

Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"

Summary:

The speaker stands in the woods, considering a fork in the road. Both ways are equally worn and equally overlaid with un-trodden leaves. The speaker chooses one, telling himself that he will take the other another day. Yet he knows it is unlikely that he will have the opportunity to do so. And he admits that someday in the future he will recreate the scene with a slight twist: He will claim that he took the less-traveled road.

The literal meaning of this poem by Robert Frost is pretty obvious. A traveler comes to a fork in the road and needs to decide which way to go to continue his journey. After much mental debate, the traveler picks the road "less traveled by." The figurative meaning is not too hidden either. The poem describes the tough choices people stand for when traveling the road of life. The words "sorry" and "sigh" make the tone of poem somewhat gloomy. The traveler regrets leaves the possibilities of the road not chosen behind. He realizes he probably won't pass this way again.

Form:

"The Road Not Taken" consists of four stanzas of five lines. The rhyme scheme is ABAAB; the rhymes are strict and masculine, with the notable exception of the last line (we do not usually stress the -ence of difference). There are four stressed syllables per line, varying on an iambic tetrameter base.

Literary Devices:

- There are plenty literary devices in this poem to be discovered. One of these is **antithesis**. When the traveler comes to the fork in the road, he wishes he could travel both. Within the current theories of our physical world, this is a non possibility (unless he has a split personality). The traveler realizes this and immediately rejects the idea. Yet another little contradiction are two remarks in the second stanza about the road less traveled. First it's described as grassy and wanting wear, after which he turns to say the roads are actually worn about the same (perhaps the road less traveled makes travelers turn back?).
- **Onomatopoeia** - "sigh" ... The word sigh in stanza 4 emphasizes the traveller depression/sadness for the outcome of the decision he made.
- **Imagery** - "two roads diverged in a yellow wood" + "And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black." ... The quote gives an image to the reader on what is current situation of this traveller and helps you visualize what is going on.
- **Symbolism** - the road ... The road symbolizes the traveller has to make in life in order to progress and continue on.
- **Personification** - "because it was grassy and wanted wear" ... This is an example of personification because we know that a road cannot have a desire to want wear.
- **Rhyming** ... The ABAAB rhythm in the poem makes the poem a more pleased reading and adds interest.

Commentary:

This has to be among the best-known, most-often-misunderstood poems on the planet. Several generations of careless readers have turned it into a piece of Hallmark happy-graduation-son, seize-the-future puffery. Cursed with a perfect marriage of form and content, arresting phrase wrought from simple words, and resonant metaphor, it seems as if “The Road Not Taken” gets memorized without really being read. For this it has died the cliché’s un-death of trivial immortality.

*But you yourself can resurrect it from zombie-hood by reading it—not with imagination, even, but simply with accuracy. Of the two roads the speaker says “the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” In fact, both roads “that morning lay / In leaves no step had trodden black.” Meaning: **Neither of the roads is less traveled by.** These are the facts; we cannot justifiably ignore the reverberations they send through the easy aphorisms of the last two stanzas.*

One of the attractions of the poem is its archetypal dilemma, one that we instantly recognize because each of us encounters it innumerable times, both literally and figuratively. Paths in the woods and forks in roads are ancient and deep-seated metaphors for the lifeline, its crises and decisions. Identical forks, in particular, symbolize for us the nexus of free will and fate: We are free to choose, but we do not really know beforehand what we are choosing between. Our route is, thus, determined by an accretion of choice and chance, and it is impossible to separate the two.

This poem does not advise. It does not say, “When you come to a fork in the road, study the footprints and take the road less traveled by” (or even, as Yogi Berra enigmatically quipped, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it”). Frost’s focus is more complicated. First, there is no less-traveled road in this poem; it isn’t even an option. Next, the poem seems more concerned with the question of how the concrete present (yellow woods, grassy roads covered in fallen leaves) will look from a future vantage point.

The ironic tone is inescapable: “I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence.” The speaker anticipates his own future insincerity—his need, later on in life, to rearrange the facts and inject a dose of Lone Ranger into the account. He knows that he will be inaccurate, at best, or hypocritical, at worst, when he holds his life up as an example. In fact, he predicts that his future self will betray this moment of decision as if the betrayal were inevitable. This realization is ironic and poignantly pathetic. But the “sigh” is critical. The speaker will not, in his old age, merely gather the youth about him and say, “Do what I did, kiddies. I stuck to my guns, took the road less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” Rather, he may say this, but he will sigh first; for he won’t believe it himself. Somewhere in the back of his mind will remain the image of yellow woods and two equally leafy paths.

Ironic as it is, this is also a poem infused with the anticipation of remorse. Its title is not “The Road Less Traveled” but “The Road Not Taken.” Even as he makes a choice (a choice he is forced to make if does not want to stand forever in the woods, one for which he has no real guide or definitive basis for decision-making), the speaker knows that he will second-guess himself somewhere down the line—or at the very least he will wonder at what is irrevocably lost: the impossible, unknowable Other Path. But the nature of the decision is such that there is no Right Path—just the chosen path and the other path. What are sighed for ages and ages hence are not so much the wrong decisions as the moments of decision themselves—moments that, one atop the other, mark the passing of a life. This is the more primal strain of remorse.

Thus, to add a further level of irony, the theme of the poem may, after all, be “seize the day.” But a more nuanced carpe diem, if you please.