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By Dr. Daniel L. Wright

The bucolic lethargy which "An Old Man's Winter Night" induces is intimately united to the essentially serene quality of some of the poem's primary images: an old man, a lonely house, a "quiet light." But the poem is not constructed to tranquilize the reader or lull one into a mere sentimental euphoria; it is, instead, designed to inspire reflection and meditation upon that menace to harmony, peace, order—and life itself—which is suggested by the advance of the night and the chill of the winter ice. The central tension in Frost's "An Old Man's Winter Night" is nothing less than the primal tension of the cosmos: the threat to life that is urged by the powers of an ungovernable Chaos.

Chaos, the impersonal cosmic nihilist, is identified by Frost as that which is one with darkness and cold. Chaos is representative of the Void, negation, and death—a dark, frozen wasteland of eternal dimension: "All out-of-doors looked darkly in at him...." "The impenetrable outer world—the "undiscover'd country" of Hamlet's melancholy muse—is a sinister, advancing landscape in this poem, one that would break through "the thin frost...gather[ed] on the pane" but for the light of the old man's lamp. And yet, though the feeble light of the old man's lamp prevents him from being engulfed by the suffocating darkness, it does not allow him to repel or overwhelm the darkness; because of the light, he cannot even fully apprehend the darkness: "it [keeps] his eyes from giving back the gaze...."

Obviously, as darkness functions as the poet's metaphor for death, so light serves as Frost's metaphor for life, and as such, the poem quickly becomes discernible as a conceit that addresses the mystery-filled encounter of life and death as the irresistible forces of extinction converge upon the lonely dwelling of an aged tenant. As such, we are presented with an existential picture of the experience of annihilation to which all humanity is inevitably, and yet singularly, drawn. This vision is confirmed by Frost's illustration of a barren world, entombed in ice and shrouded with darkness, wherein we behold the isolation of the old man who is—as are all who await the advance of death—alone. "A light he was to no one but himself"; and this light is nearly spent in its feeble efforts to keep back the rush of the night, for it is but "a quiet light, and then not even that." The old man's light is fading, and darkness awaits the opportunity to invade.

The light fades because it is not just a man, but an old man, who peers into the wintry night: "age," Frost tells us, "has brought him to [the] creaking room...." All of these images—age, winter, night, and an emptiness which amplifies the measured "clomping" of an old man's steps—unite to fill our minds with quiet recognition of what is happening here: darkness, in its enormity, is pushing through, and the old man realizes the he is "at a loss" to allay the arrival of the intruder. He can, for the moment, substantiate and ratify his existence by doing so, but this clomping can neither delay nor deter the relentless thrust of the night, for this clomping, Frost reminds us, is "nothing so like beating on a box."

At this point in the poem (line 18) however, Frost introduces his redemptive message: the exile of Chaos may not reside in man's power, but Chaos might be contained by an eternal power, and Frost borrows his metaphorical figure for this eternal power from the Romantic tradition. The poet offers us the picture of an old man "consign[ing] his...charge" to the moon—an unintelligible vision but for our recognition of the moon as that Wordsworthian symbol of immortality, transcendence and gentle, caring femininity (see, especially, The Prelude, XIV). It is not the sun, therefore, that Frost prefers in contrast to the night, for as life and death do not displace, negate or nullify but rather co-exist with one another, so the moon does not evict the night but instead suffuses it with her soft brilliance, her likewise "quiet" light. Accordingly, the moon is "better than the sun...for such a charge"; consigned to the protection of the moon, the old man can rest, and no "log that shift[s]" can disrupt that secure, maternally-projected sleep.

Though the poem closes with a sense of resignation rather than conventional triumph, the tone of the poem is one of contented resignation: death is, but death is not all there is. Instead of striving in vain to repel the night, Frost suggests that one can embrace it and surrender to this experience which confirms the mutability and transience of all things, for as the moon does not vanquish the night but, instead, transforms it, so death allows life to be transposed into a new, higher sublimity. No one, of course, can accomplish this of oneself: "One aged man—one man—can't keep a house. / A farm, a countryside...." But, if one would rise above the limitations of bondage to one's mortal condition by surrendering oneself to that which is more than mere ego, one can find oneself united with that which is most completely the life-giving Other. In doing so, Frost suggests, one might know the experience of immortality, and "if [one] can, / It's thus [one] does it of a winter night."