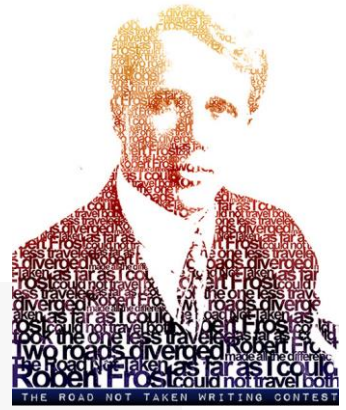


The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost (1874-1963)



Background information:

Robert Frost was an American poet. When he was young, Frost lived on a farm in New England. It was there that he wrote some of his famous works. Frost's poems reflect a deep appreciation of nature. The simplicity of his images (taken from everyday life) and his language (which reflects the rhythms and vocabulary of ordinary speech) make his poems accessible, while leading the reader to understand deeper truths. Robert Frost spent many years in New England and was influenced by the beautiful natural surroundings. The poem is set in the autumn woods and describes the yellow leaves of the trees and the dense undergrowth. This is the type of countryside that Frost would have been familiar with.

Line by line... step by step

Stanza 1

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

- Our speaker is describing a fork in the road.
- The woods are yellow, which means that it's probably fall and the leaves are turning colors.
- "Diverged" is just another word for split. There's a fork in the road.

*And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, 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 for a long time, trying to choose which path he's going to take.

*And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

- The speaker is 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 of the woods, blocks his view.

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Stanza 2

Then took the other, as just as fair,

- So after all this buildup about one road, which he's looked down for a long time, the speaker takes the other path which is just as pretty. So he was choosing between two roads, or futures, that were different but potentially equally good.

*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. "Wanted," in this instance, means "lacked."

*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 other travelers that may have worn the paths down.

Stanza 3

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.*

- The paths are equally covered with leaves, which haven't been turned black by steps crushing them because it's still early in the morning.

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 sometime later.

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*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 unreasonable.
- 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

*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". So we're probably talking years.
- 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 of relief, or sad of regret. We don't know what kind of sigh this is. 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.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

- This line is a repetition of the first line of the poem. 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.

I took the one less traveled by,

- In this line, the speaker sums up his story and tells us that he took the road less traveled by. With the hesitation in the line before, this declaration could be triumphant – or regretful.

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 be read positively, but it could be read either way. A "difference" could either mean success, or utter failure.
- 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.

Analysis and Interpretation

In the poem the speaker stands at a fork in the road and is faced with the dilemma of which road to choose. He knows that he can't choose both ways, he has to make a decision to travel one of them. He reacts to his dilemma by looking at the options and then trying to assess the pros and cons of each road. The speaker considers various factors in solving his dilemma. First, he looks down one road as far as he can until it bends in the undergrowth. He cannot see after the bend, so he chooses the other road. Second, he considers how worn the road is and chooses the one that fewer people have walked on. This path looks to him "less traveled by" because it appears "grassy" -less trodden on and less used by people.

Frost uses the roads as a symbol of life. The speaker tries to see where the

roads in life will lead. He looks down one road until it "bends in the undergrowth" and he cannot see any further. Similarly, it is difficult for us to see what will happen in the future. We can only see the immediate future and then our vision becomes obscured



by the unknown. The speaker finally chooses the other road, justifying his choice by saying that it "was grassy and wanted wear". He chooses it because fewer people have walked that way and we infer that he sees it as the less conventional and thus more adventurous choice. However, he knows that both roads are equally inviting. He tries to console himself with the thought that he will return and take the "other" road, but he knows that "way leads on to way" and people can never return to the same point again.

In the final stanza the speaker projects himself into the future and contemplates the consequences of his decision. There are several interpretations of this stanza. The speaker's sigh might be one of relief and satisfaction with his decision, which has made "all the difference" in his life. However, it could also be one of regret that things didn't work out as he had hoped.

However, whether he feels satisfied or dissatisfied with his choice in the future, his sigh is one of regret that he will never know what he missed if he had chosen the other option. He would like to come back and try the other road, but "since way leads on to way", he doubts that will ever happen. He feels regret that he has to make a decision without knowing the full implications of both options and therefore never knowing what he missed on the other path.

