

The Road Not Taken



POEM TEXT

- 1 Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
- 2 And sorry I could not travel both
- 3 And be one traveler, long I stood
- 4 And looked down one as far as I could
- 5 To where it bent in the undergrowth;
- 6 Then took the other, as just as fair,
- 7 And having perhaps the better claim,
- 8 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
- 9 Though as for that the passing there
- 10 Had worn them really about the same,
- 11 And both that morning equally lay
- 12 In leaves no step had trodden black.
- 13 Oh, I kept the first for another day!
- 14 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
- 15 I doubted if I should ever come back.
- 16 I shall be telling this with a sigh
- 17 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
- 18 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
- 19 I took the one less traveled by,
- 20 And that has made all the difference.

saving the first road, and will travel it at a later date, but then immediately contradicts him or herself with the acknowledgement that, in life, one road tends to lead onward to another, so it's therefore unlikely that he or she will ever actually get a chance to return to that first road.

The speaker imagines him or herself in the distant future, recounting, with a sigh, the story of making the choice of which road to take. Speaking as though looking back on his or her life from the future, the speaker states that he or she was faced with a choice between two roads and chose to take the road that was less traveled, and the consequences of that decision have made all the difference in his or her life.



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 traveled, 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 passersby. So the speaker has tried to choose the road that seemed less traveled, but couldn't tell which road was *actually* less traveled. By making a choice, the speaker will now never get the chance to experience the other road and can never



SUMMARY

The speaker, walking through a forest whose leaves have turned yellow in autumn, comes to a fork in the road. The speaker, regretting that he or she is unable to travel by both roads (since he or she is, after all, just one person), stands at the fork in the road for a long time and tries to see where one of the paths leads. However, the speaker can't see very far because the forest is dense and the road is not straight.

The speaker takes the other path, judging it to be just as good a choice as the first, and supposing that it may even be the better option of the two, since it is grassy and looks less worn than the other path. Though, now that the speaker has actually walked on the second road, he or she thinks that in reality the two roads must have been more or less equally worn-in.

Reinforcing this statement, the speaker recalls that both roads were covered in leaves, which had not yet been turned black by foot traffic. The speaker exclaims that he or she is in fact just

know which was less traveled. 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 traveled. 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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15
- Lines 18-20



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-traveled path over the well-traveled 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 travelers, 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 traveled" 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 traveled, 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 traveled," there's no actual way to know if it *was* less traveled.

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 traveled 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 traveled," 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 traveled path—because no one can measure precisely which path was less traveled—but rather by making the choice to *try* to take the less traveled path. In this reading, the poem implies that it is the effort made to take the less conventional path that makes the difference.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 6-8
- Lines 9-10
- Lines 18-20



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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 16-20



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler,*

The famous opening lines of "The Road Not Taken" introduce readers to the choice the speaker faces, which will become the main focus of the poem: two roads diverge, and the speaker, unable to travel both, must choose between them. It's important to notice that, right from the start in line 2, the speaker reveals a sense of sorrow at having to choose between the two roads: he or she is "sorry" that choosing one road means missing out on the other. The speaker's struggle sets up one of the poem's main themes—the role of choice and uncertainty in life. It also reveals something important about the speaker's *attitude* towards the role of choice in life: his or her sense of regret that one is often *forced* to choose, and that choosing one thing means *not* choosing another.

The speaker's regret lingers through the rest of the poem, so

that, even after he or she has made a decision, it is difficult not to wonder about what would have been had he or she chosen the other road. One of the core ironies of the poem is that it doesn't actually matter which road the speaker chooses, since both roads would leave him or her with a feeling of regret about what he or she might have missed out on. The poem's title also speaks to this dilemma directly, not only signaling that the focus of the poem is the road *not* taken, but even implying that there will *always* be a road not taken, and with it an unshakable feeling of regret over what one might have missed. Frost himself even indicated at one point that he may have modeled the speaker in this poem after an acquaintance of his named Edward Thomas, whom he described as "a person who, whichever road he went, would be sorry he didn't go the other."

