

## The Road not Taken

(Robert Frost)

### Introduction:

Robert Frost wrote “The Road Not Taken” in spring 1915 and sent a copy of the draft, under the name “Two Roads,” to the British poet Edward Thomas. According to critic David Orr, Thomas seems to have been the first person to misunderstand Frost’s canonical poem—a habit that has persisted in popular misreading, many of which falsely indicate not only that the speaker has indeed chosen a path “less travelled by” but also that the path he selected has made any difference in his life.

Ironically enough, biographer Lawrence Thompson indicates that Frost may have modelled the poem’s speaker on Edward Thomas. In a 1953 address to the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference, Frost said that the speaker is based on “a person who, whichever road he went, would be sorry he didn’t go the other. He was hard on himself that way.”

“The Road Not Taken” was first published as the opening poem of Frost’s third collection, *Mountain Interval* (1916), alongside other well-known poems like “Out, Out—” and “Birches.”

### Overview:

The poem describes someone standing at a fork, or turning point, in a road in the woods, trying to decide which path he's going to take. He looks down one road as far as he can see, and after thinking for another minute, decides to take the other one because it looks like nobody's been that way yet, and he's curious about where it leads.

He thinks maybe he might come back another day and try out the other path but he has a feeling that the road he's chosen will lead him to new places and discoveries, and he probably won't be back. He thinks wistfully about that road, the road not taken, and where he might have wound up if he'd gone that way instead. Part of him regrets his decision, but he also realizes that the things he's seen and the places he's gone because of the direction he chose has made him who he is.

### “The Road Not Taken” Summary:

As “The Road Not Taken” opens, the speaker has just met a fork in the road that he is traveling. The woods are “yellow” in colour, so it is most likely autumn. The fork offers the speaker a choice of roads, and the reader quickly comes to understand that these roads symbolize choice in general: every person reaches countless forks in the road during the course of their lives, and each has to make choices based on what limited information they have at that time. The speaker wishes that he could travel both roads and laments that he cannot “travel both / And be one traveller”—that is, that he cannot take two different journeys as the same person. He peers down one road as far as he can, and it bends and disappears in some brush.

Next, in the second stanza, the speaker takes the other road, noting that it has “perhaps the better claim” due to the fact that it is “grassy” and untrodden by other people. After noting this, the speaker undercuts himself, saying that, actually, “the passing there” (or the amount of travel that has taken place on the roads) has been “about the same” for both. In other words, about the same number of people have seemingly taken each road.

In the third stanza, the speaker continues the ending thought of the second stanza: he notes that both of the roads “equally lay” that morning, and no one appears to have travelled either one today, because the leaves are still yellow rather than black with mud from others’ shoes. This observation ends the first sentence of the poem, which has spanned three stanzas. The speaker goes on to say that he would like to think that he can keep the first road for another time, but he realizes that one road always leads to another, which leads to another, and so on—and so he doubts that he will ever be back at this exact fork in the road again.

The speaker predicts in the final stanza that he “shall be telling” the story of this decision at some point in the distant future, “ages and ages hence.” He will say that, when he came to a fork in the road, he took the one that fewer people had travelled, and that this choice has made “all the difference” in the direction his life took. However, the speaker has already spoken about how equal these roads likely are: they look somewhat different from one another, yes, but they have been travelled about the same number of times. It appears, then, that the speaker is aware of the human tendency to somewhat distort experiences, as part of an attempt to make our choices seem considered and intentional when they are really rather arbitrary. The reader might conclude that, even if a person wants their choices to be significant and special, they may in actuality make little difference.

### **Stanza Explanation:**

#### **Stanza 1:**

##### **Line 1**

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,*

- Our speaker is describing a fork in the road. This poem was first published in 1916, when cars were only just beginning to become prominent, so these roads in the wood are probably more like paths, not roads like we'd think of them today.
- The woods are yellow, which means that it's probably fall and the leaves are turning colours.
- "Diverged" is just another word for split. There's a fork in the road.

### Lines 2-3

*And sorry I could not travel both*

*And be one traveller, long I stood*

- The speaker wants to go down both roads at once, but since it's impossible to walk down two roads at once, he has to choose one road.
- The speaker is "sorry" he can't travel both roads, suggesting regret.
- Because of the impossibility of traveling both roads, the speaker stands there trying to choose which path he's going to take. Because he's standing, we know that he's on foot, and not in a carriage or a car.

