Familiar Darkness

In the poem “Acquainted With the Night” Robert Frost uses dark and disheartening tones

to convey his experiences with depression. “Acquainted With the Night” is a metaphor for what

Frost believes to be the ultimate form of heavy heartedness, and the harsh personal journey one

may go on due to isolation. Although Frost’s poem has been interpreted in many different ways,

it can be argued that “Acquainted With the Night” in particular is his most self-revealing poem

due to his similarly dark and ominous personal life.

In the first stanza of “Acquainted With the Night” Robert Frost wrote, “I have been

acquainted with the night. I have walked out in rain-and back in rain. I have outwalked the

furthest city light.” In this first portion of the poem, a feeling of despair is evoked by the

admission that the nameless character has felt the pain of isolation and loneliness. The character

is explaining that he has been a victim of the endless cycle of depression. Rain, in this poem, is a

metaphor the overwhelming physical and emotional feeling that only an extreme sense of

anguish can provide. When Frost wrote, “I have outwalked the furthest city light,” Frost is

expressing that his character has been in a state of sadness and darkness for so long that he feels

as though there is no hope of returning to the light of emotional and social affirmation. Even

though Frost’s nameless character is aware of his condition and is uncomfortable with it, it is

apparent that the character is equally accepting of his emotional and mental state.

In the second portion of his poem Frost wrote, “I have looked down the saddest city lane.

I have passed by the watchman on his beat, and dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.” This

section of the poem continues with the poem’s ominous tone by detailing the character’s harsh

experience with depression. “The saddest city lane” is a metaphor for lowest of lows that one can

experience in life. The fact that the character is so familiar with the darkest depths of emotion

contributes to the theme of a contorted sense of comfortability that is found throughout

“Acquainted With the Night.” The watchman in this part of the poem represents all of humanity.

When Frost says, “I have passed by the watchman on his beat” he is saying that, on his

character’s journey of depression, he has had people attempt to aid him in his journey back to the

light, but has instead chosen to lean towards confinement. The line, “And dropped my eyes,

unwilling to explain.” conveys the character’s feeling of shame. He is ashamed of his current

circumstance, and his unwillingness to accept help along his journey.

Frost’s third stanza, “I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet. When far away an

interrupted cry. Came over houses from another street…” does not use any pronouns when

describing the character. The absence of pronouns shows that the isolation the character is

becoming even more intense as the character continues on his journey through the night. The

character has not only separated himself from the rest of humanity, but from himself as well.

Frost’s character, in this section of the poem, is also battling an internal conflict between the

desire to be sought after, and the desire to be left alone. When the character is listening for the

cries from other houses nearby there is a sense of guilt that is conveyed. The character is wishing

the cries from the next street over were for him, so much so that he stops in the middle of the

street to bask in the bewailing. The character momentarily gives into the side of himself that

wants to be longed for and loved by the outside world.

The final stanza of “Acquainted With the Night” states, “But not to call me back or say

good-by; And further still at an unearthly height. One luminary clock against the sky. Proclaimed

the time was neither wrong nor right. I have been one acquainted with the night.” This stanza

illustrates what was not made completely clear in the third stanza. The cries from the next street

over, were in fact, not for him but for someone else. No one is saying goodnight to him, no one

cares for him, he is indeed alone on his journey. The moon is referred to as the Earth’s luminary

clock that lets the character feel content in his decision to walk his path of sadness alone. The

poem concludes with Frost repeating the first line of the first stanza, further emphasizing that he

is all too familiar with emotional and mental darkness.

Robert Frost had a life of challenging hardships. Frost lived through a cycle of life’s

highest of highs and lowest of lows. According to Biography.com Robert Frost lost his father at

the age of eleven. When Frost was an adult he married his wife, Elinor, and had six children.

Most all of his children, with the exception of one who developed a severe mental disease, died

early on in their lives. All while his family is falling apart Frost was distributing his literary

works to the world. As Frost was becoming an international literary sensation, depression and

death were becoming the most common themes in his life. This imbalance of emotions, sent

Frost into a downward spiral of depression, and suicidal thoughts. These dark themes and

thoughts that were present in his mind undoubtedly bled into his poems. The poem, “Acquainted

With the Night” undoubtedly showcases Frost’s desire to isolate himself from the world. Perhaps

Frost isolated himself from the world in order to protect himself from further heartache. In the

Britannica.com article, “Frost Medal: American Poetry Award” Frost received multiple honorary

degrees from America’s most prestigious academic institutions, such as Harvard, Yale, and

Princeton. Frost also received the literary community’s most famed award, the Pulitzer Prize

Award. It can be concluded that the mixture of positive and negative events in Frost’s life

ultimately caused him to suffer emotionally. “Acquainted With the Night” was written as a

cathartic and therapeutic declaration to the world that he, like so many others, is familiar with the

unbearable darkness life can bring.