In light of the choice presented in the poem's first lines, the most obvious guiding question for the poem may at first seem to be, "Which road will the speaker choose?" But if one keeps in mind that the speaker will be stuck with a feeling of regret no matter which road he or she chooses, the guiding question then becomes, "How will the speaker deal with his or her feeling of regret at having been forced, by the demands of life, to choose one road rather than the other?"

LINES 3-5

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

In the first three lines, the poem captures the cost and sadness inherent in having to make any choice (that, in making a choice, you are also always forced to *not* choose something else). In lines 3-5, the poem examines another aspect of choice-making: the uncertainty that the person making the choice always faces. The speaker describes standing for a long time at the fork where the two roads diverged, suggesting that he or she spent that time trying to gather as much information as possible about the two roads in order to make the best decision about which one to take. However, despite peering down one road "as far as I could," the speaker's view is blocked by a bend in the road.

Everyone can relate to the feeling of looking down a road and being unable to see what might lie around the next bend. This scene and sensation are part of the poem's [extended metaphor](#) in which the forking road stands in for all of life's choices. The poem calls attention to the role that uncertainty plays in decision making, and suggests that it's just as impossible to see into the future as it is to see beyond where the road bends in the undergrowth. Further, by depicting the way that both the speaker and, more broadly, any person facing a choice will always remain at least somewhat in the dark about the outcomes of that choice, the poem begs the question of whether it is ever possible to make entirely rational and informed decisions. In its first stanza, then, the poem presents

choice-making as a kind of double tragedy: first, like the speaker at the fork in the road, making choices requires an opportunity cost of missing out on other things; and second, like the speaker who can't see the end of either road, the person making the choice can't ever really tell what the outcome of either choice will be.

Stylistically, the speaker's hesitation in the face of the choice that he or she must make is effectively illustrated, both visually and sonically, with the [repetition](#) of the word "and" at the beginnings of lines 2-4. Like a skipping record, the use of repetition captures the speaker's inability to move forward in time and conveys his or her feeling of paralysis and indecision about which way to go. This effect is strengthened through Frost's use of [enjambment](#) at the ends of lines 2-4, with the lack of punctuation creating the sense of one lengthy, uninterrupted moment of hesitation or uncertainty, drawn out over the three lines. This elongation of the moment before the [end-stop](#) in line 5 reflects the speaker's prolonged moment of uncertainty as he or she is faced with making a choice.

LINES 6-8

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*

Having looked down one road, the speaker now explains at the start of the second stanza that he or she took "the other" because it was just as attractive as the first but had the added benefit of seeming more "grassy" and less worn. The speaker doesn't explicitly state that he or she regards "want[ing] wear" as a positive characteristic, but makes it clear implicitly based on the fact that he or she chooses which road to take based on the criteria of which is less worn (and therefore, presumably, less traveled). This is the first instance in the poem in which the speaker attaches a positive connotation to the idea of *not* doing what most people do. Lines 6-8, then, introduce another of the poem's themes: individualism and nonconformity. By having the speaker choose a road based solely on which one seems less worn, Frost is further elaborating the [extended metaphor](#) that forms the backbone of the poem, in which the diverging roads are life's choices, and the traveler who chooses to take the road less traveled is a nonconformist.

There is a long history of celebrating the ideal of individualism in American verse and, at this point, it seems as if the poem is strongly fitting into that tradition of praising the "rugged individualist." However, as the poem progresses, it becomes less clear whether Frost is, in fact, celebrating that ideal or subtly calling it into question (or both).

Note also how much of the language the speaker uses to describe the road in lines 6-8 could just as easily be used to talk about a person. First, the speaker calls the road "fair," meaning beautiful or attractive. Then, the speaker supposes the road had "the better claim," as if it had made an assertion or demand.

Finally, the speaker says that the road "wanted wear," as if it had desires of its own, or had called out to him. Although subtle, the speaker's language verges on [personifying](#) the road, as though the speaker had engaged in a conversation with the road, and it had convinced the speaker to choose it. This creates the impression that the road itself had some degree of agency or influence in the speaker's decision. Perhaps Frost does this to suggest that the path of nonconformity is seductive, or to give some indication that the speaker's decision may not have been as clear-eyed or rational as he or she presents it.