### Lines 4-5

*And looked down one as far as I could*

*To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

- The speaker really wants to go down both paths – he's thinking hard about his choice. He's staring down one road, trying to see where it goes. But he can only see up to the first bend, where the undergrowth, the small plants and greenery of the woods, blocks his view.
- This is where we start to think about the metaphorical meanings of this poem. If our speaker is, as we suspect, at a fork in the road of his life, and not at an actual road, he could be trying to peer into his future as far as he can. But, since he can't really predict the future, he can only see part of the path. Who knows what surprises it could hold?

### Stanza 2:

#### Line 6

*Then took the other, as just as fair,*

- So after all this build up about one road, which he's looked down for a long time, our speaker takes the other path.

- Then we get a tricky little phrase to describe this road. It's "as just as fair." Read without the first "as," this phrase is clear, if you think of fair as meaning attractive, or pretty. But the first "as" makes the phrase a little more difficult. Combining the words "just" and "fair" in the same phrase is a play on words – both of these words have multiple meanings. The phrase could mean something like "as just as it is fair," as in proper, righteous, and equal. But this doesn't quite apply to a road.
- Yet we trust that our speaker wouldn't let things get awkward without meaning it. We're guessing that he means the road is just as pretty, but that in the metaphorical world of this poem, he thinks he made the fair, or right, choice.
- But it's not fairer – it's just as fair. So he was choosing between two roads, or futures, that were different but potentially equally good.

### Lines 7-8

*And having perhaps the better claim,*

*Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*

- The speaker still seems pretty uncertain when he explains that this second path is better. It is only "perhaps" better.
- Then the speaker tells us why the path is better – it seems like it hasn't been walked on very much, because it's grassy and doesn't look worn.
- Be careful not to think that the phrase "wanted wear" is personification (it is alliteration, though). "Wanted," in this instance, means something more like "lacked."

### Lines 9-10

*Though as for that the passing there*

*Had worn them really about the same,*

- The speaker of this poem really can't seem to make up his mind! Just when we think we've got a declaration about which path is better, he changes his mind and admits that maybe they were equal after all.
- The "as for that" refers to the path being less worn.
- "The passing there" refers to traffic, probably on foot just like our speaker, that may have worn the paths down.

### Stanza 3:

## Lines 11-12

*And both that morning equally lay*

*In leaves no step had trodden black.*

- Here, again, we hear that the paths are equal, but we find out something new, that it's morning. It's possible that our speaker is the first to travel to this place on that day.
- The paths are covered with leaves, which haven't been turned black by steps crushing them.
- Wait, we thought one path was grassy...and now it's covered with leaves. Possibly, the leaves aren't very thick, or the grass sticks up in between them. Or maybe the speaker isn't being quite honest.

## Line 13

*Oh, I kept the first for another day!*

- The speaker seems like he's already regretting his decision. He is rationalizing his choice of path by saying he'll come back to the one he missed later.
- This is a familiar way to deal with difficult choices; "you can always come back and try it again later," we think.
- With an "Oh" at the beginning and an exclamation point at the end, this line is emphatic. The speaker feels strongly about what he's saying here.

## Lines 14-15

*Yet knowing how way leads on to way,*

*I doubted if I should ever come back.*

- The speaker realizes that his hopes to come back and try the other path may be foolish.
- He knows how "way leads on to way" – how one road can lead to another, and then another, until you end up very far from where you started. Because of this, he doesn't think he'll ever be able to come back and take that other path, as much as he wishes he could.
- Here we return to the metaphorical meaning of this poem. In any life decision, we can hedge our bets by thinking we can always come back, try a different option later. But sometimes our decisions take us to other decisions, and yet still others, and it's impossible for us to retrace our steps and arrive back at that original decision.

- It's like deciding which college to go to – "I can always transfer" a high school senior might think. But then, once the decision is made and freshman year has passed, the reality hits that switching schools is a lot more complicated than it seems, and it's hard to start completely over somewhere else.

#### Stanza 4:

#### Lines 16-17

*I shall be telling this with a sigh*

*Somewhere ages and ages hence:*

- Now we jump forward in time. We don't know exactly when, but we know that it's ages and ages "hence," or, from now. So we're probably talking years, not months.
- We know that this story is important, because the speaker will still be telling it many years later.
- He'll be telling it with a sigh, though, which is interesting because sighs can be happy, sad, or merely reflective – and we don't know what kind of sigh this is.
- So, we know that this choice is probably going to be important for the speaker's future, but we don't know if he's going to be happy about it or not.

