

Robert Frost – Acquainted with the Night

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

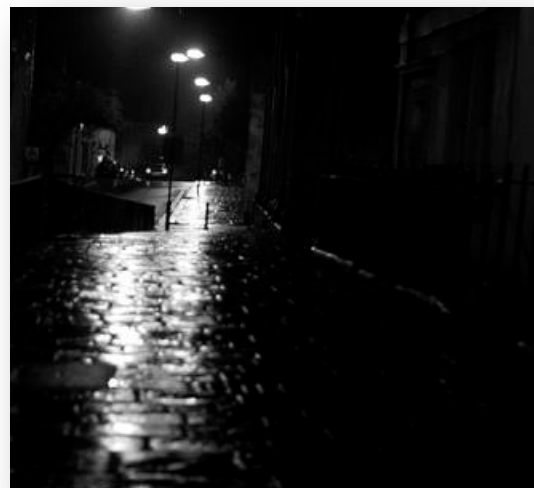
**luminary clock: the moon*

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Background:

This poem was published in Frost's *West Running Brook* in 1928.

This poem was part of a series of poems called 'Fiat Nox'; it was the final poem in the series. All of the poems were bleak and depressing, creating what one critic calls 'an apocalyptic mood'. The name of the series, 'Fiat Nox', means 'Let there be night' and is the opposite of 'Fiat lux', (let there be light) from the Book of Genesis (1:3).



Summary and analysis

The first line of the poem is worth noting carefully because it is used as the title and as the final line of the poem.

Unusually for Frost, this poem is set in an urban environment. It is a very negative picture of the isolation that one can feel even in the middle of a city.

The speaker says that he has been 'acquainted with the night'. The use of the word 'acquainted' is interesting. It is a word that implies knowledge of but no affection for the night.

The speaker refers to himself as 'one' of those who have been acquainted with the night in this opening line. This may suggest that there are others who have been in a similar situation, yet at the same time the word 'one' implies loneliness and isolation. Perhaps there are others in the same situation as him but the nature of their depression or sadness means it is unlikely they will ever form a cohesive group.

When the speaker says that he has 'walked out in rain – and back in rain', he may be talking about an actual journey or he may be saying that he has journeyed into the depths of his mind but come back from this depressive episode once more. The reason we feel that he is depressed, whether it the journey is literal or not is because of the repetition of 'in rain'. His misery is clear either way.

The darkness that the speaker experiences when he has walked past the further city light adds to the gloomy, oppressive feeling of the poem. Again, this can be taken to mean a physical location or it can mean the darkest recesses of his mind. There is no glimpse of light or of hope, here.

The repetition in these lines reinforces the idea of trudging gloomily through the streets. The poem is written in iambic pentameter (think of your Shakespearean play) which is a regular, measured beat. It is similar to the rhythm of our normal speaking voice, and in this case it also suits the rhythm of walking. The long vowel sounds in 'rain', 'lane' and 'explain' reinforce the melancholic atmosphere of the poem.

There is no sense of connection with other people in this poem. When the walker sees a

watchman, he drops his eyes. He is unwilling to make contact and remains alone. We are left to imagine why the speaker is alone or why he seems to wish to remain so. The only other person mentioned in the poem is a figure even more shadowy and distant than the watchman: all we learn of them is that they gave an 'interrupted cry'. The fact that the cry is broken off suggests violence rather than comfort. There is no connection between frost and the person is not calling to Frost in any way. Although he is in a city, Frost is completely isolated. It is worth contrasting this with the companionship he feels with the absent mower in 'The Tuft of Flowers'.

The 'luminary clock' Frost sees may be the moon or it may be an actual clock. Either way, it reminds us of the passing of time. Frost looks up –to the heavens if the 'luminary clock' is the moon, but there is no comfort to be found there. Listlessly, he says that the clock was 'neither wrong nor right'. This creates a feeling of uncertainty, and makes us wonder if there is any sense of right or wrong in the wider world either. If the speaker is deeply depressed, he may feel that there is not.

The poem ends with a repetition of the opening line, bringing the poem full circle. The speaker is locked in his own particular spiritual darkness and the circularity of the poem indicates that there is no escape.

Form: This poem is written in terza rima – a rhyming verse stanza form that consists of a three-line rhyming stanza. It was first used by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri in his 'Divine Comedy'. Dante uses the terza rima when describing his descent into hell. Many critics have suggested that Frost deliberately uses this same rhyme scheme to link his depression to a journey to hell.

References:

The Robert Frost Encyclopedia – December 30, 2000 by Nancy L. Tuten (Author), John Zubizarreta (Author)