LINES 9-12

*Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.*

Because the speaker chooses which road to take based on which one seems less traveled, "The Road Not Taken" can easily be (and often is) read as a simple celebration of individualism. However, lines 9-12 call this straightforward reading of the poem into question. The poem does this by revealing that the speaker's initial judgement about the two roads was incorrect—in reality, the speaker admits to him or herself that the roads were traveled "about the same" and that both are equally covered in leaves that had yet to be blackened by foot traffic.

Considered in the context of the poem's [extended metaphor](#), lines 11-12 may be read as evidence that every experience, no matter which path one chooses, is unique. If at first the poem seems to contain a moral message (i.e., "choose the path of nonconformity"), that message is quickly undermined by the poem's acknowledgement that it's difficult to actually evaluate the nature of the paths you can take, such as which is more non-conformist.

However, lines 9-12 should also be read with an even deeper degree of skepticism. The speaker has already acknowledged that, "be[ing] one traveler," he or she is unable to experience both roads, and yet now he or she declares that the two roads were "worn [...] about the same," and both "equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black." But the speaker can't know that the two paths were equally worn, because the speaker couldn't travel both roads. These lines therefore raise questions about the speaker's credibility, and in doing so draw attention to the impossibility of doing exactly what the speaker is trying to do—which is to make sense of his or her experience by comparing the two roads.

In this way, the poem creates a degree of [irony](#) that separates what the *speaker* is saying from what the *poem* is saying. The implication is that the speaker, without perhaps entirely realizing it, is attempting to deal with the regret of not being able to experience the "road not taken" by imagining the two roads to have been "really about the same." Meanwhile, the

poem seems to be more broadly highlighting the human tendency to deal with complex experiences and unanswerable questions by creating comfortable and tidy—but ultimately fictional—narratives.

It's also worth noting how lines 6 - 12 contain a lot of assonance, in the form of repeated "aah" sounds in words like "and," "passing," "perhaps," "grassy," "passing" and others. The assonance creates a pleasing melody and rhythm that connects these lines, which is interesting because the actual meaning of the lines is oppositional, with lines 6-8 saying that one road is less worn than the other, while lines 9-12 admit that this wasn't the case. The discordance of coupling the similar sounds in the lines with opposing meanings suggests a kind of inner discordance in the speaker, which makes sense, as the speaker is hoping for one thing (to take the road less traveled) while faced with a world that makes it impossible for the speaker to know if he or she will in fact achieve the desired goal.

LINES 13-15

*Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

The "Oh" at the start of line 13, and the exclamation point at the end, mark a sudden shift in tone in the poem, conveying the whimsy of the proclamation that follows. For a moment, the speaker imagines a solution to the issue of having to choose between the two roads: that he or she may return to this spot some day to travel along the other road. The speaker imagines a world in which he or she is *not* forced to choose, and it fills him or her with delight.

But the poem immediately reveals this idea to be fantasy. In the next line, the speaker admits that, in the real world, each path inevitably leads to a next path, and the only way one can go is forward. After briefly imagining a world in which making a choice *doesn't* come with the opportunity cost of missing out on what wasn't chosen, the speaker now abandons that dream in the face of reality. Thus, the speaker continues to struggle with the feeling of regret, first expressed in line 2, that he or she is unable to travel by both roads. This is all in keeping with the [extended metaphor](#) at the heart of the poem, in the sense that the forking roads represent life's choices, and one cannot go back in time to re-make decisions.

The structure of this stanza loosely mirrors the structure of the previous stanza, with the speaker providing some sort of rationalization for his or her decision before admitting, in lines 9 and 14 respectively, that his or her rationalization is flawed. Making use of such rationalizations, the speaker of the poem continually attempts to suppress the feelings of uncertainty and regret that surround his or her choice, but these attempts reliably fail, leaving the speaker alone with his or her uncertainty. Frost uses this structure to highlight the flawed nature of the speaker's attempts at making meaning out of his

or her experience. This is one instance in which the ironic distance between Frost and the speaker seems to diminish, as both Frost and the speaker here seem to acknowledge the flawed nature of such attempts.

In line 14, note how the word "way" is repeated, which embodies the idea being expressed by the speaker that each path taken inevitably leads to the next path, and you can only go onward in this repetition (from way to way to way), and you can never go back.