#### Line 18

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*

- This line is a repetition of the first line of the poem, with the subtraction of the word "yellow" and the addition of the words "and I."
- This repetition helps to bring the poem to a conclusion. It reminds us what's important in the poem – the concept of choosing between two different paths.
- Then, we get the hesitation of "and I" and the dash. This lets us know that whatever the speaker is about to say next is important.

#### Line 19

*I took the one less travelled by,*

- In this line, the speaker sums up his story and tells us that he took the road less travelled by. With the hesitation in the line before, this declaration could be triumphant – or regretful.
- Also, remember it wasn't exactly clear that the road our speaker took was the one that was less travelled. He said at first that it looked less worn, but then that the two roads were actually about equal.
- Before you start getting mad at our speaker for stretching the truth, remember that he's telling his story far in the future, a long time from when it actually happened. He's predicting that his memory will tell him that he took the road less travelled by, or that he'll lie in the future, no matter what the reality of the situation was.

### Line 20

*And that has made all the difference.*

- At first glance it seems that this line is triumphant – the narrator took the path that no one else did, and that is what has made the difference in his life that made him successful.
- But he doesn't say that it made him successful – an optimistic reader wants the line to read positively, but it could be read either way. A "difference" could mean success, or utter failure.
- Remember, the speaker is telling us about what he's going to say in the future. From where he is now, just looking down the path as far as he can see, he can't tell if the future that it leads him to is going to be good or bad. He just knows that his choice is important – that it will make all the difference in his life.
- The speaker of this poem could be saying that his choice made all the difference while he's surrounded by his grandchildren, by a fire in a cozy little house. Or he could be saying it to the wind, while walking alone on the streets. At this point, he doesn't know – and neither do we.

### 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. There are four stressed syllables per line, varying on an iambic tetrameter base.

### Commentary:

This has got 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 Travelled 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 travelled 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-travelled 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 Road Not Taken” Themes

#### Choices and Uncertainty:

In “The Road Not Taken,” the speaker describes him or herself as facing a choice between which of two roads to take. The speaker’s choice functions as an **extended metaphor** for all the choices that the speaker—and all people—must make in life. Through the speaker’s experience, the poem explores the nature of choices, and what it means to be a person forced to choose (as all people inevitably are).

The poem begins with the speaker recounting the experience of facing the choice of which road to take. The speaker’s first emotion is “sorrow,” as he or she regrets the reality that makes it impossible to “travel both” roads, or to experience both things. The poem makes clear that every choice involves the loss of opportunity and that choices are painful because they must be made with incomplete information. The speaker tries to gather as much information as possible by looking



"down one [road] as far as I could," but there is a limit to what the speaker can see, as the road is "bent," meaning that it curves, leaving the rest of it out of sight. So the speaker, like anyone faced with a choice, *must* make a choice, but can't know enough to be sure which choice is the right one. The speaker, as a result, is paralyzed: "long I stood" contemplating which road to choose.

The speaker does eventually choose a road based on which one appears to have been less travelled, but the poem shows that making that choice doesn't actually solve the speaker's problem.

Immediately after choosing a road, the speaker admits that the two roads were "worn... really about the same" and that both roads "equally lay" without any leaves "trodden black" by passers by. So the speaker has tried to choose the road that seemed less travelled, but couldn't tell which road was *actually* less travelled. By making a choice, the speaker will now never get the chance to experience the other road and can never *know* which was less travelled. The speaker hides from this psychic pain by announcing that he or she is just saving "the first [road] for another day!" But, again, reality sets in: "I doubted if I should ever come back." Every choice may be a beginning, but it is also an ending, and having to choose cuts off knowledge of the alternate choice, such that the person choosing will never know if they made the "right" choice.

The poem ends with the speaker imagining the far future, when he or she thinks back to this choice and believes that it made "all the difference." But the rest of the poem has shown that the speaker doesn't (and can never) know what it would have been like to travel down that other road—and can't even know if the road taken was indeed the one less travelled. And, further, the final line is a subtle reminder that *the only thing* one can know about the choices one makes in life is that they make "all the difference"—but how, or from what, neither the poem nor life provide any answer.

### **Individualism and Nonconformity:**

In "The Road Not Taken," the speaker is faced with a choice between two roads and elects to travel by the one that appears to be slightly less worn. The diverging roads may be read as being an **extended metaphor** for two kinds of life choices in general: the conventional versus the unconventional. By choosing the less-travelled path over the well-travelled path, the speaker suggests that he or she values individualism over conformity.

