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(Fietzfotos)

Existential Dread in the Literary Self:
A Thinking and Analysis Report on Robert Frost's "Desert Places"

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Part One: Data Collection

In the stage of data-collection, there seemed a prevalent common reading of the poem's themes of both isolation and loneliness. While interpretations of the poem as a declaration of loneliness were expounded in much of the comments, some offered an interpretation of the central metaphor, the desert place, as something soothing and reflective. In her original comments, Zoe Calhoun wrote:

“In the second stanza, we are told the narrator is feeling lonely. The third stanza alludes to loneliness as well, describing the snow as expressionless. The fourth stanza ends with the emptiness trying to scare him, and the speaker's reluctance. He has his own desert places that allow him to be content. My interpretation is that the poem is about mental security. Regarding the title, a desert can also be isolating and lonesome, thus a surface parallel in the symbols of climate emerges. However, a desert is inherently calm and warm where a snowstorm is cold and chaotic,” (Calhoun 2023).

Despite the variation in personal reader response to the text, nearly all students seem to agree that the poem "Desert Places," is “A powerful exploration of the themes of loneliness, isolation, and the meaning of existence,” (Wrona 2023). These patterns in literary interpretation clearly imply a textual causation. I will attempt to mine the formal elements of the text to derive not so much a new or obfuscated “meaning,” but empirically sound explanations for the largely unified reading and in doing so, outline a structural interpretation of the poem that accounts for and refutes these previous dissenting claims. Frost's work is often deceptively simple; however, there are concretized elements at work that direct the audience toward an understanding of the subjective experience sketched on the page. I aim to support a theory of the work with language contained in “Desert Places,” and largely eschew biographic or historical contexts.

Part Two: Research

External research in support of this analysis will be light. I will be primarily concerned with using credible accumulative writings on the history of literary criticism such as the *Norton Guide to American Literature*, to help clearly define the formal elements and poetic devices employed by Robert Frost and to which I will be pointing. Upon cold reading, “Desert Places” does not appear to be a text that is heavy on allusions. However, there is a certain awareness and intellectual base on display that, while perhaps not employing modernist techniques of translation, quotation, or overt remediation, is indicative of certain prevailing modes of thought from Frost’s time. Though the poetic address of this abstract concept—dread in the face of a vast, unexplained, and finite consciousness—is not an immediate citation of a particular work or philosophical school, such as the then contemporary Existentialism, I submit that such a well-defined observation *preceding* certain seminal contributions in academia and the cultural consciousness would be deeply implausible. So, while there may not be much to directly research in terms of historical/contextual information, Frost and his work with “Desert Places” are the product of a cultural attitude in which I can attempt to situate my analysis.

Part Three: Thinking Routine

Reporter's Notebook:

	<u>Clear</u>	<u>Need to Check</u>
<u>Facts & Events</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaker is on a walk on a snowy evening. • Speaker is passing a field covered in snow. • Speaker is observing the harsh environment however • Speaker is (physically) unaffected by the environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the physical descriptions doing in this poem? • Why is snow important? • What is the quality of this writing on the natural world that helps evoke a feeling through signifiers as would a physical walk-in nature (the signified)?
<u>Thoughts & Feelings</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speaker describes a clear sense of self who is located in physical space and who is feeling feelings of loneliness. • The speaker is engaged in observation and contemplation about his place in the world. • Speaker alludes to his perhaps punishing sense of consciousness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the speaker's musings consistent with solipsism? Is the speaker alone of human connection or does the speaker feel an even less tangible aloneness in his sense of aliveness and awareness? • Is the speaker confident and accepting of the unknowable, unsolvable and paradoxical nothingness of the universe and his life?