LINES 16-17

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:*

In its final stanza, the poem makes a sudden shift in both tense and mood as the speaker turns to imagine him or herself in the distant future. That the speaker imagines retelling "with a sigh" the story of making the choice about which road to take indicates that he or she has strong feelings attached to the memory, though the exact nature of those feelings remains a mystery. That is, people sigh for all sorts of reasons. So the speaker might be feeling a sense of contentment or relief, but he or she may also be feeling sorrow or regret. The result is that the emotional tenor of the speaker's imagined "telling" of the story remains ambiguous—all readers know is that the speaker is overcome by emotion.

The ambiguous tenor of the speaker's sigh is significant because it allows for multiple readings of what the speaker says in lines 18-20: that choosing the road less traveled has "made all the difference." Many readers interpret these words at face value, and therefore understand the poem as a celebration of individualism. In this straightforward reading, it would make sense to interpret the speaker's sigh as nostalgic and satisfied—a sign of affection for the adventurous life he or she led, and confidence that such adventurous choices have positively defined the speaker's life. However, it's also possible to interpret the poem's final words [ironically](#), given that the speaker can't actually know whether he or she "took the [road] less traveled," and therefore has no idea whether it "made all the difference," or what precise difference, or any difference at all. In this reading, it would make sense to interpret the speaker's sigh as one of sadness or regret about the impossibility of knowing what difference one's choices make in the scheme of a lifetime. The ambiguity that surrounds the speaker's sigh thus encourages readers to explore and even embrace multiple readings of the poem.

Finally, note that by this point in the poem the speaker has transformed something that could easily be regarded as a trivial decision (i.e., which road to take through the forest) into a moment so significant that he or she imagines retelling the story long into the future. This is one way in which Frost cues his audience to read the poem as an [extended metaphor](#), since it's unlikely that, "ages and ages" into the future, the speaker

would still be recounting this seemingly insignificant moment in the woods unless it had taken on some kind of symbolic value for him or her. With lines 16-17, Frost is signaling that the significance of the story lies beyond its literal meaning.

LINES 18-20

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

The final lines of the poem can be read a number of different ways. Many people read the final lines straightforwardly in relation to the overarching [extended metaphor](#) of the poem (in which the diverging roads symbolize life's choices), and therefore understand the speaker to be saying that he or she has gone through life choosing the path of nonconformity, and has lived a better life because of it. In this reading, the poem is a celebration of individualism.

However, the final lines of the poem also have an [ironic](#) meaning. The speaker states in line 19 that he or she took the road less traveled. And yet, the poem has already made it clear (in lines 9-12) that the speaker has no way of actually knowing whether the road he or she chose was *really* the road less traveled. In the same vein, the speaker states in line 20 that choosing the road less traveled "has made all the difference," but the poem has also already made it clear that the speaker hasn't the faintest idea *what* difference his or her choice made—or whether it made any difference at all. Thus, the meaning the poem *seems* to have when read at face value doesn't hold up under close scrutiny. This makes room for an ironic reading of the poem.

Under an ironic reading, the poem becomes about the ways in which people attribute meaning to their decisions after-the-fact in an attempt to fashion their life experiences into coherent narratives. By portraying the speaker's attempt to draw conclusions about the meaning of his or her choices, the poem suggests that such narratives often say more about a person's lingering uncertainties and regrets than they do about reality.

Pushing the ironic reading a bit further, though, it's important to note that whether Frost is critical or understanding of such attempts to apply meaning to past events is yet another matter that is open for interpretation. Put more bluntly: an ironic reading of the poem doesn't necessarily contradict the straightforward reading. While it is possible to read the poem ironically and conclude that the poem is mocking the flawed ways that the speaker (and people more generally) manufacture a simple and comfortable narrative from choices that were, in fact, complicated and not entirely rational, it's *also* possible to see the poem as suggesting just the opposite: that creating such narratives is a part of being human, and that even if one is doomed to fail in choosing the nonconformist path because evaluating which path is more nonconformist is

impossible, the *attempt* to make the nonconformist choice is enough to define a life.