The speaker, when deciding which road to take, notes that the second is "just as fair" as the first, but that it has "perhaps the better claim, / Because it was grassy and wanted wear." In other words, the

second road had the added benefit of being less well-worn than the first. Notably, this absence of signs of travel is phrased positively rather than negatively. Rather than stating outright that the road looked as if it had not had many travellers, the speaker states that it was “grassy” (a consequence of low foot traffic) and that it “wanted wear” (as if it were almost asking for the speaker to walk on it). The speaker presents nonconformity as a positive trait, and even implies that popularity can make things less appealing: the first road, because of its popularity, lacks the grass that makes the second path so enticing.

Despite the speaker’s preference for nonconformity, though, the poem ultimately remains ambiguous about whether choosing the road “less travelled” necessarily leads to a better or more interesting life. First, the poem questions whether it's actually even possible to identify what is non-conformist. After choosing the road that seems to have been less travelled, the speaker then comments that, in fact, the two roads had been “worn ... really about the same.” The speaker seems to sense that though he or she has attempted to take the road “less travelled,” there’s no actual way to know if it was less travelled.

Second, the poem subtly questions its own final line, in which the speaker asserts that choosing the road he or she did actually take has made “all the difference.” Many readers interpret this final line as being an affirmation of the speaker’s decision to venture off the beaten path. But note that the poem is careful not to state that choosing the road less travelled has necessarily made a positive difference. Further, because the poem has raised the possibility that the path the speaker took was not in fact “less travelled,” it also raises the possibility that the speaker is wrong, and taking that particular path can't be said to have made any specific difference at all. There is also a third option offered by the poem, which is that the speaker is correct that choosing that road “made all the difference,” but that this “difference” was created not by taking the objectively less travelled path—because no one can measure precisely which path was less travelled—but rather by making the choice to try to take the less travelled path. In this reading, the poem implies that it is the effort made to take the less conventional path that makes the difference.

### **Making Meaning:**

In “The Road Not Taken,” the speaker must choose between two roads without having complete information about how they differ. Even after having chosen the second road, the speaker is unable

to evaluate his or her experience, because the speaker can't know how things would have been different if he or she had chosen the first road. In the final stanza, the speaker imagines him or herself in the distant future looking back on this choice. In this way, the poem engages not just with a choice being made, but with the way that the speaker interprets that choice and assigns it meaning after the fact. It is only when looking back, after all, that the speaker sees the choice of which road to take as having made "all the difference."

Many people read the poem straightforwardly, and believe the choice did make "all the difference." The poem, however, is not clear about whether the speaker's final assertion is true. The speaker explains that he or she chose to take the second road because it seemed more "grassy" and less worn than the first, but soon admits that the two roads were actually worn to "about the same" degree. By raising the question of whether there was actually anything special about the road the speaker chose to take, the poem further questions whether taking the second road could have possibly "made all the difference," or even any difference at all. The poem implies that the speaker in the future may look back and construct a narrative of his or her life that is simpler and cleaner, and which gives this choice more meaning than the truth would support. Using this interpretation, the poem can be read as commenting more broadly on how *all* people fictionalize their lives by interpreting their choices, in hindsight, as being more purposeful and meaningful than they really are.

The poem can also be read in a third and more positive way, though. In this third interpretation, the poem implies that it's less important whether the speaker's choice *actually* "made all the difference" than it is that he or she *believes* that it did. In this reading, the poem recognizes that the speaker—and all people—fictionalize their lives by creating meaning where there may not be any, but portrays such meaning-making not as fraudulent, but rather as a part of being human.

All three of these different possible readings co-exist in "The Road Not Taken." The poem does not suggest a solution to the question of the meaning in the speaker's choice, but rather comes to embody the question itself, allowing for contemplation of the mysteries inherent in defining or interpreting a life.

**Symbols, Imagery, Wordplay:**

Welcome to the land of symbols, imagery, and wordplay. Before you travel any further, please know that there may be some thorny academic terminology ahead.

## Roads:

This poem is about actual and figurative roads: the roads we walk and drive on, and the roads we take through life. As the speaker of this poem discusses, for every road we take, there's a road we don't take. Wrong turn or not, the roads we take can end up making significant changes in our lives. And we'll always wonder about the roads that we didn't try.



Line 1: This line sets the scene for the literal and metaphorical fork in the road that the speaker faces. The road splitting in the woods is a **metaphor** for a choice. Wherever the speaker's life has taken him so far, he has come to the point where, to go any farther, he needs to make a choice that takes him down one path and precludes him from taking the other. Because the fork in the road is a metaphor for choices throughout the poem, it's called an **extended metaphor**.