The theme of the poem is that choices are inevitable and the human tendency is to wonder "what might have been if ...?"

The speaker finally chose the other road (not the one he looked down) because it was "grassy and wanted wear". This choice reveals something important about the speaker's personality. "Grassy" is associated with green – new, fresh, wild, untamed, original, inexperienced. Therefore, we may assume that the speaker is an adventurer, a non-conformist. He doesn't back down from difficulty. It would have been easier to go the way others had gone.

The **repetition** of the lines "two roads diverged..." gives us the feeling of coming full circle – past actions find their consequences in the future. "I" is repeated to **convey the message** that a person's free choice decides his fate – that is what "makes the difference".

On the literal level

The poem opens with the speaker telling us of how he once stood before two diverging roads, trying to decide which road to continue his journey on.

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Although he would have liked to try out both roads, he couldn't since he was only one person. In order to avoid making a mistake, the speaker took a long time thinking over his decision and even tried to see where one of the roads led. However, this proved impossible because the road "bent". In addition, bushes and trees growing on its side blocked the view. The speaker tried to go out of his way to see what lay ahead.

On the figurative (symbolic) level

The wood represents life itself.

The fork in the road represents those points in our lives when we have to make decisions that will affect our future.

The two roads represent the options and possibilities we can choose or paths we can travel in life.

The roads are situated in a **yellow wood** which can be interpreted in two ways. First, the speaker is not at a very young period of his life (yellow is associated with age as opposed to green). Second, the wood is yellow because the season of the year is fall. The speaker's inability to look into the future is symbolized by his physical inability to see what lies down the road. **The undergrowth** symbolizes the fact that a person's choice is often made more difficult by obstacles, things that confuse him.

The Title

It seems that the notion of regret is seen in the title – *The Road Not Taken* rather than *The Road Taken*. Although the speaker has made his choice, he can't stop thinking about the road he left behind. It appears that he is not at peace with himself concerning his decision. Thus, we can infer that Frost calls the poem *The Road Not Taken* because he is thinking about the choice he didn't make and will always regret not knowing what he missed. It is appropriate that the poem is called *The Road Not Taken*, as the poet wonders what would have happened if he had taken the other road.



HOTS relevant to this poem.

Problem Solving

This means identifying the problem, considering the options, weighing the pros and cons and finally reaching a decision. We can see ALL these stages in the poem. This thinking skill helps us understand the dilemma or the problem the speaker is facing, and the solution he reaches in the end.

Inferring

This means reading between the lines and trying to reach a conclusion based on the information we have. The speaker never expresses explicitly what his feelings are or what message he is trying to convey. We can use the thinking skill of inferring to understand the speaker's state of mind and how he feels about his decision – is it a sigh of relief or regret?

Explaining cause and effect:

This means identifying the reasons (the cause) why things happen. Then identifying and describing the result (the effect) of specific actions and explaining the connection between the two. This thinking skill helps us understand that the decision the speaker made in the past has affected the way he has lived his life.

Comparing and Contrasting

This means finding similarities and differences between two things and drawing conclusions based on them. This thinking skill helps us understand how the speaker compared and contrasted the two roads and drew his conclusion as to which road to take.

Uncovering motives

This means identifying reasons for the character's behavior and supporting them with evidence from the text. We sometimes want to know why a character behaves in a certain way. This thinking skill helps us try and uncover the motive of why the speaker will be telling the story with a sigh, or why he chooses one way and not the other.

Distinguishing different perspectives

This means identifying different points of view within a text. This skill helps us understand the different perspective the speaker will have on his decision later on in life than he has now.



How can you relate these quotes to the poem?

"A wise person decides slowly but abides by these decisions." **Arthur Ashe**

"A lot of people don't want to make their own decisions. They're too scared. It's much easier to be told what to do." **Marilyn Manson**

"Quick decisions are unsafe decisions." **Sophocles**

"The more decisions that you are forced to make alone, the more you are aware of your freedom to choose." **Thornton Wilder**

"Decisions should be based on facts, objectively considered." **Marvin Bower**