When a poem supports multiple different readings in the way that "The Road Not Taken" does, it's reasonable to think that this is because the poet *intended* for people to read the poem multiple different ways, and to hold onto all of those multiple meanings at the same time. In other words, neither the straightforward nor ironic way of interpreting the poem is the "correct" way; multiple readings can exist together in the poem without cancelling each other out. When looked at in this way, the poem becomes not the simple story of a person who made a choice and the outcomes of that choice, but rather a deeper exploration of the mysteries and complexities inherent in every choice—and, by extension, in our lives, since life is made up of those choices.



SYMBOLS



DIVERGING ROADS

The entirety of "The Road Not Taken" is an [extended metaphor](#) in which the two roads that diverge symbolize life's many choices. In much the same way that people are generally unable to see what the future holds, the speaker is unable to see what lies ahead on each path. Furthermore, what little the speaker *thinks* he or she understands about each path at the moment of decision later turns out to have been less clear cut, underscoring the impossibility of predicting where one's life choices will lead. Just as there are no "do-overs" in life, the speaker acknowledges (in lines 2-3 and 14-15) that he or she can only travel one road, and will not be granted the chance to "come back" and try another route. In these ways, the diverging roads in the poem symbolize all of life's choices—the confusion of having to make choices in the moment, the painful impossibility of foreseeing their consequences, and the sense, when looking back, that those choices defined your life, even when you can't know in what way, or even whether they did at all.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Two roads diverged"
- **Line 18:** "Two roads diverged"



THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

The entirety of "The Road Not Taken" is an [extended metaphor](#) in which the road "less traveled" symbolizes the path of nonconformity. The speaker, when trying to choose which road to take, looks for the road that seems less worn. At the end of the poem, the speaker asserts that choosing the road less traveled "has made all the

difference"—the suggestion being that he or she has led a life of nonconformity, and is happier because of it. However, the status of the road less traveled as a symbol of nonconformity is complicated somewhat by the fact that the poem makes it clear that the speaker has no way of actually knowing whether the road he or she chose was really the road less traveled: both roads, after all, are "worn...really about the same." This, in turn, raises questions about the speaker's notions of individualism and nonconformity, suggesting that these ideals may not be as easily definable as the speaker of the poem thinks. In this way, the road less traveled is as much a symbol of nonconformity as it is a symbol of the difficulty of defining that ideal.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 19:** "I took the one less traveled by"



POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"The Road Not Taken" is an example of an extended metaphor in which the *tenor* (or the thing being spoken about) is never stated explicitly—but it's clear that the poet is using the road less traveled as a metaphor for leading an unconventional way of life. The entire poem, then, is an extended metaphor in which the fork in the road represents all of the many choices one faces in life. As with all extended metaphors, this one contains many smaller [metaphors](#) inside it. The bend in the road that the speaker describes in line 5 may be read as a metaphor for people's inability to comprehend the consequences of their decisions before they make them. The speaker's realization that, despite his or her initial impressions, the two roads are in fact equally untraveled (lines 9-12) may be interpreted within the context of the extended metaphor to mean that everyone's life is unique, no matter what path one chooses.

Frost uses this extended metaphor to argue that life is full of moments in which one is forced to decide between two or more alternatives without complete information about what each choice entails, while the speaker's attempts to rationalize his or her decision in the moment, and to assign it meaning after the fact (as described in the last stanza), mirror the ways in which all people attempt to rationalize and make meaning out of the choices they make in life.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Two roads diverged"
- **Line 5:** "bent"
- **Lines 9-12:** "Though as for that the passing there / Had worn them really about the same, / And both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden

black."

- **Lines 16-20:** "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 traveled by, / And that has made all the difference."

IRONY

"The Road Not Taken" is full of instances in which the speaker's words may be taken at face value, but are not (upon further investigation) as clear as they seemed. In other words, a close reading of the poem reveals that what Frost *means* is actually quite different from—and perhaps even opposite to—what his speaker *says*. This makes the poem a great example of irony, since it deals in the gap between what the words appear to mean and what they really mean.