Lines 4-5: This description of the road is a **metaphor** for the future. Just like we can only see a path in the woods for so far, we can only see the consequences of our decisions for a short while into our future.

Line 6: Here, the speaker decides that, even though he's spent a long time looking down one road, he's going to take the other, which seems just as interesting. This is probably a **metaphor** for a sudden decision – when we think about doing one thing, like, say, staying with a boyfriend or girlfriend, for a long time. But then, all of a sudden, we find ourselves doing something else – dumping the boy or girl, and setting out on a new path. We don't know why we did it, other than that we thought we'd be just as happy with one choice as the other.

Lines 13-15: The speaker wants to be able to take both roads, but realizes that the nature of these roads is such that he probably will never be able to come back to this place. This is a **metaphor** for a decision that changes everything – once you've made it you can never go back.

Lines 18-20: The repetition of the first line brings us back to the beginning of the **extended metaphor**, and then the last two lines conclude the metaphor. In line 19, one of the roads is being affirmed as less travelled, even though the narrator seemed unsure before. And then we get the famous line "and that has made all the difference," which solidifies the figurative level of this poem by saying that taking the road that the speaker took, making the choice that he made, has changed his life.

## Nature:

You might not associate roads with nature, but remember, we're talking about a Robert Frost poem here. We're not talking highways – highways didn't even exist when this poem was written. Instead, this poem centres on two roads (more like paths) going through the woods in autumn. Nature in this poem sets the scene, and could hold metaphorical meaning as well.

Line 1: This line gives us the setting of the poem. The speaker tells us the woods are yellow, so we can infer that it's autumn. The **metaphorical** significance of this poem taking place in autumn could be that the speaker is making this choice in the fall of his life, when he's beginning to grow old.

Line 5: We find out here that these woods must be pretty thick, because a road can disappear in the undergrowth. **Metaphorically**, the undergrowth could represent aspects of the speaker's future that are unclear.

Lines 7-8: The speaker is biased in favour of nature. He thinks one path could be better because fewer people have worn it down. These lines are not just about nature, but are a **metaphor** for a decision that is less commonly made.

Lines 11-12: Here, we see the autumn **imagery** continue, and we find out that it's morning. We also see a contradiction of the earlier claim that one path is less worn than the other. This line shows us that the leaves have freshly fallen – perhaps masking which path was more or less travelled the day before. So, **metaphorically**, this line points out that sometimes there's no way to tell which decision is better.

Line 18: The first line is repeated here. The detail that the woods are yellow is left out, but the repetition shows that nature is still important to the speaker.

## "Metaphor"

### Man and the Natural World:

Throughout "The Road Not Taken," nature is used as a metaphor for the life of the speaker. The speaker contextualizes a major decision by writing about it as if it were something he encountered while walking in a forest in the fall. This metaphor helps us wrap our minds around the complexities of a choice that will decide his future.

### Analysis of Poetic Devices in "The Road Not Taken"

Although most of the poetic devices are part of literary devices, some devices are only used in poems. The analysis of some of the major poetic devices used in this poem is given here.

- **Stanza:** A stanza is a poetic form of a fixed number of lines. In this poem, there are four stanzas with each stanza having five verses or lines.
- **Quintain:** A quintain is a five-lined stanza borrowed from Medieval French Poetry. Here, each stanza is a quintain such as the first one or the second one.
- **Rhyme Scheme:** The whole poem follows ABAAB rhyme scheme. There are four beats per line, employing iambic tetrameter. The rhymes in “The Road Not Taken” are end rhymes which are also perfect rhymes.
- **Trochee:** Trochee means there is a one stressed and one unstressed syllable in a line such as “Two **roads diverged** in a **yellow wood**.”
- **Anapests:** Anapests means there are two short or unstressed syllables followed by one long or stressed syllable. The above example is also an anapest.

This analysis shows that this poem, though, seems a simple and innocent composition, points to the reality of making decisions in complex situations. The point to remember is that the road has been emphasized in that it is the choice that makes the road important for us. In other words, our preferences in life make us different from others.

### Quotations for Usage from “The Road Not Taken”

1. The two lines given below can be quoted during a speech when remembering a hard time of one’s life.

“I shall be telling this with a sigh / somewhere ages and ages hence.”

2. These two lines could be used when delivering lectures or speeches about decision-making choices in life such as:

“I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.”

### Reference:

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