This poem is an extended metaphor of all the elements of man's darkness. It subliminally evokes fears, loneliness, and sadness in even the most casual reader who may not understand the symbolic values. Nearly anyone can relate to the imageries in this poem. The lack of judgmental value lets the reader see himself in the poem and lets him feel to the degree of his own experiences. The reader doesn't have to try to relate to the degree of the speaker's experiences. The speaker's sadness *IS* the reader's sadness; the speaker's fear *IS* the reader's fear; and the speaker's loneliness *IS* the reader's loneliness. This mirror of vagueness is why this poem is one of Frost's most loved poems; it is a mirror of the reader's experiences. This is also why it's one of Frost's best poems. "At his best, [Frost] is a poet of elusiveness, wit, and modesty. "Acquainted with the Night" [is] among his finest [poems]" (170).

Works Cited

- Fleissner, Robert F. "Frost's 'Acquainted with the Night.'" The Explicator Vol 37: 12-13.
- Howe, Irving. "Robert Frost: A Momentary Stay," A World More Attractive: A View of Modern Literature and Politics. Horizon, 1963: 144-57.
- Jarrell, Randall. In his Poetry and the Age. Knopf-Vintage 1953. Contemporary Literary Criticism Vol 1, 1973: 109-110.
- Jennings, Elizabeth. In her Frost. Oliver & Boyd 1964. Contemporary Literary Criticism Vol 3 1975: 171-173.