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker states that choosing the road less traveled has "made all the difference." Frost borrows this phrase from [colloquial](#) speech, and its conventional meaning is that something matters a great deal. This typically carries a positive connotation (for instance, if someone were to say that adding salt to an egg makes "all the difference," it would be safe to assume they mean it makes a *positive* difference, and that the egg is better because of the salt). Many people read the end of the poem straightforwardly, and accept the idea that in choosing to lead an unconventional life by taking the road less traveled, the speaker has made his or her life *better*. The irony here is that the speaker cannot know *what* difference the choice made—or whether it made any difference at all—because he or she doesn't have any information about the other road that he or she can use to gauge the outcome of the choice. In this light, the two seemingly straightforward declarations that end the poem and give it its apparent meaning (i.e., "I took the road less traveled by," and it "has made all the difference") prove impossible to verify.

The poem is full of these sorts of moments. For instance, though the speaker chooses which road to take based on which appears to be less traveled, the poem makes it clear that the speaker can't actually see that far down either road to make such a judgment (the road is "bent" so it's impossible to see that far down it), and later the speaker comments that, in fact, the two roads were "worn... really about the same." All through the poem, the speaker's seemingly straightforward statements are undercut and made murky by other details in the poem.

Straightforward readings of the poem therefore unravel upon closer examination, suggesting that Frost intended for people to be able to read the poem as having multiple layers of meaning: the straightforward as well as the ironic. In the poem, Frost portrays his speaker's earnest belief that the choice defined his or her life, even as Frost also shows how the speaker's choice was in fact not so clear cut at all, opening the

possibility for the poem to be read as an ironic commentary on the way that all people rationalize essentially irrational decisions and make meaning out of experiences in ways that may not be supported by objective reality.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "bent"
- **Lines 9-12:** "Though as for that the passing there / Had worn them really about the same, / And both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black."
- **Lines 18-20:** "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference."

pausing at a fork in the road for a long moment of contemplation about which option to take, the word "and" is repeated at the beginnings of lines 2, 3, and 4, capturing the speaker's feeling of paralysis and indecision about which way to go.

In line 14, the word "way" is repeated, embodying the idea being expressed by the speaker that each path taken always leads to the next, such that you can never go back.

In line 17, the word "ages" is repeated, amplifying how distantly into the future the speaker is imagining him or herself and thereby amplifying the speaker's belief that the decision to take the road less traveled has implications that extend far beyond a single day in the woods, even reverberating throughout an entire lifetime.

EPIZEUXIS

Frost's use of epizeuxis in the final stanza, in the repetition of the word "I," emphasizes the importance of the poem's speaker as the sole agent in the decision he or she made to take the road "less traveled." In other words, this repetition underscores that Frost's focus in the poem is less on the decision being made than it is on the speaker's process of making and reflecting on the decision.

Interestingly, Frost's use of epizeuxis serves a dual purpose here, cleverly supporting two distinct and even contrasting readings of the poem. In one reading, the repetition of the word "I" conveys the speaker's pride and confidence in his or her decision, as if to proudly say "I and I alone" made the courageous decision to take the road less traveled, and have been rewarded for it. However, the repetition of the word "I" may also be read as a fumbling for words, conveying hesitation or inner conflict, as though the speaker were filled with uncertainty about the decision and its consequences for his or her life. In this way, the use of epizeuxis supports both the straightforward reading of the poem (i.e., that choosing that road less traveled has made a positive difference in the speaker's life) and the [ironic](#) reading (i.e., that the poem is pointing to the flawed nature of any attempt to find broader meaning in such choices).

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** "I— / I"

REPETITION

Throughout the poem, Frost uses repetition to enhance the sense of music and rhythm in his verse, but in each instance where repetition is used, it also serves the additional purpose of helping the speaker to express some facet of his or her thoughts and experience.

In the first stanza, in which the speaker finds him or herself

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "And sorry I could not travel both / And be one traveler, long I stood / And looked down one as far as I could"
- **Line 14:** "Yet knowing how way leads on to way,"
- **Line 17:** "Somewhere ages and ages hence:"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "The Road Not Taken" are [end-stopped](#), which contributes to the pleasing rhythm created by the poem's more or less regular use of iambic tetrameter (since each line ends in a natural pause, as indicated by punctuation). However, the poem also contains several instances of enjambement. Stanzas 2, 3, and 4 each contain just one enjambed line, but the poem's first stanza has three enjambed lines, making it unlike the rest of the poem—and therefore worth taking a closer look at.