Part Four: Essay

“Desert Places,” a poem written in 1936, follows the rhyming pattern of *AABA* across four stanzas consisting of 16 lines. Each line of the four quatrains is written in iambic pentameter. The poem introduces concepts of loneliness and the connection between humanity and nature from a limited first-person perspective that firmly establishes a self. Opening lines depict the protagonist walking through an empty field on a snowy evening, surrounded by woods: “Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast/ In a field I looked into going past,” (Frost, lines 1-2). There is use of “I” as soon as the second line as well as the colloquial “oh” to imply an emotional response. Frost’s speaker observes the “loneliness” of the field directly in line 8. The claim I will make is that “Desert Places” and its speaker muse that the universe lacks inherent meaning—a truth unearthed through a contemplative and literal nature walk while reflecting on loneliness, suffering, and desperation—but posit that he can populate the universe with his own contrived meaning or purpose, rather than being bound to cold dispassion ruled by death and separateness. This is illustrated by the acute awareness of the human condition telegraphed in the final lines. The protagonist's experience in the field initially overwhelms him with hopelessness, but the poem restores his sense of self and his relationship with nature. The poem is tightly controlled and concise with language that extends what many Realist and Naturalist poets have done with projecting feelings onto nature and blurring the lines between outer and inner. Using the sound-focused formal elements of assonance, consonance, and alliteration, together with heavy paradox, metaphor, and careful imagery, Robert Frost creates a lyric and cacophonous poem narrated by a self who is compelled by a deep personal loneliness to contemplate the grander implications of humanity’s isolation in the natural world and question which “desert places” are more intimidating, the

physical or metaphysical. The poet, in typical fashion, marries the themes and perspective of naturalist writing with a modernist's more colloquial language and self-conscious existential dread.

The title of the work is a metaphor in which “desert” takes on the adjective form, “uninhabited and desolate” as the more literal “of or referring to a desert” is incongruous with any other language used in the poem and there exists no evidence I can parse to suggest the title is an imperative sentence as in, “(you) abandon places.” The only use of the phrase within the text informs the reader of its stature as a symbol, again in the final lines, “They cannot scare me with their empty spaces/.../ I have it in me so much nearer home/ To scare myself with my own desert places,” (Frost, lines 13, 15, 16) in which the speaker takes ownership of the mystified vastness and situates it within his mind—conscious or sub-conscious—as distinct from his body through the use of emotional indicators such as fear. Whether the ultimate question implied by the central metaphor—as from “uninhabited” and “vast” can be extrapolated “unknown”—is one of moral or spiritual consideration within the human mind is not explicitly made clear. The speaker subtly questions his identity and place in the world: rich descriptive detail immerses the reader in the contemplative and solitary walk (no companion or secondary perspective is ever alluded to) and Frost’s diction, which is at once inclusive, “The woods around it have it - it is theirs, /All animals are smothered in their lairs.” (lines 5-6), and distancing (variations of the word “lonely” are used four times), serves to nurture the impression of the speaker as “other.”

For Frost, setting is an invaluable component of the poem. His language and themes are often concretized in a distinctive sense of place. This poem is set on a snowy winter night, a season and climate that traditionally evokes associations of loneliness, emptiness, emotional

coldness, or even death. The speaker passes and considers a field, a barren and desolate landscape that reinforces the sense of loneliness but also grand separation and distance from his possible destination, “In a field I looked into going past, / And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,” (Frost, lines 2-3) which foreshadows the more cosmic dread found in the latter lines. The observations of the field and surroundings convey a deep sense of isolation and disconnection from the world, a feeling that is heightened by the stark and unforgiving winter landscape. Two lines end in the word snow which, for a 16-line poem, belies authorial intent. As Brian Russell put it in his analysis, “The poem has a curious rhyme scheme. This is one of the few poems I've read that I understood to be AABA CCDC EEFE GGHG. I think the off-rhyme third line evokes the feeling of isolation hinted at,” (2023); in fact, the third lines of stanzas one and three both end with B, the word “snow.” Furthermore, the poem seems further intent on engendering such an atmosphere when, in closing in on the final stanza, the vocabulary of the piece is elevated from the climate and geography of New England winter into something more celestial and speculative. The language expands our setting while shrinking our speaker and surrogate. Again, this brief poem is hardly allusive, and it makes no overtly secular claims about reality; however, it speaks not of heavens but of “empty spaces / Between stars - on stars where no human race is,” (Frost, lines 13-14). The poem implies contemplation which while perhaps not empirically unheard of in antiquity, is rendered in language that implies an awareness post Sartre, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein.

Frost's use of vivid and specific imagery invites the reader into a subjective state. Images such as the "ground almost covered smooth in snow"(Frost line 3), "a few weeds and stubble showing" (Frost line 4), and "smothered" (Frost line 6) animals, creates a bleak and desolate landscape, emphasizing the emptiness and loneliness of the landscape while subtly conditioning the

