

Write a critical appreciation of the following poem:

*The Road Not Taken*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bend in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear:  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really just the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

I will try in this essay to apply practical criticism to this poem: therefore, I am not taking into account any external reference, which explains why there is no bibliography.

The only references will be taken from the text itself, to follow the spirit of 'close reading' that was advocated by the proponents of practical criticism. The first part

illustrates my understanding of this poem, its story and its central paradoxes. The following sections demonstrate what in the text leads to my interpretation.

At first glance, this seems to be an evocation, mixed with nostalgia, of a past choice, and the consideration of what could have been, as the title suggests. The narration starts with the description of a bifurcation in a wood, and the hesitation of the narrator confronted with that choice. The second stanza details the choice itself and what motivated it. In the third stanza, once a road has been chosen, the narrator ponders the consequences and irreversibility of his or her decision. Finally, in the fourth part, the future regrets are considered. However, all along, there is a fundamental paradox: both roads seem to be identical in reality, although in the experience of the narrator they are different. There is an irony in what the narrator says which seems to imply that he or she is not really the author itself, but a fabrication of the author: what looks, formally, like an intimate poem ends up sounding like a gentle mockery of the narrator. In a way, the author also catches with the same trap the reader, who has to ponder what in the poem is frivolous and what is serious. By this device, the author thus succeeds in causing in the reader a reflection on the concepts of choice, reality and experience.

In its form, this poem is very conventional: four stanzas with five verses each, each verse with four feet (or nine syllables, more precisely), a fixed rhyme pattern. It is as if the author wanted to make the reader comfortable, by using a familiar structure, a well-known rhythm. That impression is reinforced by the high number of repetitions: of whole verses ('Two roads diverged in a yellow wood' and 'Two roads diverged in a wood, and

I-‘) as well as of words (‘roads’, ‘travel’, ‘two’, ‘one’, ‘way leads on to way’, ‘ages and ages’, ‘and I- / I’...). Sounds themselves are repeated, as if to lull the reader: ‘oo’ in the first stanza, the alliterations in ‘was grassy and wanted wear’, ‘equally lay’, ‘knowing how way leads on to way’. Those repetitions are as many echoes within the poem: the form thus underlines the meaning, where there are two roads and one choice, and a constant tension between unity and duality.

Another important aspect of this text is the way time and space are interwoven. The bifurcation in the wood is a classical symbol of an alternative in life. The wood is the unpredictable future, hidden from view: ‘To where it bent in the undergrowth’. It is yellow, evocating the autumn, itself a symbol of maturity in life. In the first stanza, the narrator is then a young adult, in the ‘morning’ of life (‘And both that morning equally lay’), contemplating the choices of maturity. Distance and duration are mixed, ‘far’ standing for ‘in a long time’, ‘step’ is linked to ‘another day’, and they even fuse in the verse ‘Somewhere ages and ages hence’. The third stanza projects the irreversibility of time into space: ‘Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back’, which actually proves that there is no coming back, that the choice is definitive. The poem seems to describe an innocent gambol through an abstract landscape, but at the same time there is a serious undertone, because of this parallelism between road and life.

There is a constant tension between unity and duality: there are two roads, but only one can be taken. Is there one traveller, or two projections of the narrator, one in the

past, the other in the future? Is there even one narrator, or two: the apparent one and the real one, the actual author? The poem builds this tension through its form and its meaning. There is a succession of bifurcations, underlined by the repetitions of 'and', 'two', 'one' and 'other' or 'another'. The 'I' in the first three stanzas is different from the 'I' in the last one: hesitation becomes regret. The ignorance and innocence which appear in 'long I stood / And looked down one as far as I could' and 'I doubted if I should ever come back' are replaced by the experienced wisdom of 'And that has made all the difference'.

This leads to the central paradox: the tension between identity and difference, which is an echo of the one between unity and duality. The second and third stanzas show the roads as being identical: 'as just as fair', 'about the same', 'equally lay'. Moreover, they have not been used much, if at all: they are 'grassy' and want 'wear', and covered 'In leaves no step had trodden black'. It appears that the only difference between them is that the narrator travelled on one and not the other. In other words, the difference is subjective, created by the narrator's choice. As the poem progresses, the gap between the roads increases: the third stanza makes it irreversible, definitive, the fourth one declares that the choice 'has made *all* the difference'. It will become such that the narrator 'shall be telling this with a sigh'. The obvious exaggeration in the emotion shown in the last stanza (culminating in 'and I - / I '), the fact that the chosen road, initially identical to the other, is transformed by the narrator into 'the one less travelled by' (underlining individuality), all this points to an ironic intention in the author, which suddenly confronts the reader in the third verse of the last stanza.

Up to that point, the poem could really have been an intimate evocation: but the third verse of the fourth stanza constitutes a rupture. The narrator ceases to be entirely plausible as the author. In a way, the split in ‘and I - / I’ mirrors the split between the author and the narrator, and the reader must reconsider the whole poem in a different way: when is it the author speaking, and what is the relationship between the author and the narrator? Once again, there is that tension between identity and difference, unity and duality: the narrator and the author are different and identical, separate but very close, at the same time one and not the same. This ambiguity questions the apparent seriousness of the choice, without removing it. Although regrets seem pointless, absurd even when one remembers that the roads, the possibilities, were identical, they are no less genuine and cannot be denied.

This poem manages to keep a delicate balance between a series of opposite concepts: time and space, unity and duality, identity and difference, reality and experience, past and future, irony and nostalgia. The unsuspecting reader suddenly discovers that the author may have been wearing a mask all along, but instead of breaking the spell, this only reveals hidden depths, and a whole new way of understanding the text: yet another alternative! In this way, the author reveals the nature of the choice: it defines reality, creates experience. It is the essence of individuality, the structure of life. We are equally defined by the road we have chosen, the life we have led, and by all the roads not taken. It does not matter how frivolous our choices may seem: our memories make us who we are as much as our regrets.