Each of the middle three lines of stanza 1 are enjambed, giving each line the effect of "spilling over" onto the line below. In combination with the repetition of the word "and" at the beginning of these same three lines, this spilling-over effect creates the sense of one drawn out, cascading moment of hesitation or uncertainty. Through this use of enjambment, the poem's rhythm reflects the speaker's prolonged moment of uncertainty before making a decision.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "And sorry I could not travel both / And be one traveler, long I stood / And looked down one as far as I could"
- **Line 9:** "Though as for that the passing there"
- **Line 11:** "And both that morning equally lay"
- **Line 16:** "I shall be telling this with a sigh"

ASSONANCE

Lines 6-12 of the poem are filled with assonance. Specifically, the repeated vowel sound is "aah," as in the word "and." The repetition of this sound adds to the poem's musicality, making it pleasing to listen to in a way that functions more subtly than the poem's use of end rhyme.

The repetition of this same sound also has a way of tying together and making less obvious the speaker's contradictory statements in these lines (that one road is less worn than the other, only to then admit that in fact they are "worn... really about the same"). The speaker seems almost not to want to acknowledge these contradictions in his or her thoughts, and the smooth repetition of the "aah" sound helps ease the reader along in a similar pleasant state of not-quite-paying-attention.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "as just as"
- **Line 7:** "And having perhaps"
- **Line 8:** "grassy"
- **Line 9:** "as for that the passing"
- **Line 10:** "Had"
- **Line 11:** "And both that"
- **Line 12:** "had trodden black"



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Road Not Taken" is an example of [formal verse](#) (meaning that it rhymes and has a strict meter), but it doesn't adhere to any specific poetic form (such as a [sonnet](#)) that dictates, for instance, how many lines a poem must have.

"The Road Not Taken" is a 20-line poem made up of four quintains (five-line stanzas). The four stanzas loosely correspond to the four stages of the speaker's engagement with the decision which the poem takes as its subject: weighing the different options; choosing to take the road less traveled; realizing the decision-making process was flawed; and finally, attempting to make sense of the experience despite this.

METER

"The Road Not Taken" is written in loose iambic tetrameter, meaning that each line mostly consists of [iambs](#) (unstressed-stressed) and has roughly eight syllables. However, Frost frequently substitutes [anapests](#) (unstressed-unstressed-stressed) for iambs throughout the poem. For instance, in the poem's first stanza, each line contains three iambs and one anapest:

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

Note that in the above, the order of iambs and anapests differs from line to line. For instance, the first line goes iamb-iamb-anapest-iamb, while the second goes iamb-anapest-iamb-iamb.

Frost's approach to meter is artful but not strict, lending the poem a pleasing rhythm while still allowing for him to employ an informal, reflective tone that doesn't feel artificial because of an unnaturally consistent pattern of stresses.

Frost's use of iambs also lends the poem a steady rhythm of walking ([step-step](#) [step-step](#)), helping to capture the experience of the speaker's walk through the woods in the sound of the words.

"The Road Not Taken" is typical of Frost's work in that he tended to use traditional meters in his poems, but adhered to those meters loosely rather than strictly.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Road Not Taken" follows a strict ABAAB [rhyme scheme](#).

In addition to the poem's regular use of [end rhyme](#), it also makes irregular use of [assonance](#). The vowel sound "aah" (as in the word "and") repeats throughout lines 6-12, adding to the pleasing musicality of the verse.



VOCABULARY

Diverge (Line 1) - To diverge is to split off in a different direction. In other words, the speaker is describing a fork in the road.

Yellow wood (Line 1) - A forest in autumn (the "yellow" refers to the color of autumn leaves). Referring to a forest as a "wood" is also an example of [synecdoche](#).

Undergrowth (Line 5) - A dense growth of bushes, shrubs, and other plants, especially under trees in a forest.

Fair (Line 6) - Beautiful or attractive. The speaker is saying that the other path seemed just as picturesque as the first.