reader toward its eventual parallel. The kinesthetic quality conveyed through the line "snow falling and night falling fast" (Frost line 1), allows the reader to experience the coldness of the snow and the isolation of the night while seeding anxiety through use of the verb and a syntax that sends the tongue tripping along the lines. These seeds reach a climactic invocation in line twelve where Frost personifies the dusky pasture as "expressionless." Paradoxical sensations of touch are also evoked with words such as "smooth" and "stubble." Considerable alliteration and assonance contribute to the lyrical mood and tone of "Desert Places." Repeated use of the *f* sound in "falling, falling, fast, fast and field" emphasizes the coldness and emptiness of a winter night, as well as the speaker's sense of loneliness and isolation by approximating the frigid stuttering of someone with a deep chill. Similarly, the *s* sound in "scare, spaces, stars, stars, so and scare" illuminate the self, inward, and give a breathy and vulnerable personality to the bleak and desolate atmosphere of the poem. I find it in keeping with a near meditative (if only by cold-induced docility) walk and metaphysical exploration that Frost should linguistically experiment with a hypnotic or sonorous quality supported by instances of alliteration, such as "smooth, snow and stubble" and "expression and express," as well as the repetition of long vowels and diphthongs, such as in "snow, going, almost, snow and showing" and "lonely, loneliness, lonely, snow and no." The words can *feel* heavy in the mouth. Consonance in words such as "field, ground, covered, around, smothered and spirited" and "weeds, woods, theirs, animals, lairs, includes and unawares" creates a sense of desolation and bleakness, emphasizing the emptiness and barrenness of the landscape. Furthermore, the sound devices used in the poem also serve to establish its rhythm, which is urgent—the repetition of the *s* and *z* sounds in words such as "spaces, stars, stars, is and places" and "loneliness, less, whiteness and express." The urgency is punctuated and contradicted by the lack of an explicit destination for the speaker, perhaps

entrenching the reader in his desperate search for meaning. The residual impression is of a speaker resigned to fill the emptiness with language, if only in the interim.

Several more ancillary formal elements are at play in "Desert Places." Frost presents a contrast between snow and night, concepts that work together to silence sensation and obliterate perception. The snow works against the dark, providing a ghastly light to see through it, while the falling darkness gives urgency to the need to see. Similarly, the weeds and stubble create a crosscurrent of meaning, with the stubble hinting at man's presence and the weeds reminding us of nature's persistence in reclaiming the artificial. The poem also explores the isolation and loneliness of man in a complex and pluralistic natural world, where the blank whiteness becomes a landmark of nothingness by which realities are known. The poem employs transferred epithets and puns like "night falling" (Frost line 1) and "benighted snow" (Frost line 11) to add these layers of meaning. Personification is used to present the barren landscape surrounding the speaker as a character. Repetition is also used in the poem, with words like "falling," "fast," "loneliness," "lonely," "snow," "no," "nothing," and "stars" repeated to reinforce the poet's exigency. Hyperbole is used when the speaker claims that "they cannot scare me with their empty spaces / between stars," (lines 13-14) which aggrandizes the narrator and emphasizes the importance of a specifically personal desert or Jungian "Self." Finally, the use of understatement when the speaker says, "they cannot scare me" (Frost line 13) emphasizes his deeply realized stoicism.

The techniques enumerated in this analysis assemble my concept of Frost's poem as a terrifically composed preamble to the deafening declaration put forth in the final line. Neither of the parallel subjects to which the speaker refer can, under scrutiny of this evidence, be regarded as warm or comforting. "To scare myself with my own desert places," (Frost, line 16) refers to the "desert places" both within and without and suggests a poignant loneliness of the soul which trumps even the dispassionate chaos of nature. Every image and every sound chosen carefully are conjoined toward this rhetoric goal. In the first stanza, snow and nightfall are described together; the second stanza shows how all life is erased; the third sums up nature, and, crucially, excludes the narrator as observer. If any direct references are made by the poet, they surely come in the final stanza where a keen eye can detect shades of the French philosopher, Blaise Pascal's 1607 aphorism: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me," (206) along with the possible remediation of Einstein's then recent rebuke of quantum-physics as being "Spooky action at a distance," (698). Robert Frost uses the regional vernacular of a dedicated nature poet to weave deeper insights into a work that shares a lineage beginning with the metaphysical poets and continued popularly, in his time, with the modernists. Sound-based literary techniques such as assonance, consonance, and alliteration, along with powerful paradoxes, metaphors, and vivid imagery are deftly layered into a clean 16 lines and amount to a poignant and dissonant poem. The speaker, driven by an intense sense of literal and metaphysical solitude, reflects on the frightening immenseness of the natural and unknowable world which, by his ultimate assessment, pales against the vast and inscrutable condition that is human consciousness.

Part Five: Works Cited/ Consulted

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