Wanted (Line 8) - Lacked. To say that the road "wanted wear" means that it wasn't worn. Frost's use of the word "wanted" here also has a subtle second meaning: it suggests that the road was calling him, as though it "wanted" him to choose it.

Passing (Line 9) - Walking or traveling. The speaker is saying that, in fact, the two roads had each been walked on about the same amount.

Trodden (Line 12) - The past participle of "tread," meaning: to crush or flatten something with the feet. To say that the leaves had not been trodden black means that they had not been turned black by the wear of foot traffic.

Hence (Line 17) - In the future.

While it was not out of the ordinary for Frost to use strict rhyme schemes of the sort present in "The Road Not Taken," it also wasn't universal—sometimes his use of rhyme could be erratic.



SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Road Not Taken" is anonymous and has no specified gender. While it's possible to argue that Frost himself is the speaker, there isn't definitive evidence that that is the case—and in fact, there is evidence to suggest that Frost may have based the speaker in this poem on his acquaintance Edward Thomas, whom Frost described as "a person who, whichever road he went, would be sorry he didn't go the other." Further, there is an [ironic](#) distance between what the speaker is saying in the poem and what the poem itself seems to be saying, further implying that Frost is not the same as the speaker.

The speaker, faced with a seemingly insignificant decision between two roads, makes a choice to follow the one that appears less worn—seemingly an argument against conformity—and then spends the rest of the poem reflecting on the decision. The poem ends with the speaker imagining him or herself in the distant future, reflecting back on the decision and believing that taking the road "less traveled [...] has made all the difference." The poem's ending reveals the speaker to be deeply concerned with the ways in which even small decisions may have far-reaching implications. However, by acknowledging in lines 9-12 that his or her decision was based on incomplete information, the speaker also acknowledges that the consequences of these decisions can rarely be predicted or controlled, and that it's often difficult to understand the meaning of one's choices in a broader context, even a long time after those decisions have been made.



SETTING

The poem takes place in a forest in autumn, after the leaves have begun to change color. More specifically, the poem takes place at a spot in the woods at which a road forks into two. The two roads continue on from the fork, but the roads soon pass out of sight as they wind and bend in the undergrowth of the forest. A person standing at the fork can see that one of the roads is a bit grassier than the other, but they are equally strewn with freshly fallen leaves, and in truth both roads appear to be about equally worn.

However, while it's accurate to say that the poem is set in a forest, it is equally accurate to say that the poem is set in the speaker's mind. Throughout the first three stanzas, the speaker is remembering the forest, the fork in the road, and making the decision to choose one rather than the other. And in the fourth and final stanza, the speaker imagines him or herself even

further into the distant future, and looking back from that vantage in time to the moment of choosing the road in the wood.

This dual setting fits with the way that the poem seems to describe the speaker's straightforward decision about taking the less worn road in a wood, *and* also the way that the poem functions as an [extended metaphor](#) in which the speaker attempts to come to terms with a choice he or she made in the past.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Although Frost was an American poet, many of his earliest poems were written and published in England between 1912 and 1915. Frost didn't associate himself with any particular poetic school or movement, but when he began to publish work more widely in the United States in 1915—still very early in his career—the imagist poets were instrumental in helping to promote his work. Ezra Pound, for instance, favorably reviewed one of Frost's early collections (*A Boy's Will*), saying that Frost's style "has just this utter sincerity." Frost's poetry might also be broadly considered to be modernist.

"The Road Not Taken" appeared in 1916 as the first poem in a collection titled *Mountain Interval*. *Mountain Interval*, and "The Road Not Taken" along with it, were regarded as a turning point in Frost's career, marking a shift from his earlier poems (that were largely dramatic monologues or dialogues) to poems that were, as the Poetry Foundation describes them, "brief meditation[s] sparked by an object, person or event."

As in many of Frost's later poems, "The Road Not Taken" takes place in a pastoral setting in which the characters' actions take on symbolic significance to illustrate some general truth about human life. In a time when many of his contemporaries were turning away from the traditional verse practices of the 19th century, Frost was markedly more conservative in his technique, always using traditional meters. He was influenced by 19th-century Romantic poets (such as Keats) in both his subject matter and his thinking about craft, but he made his poems feel distinctly modern through his use of [colloquial](#) and everyday speech.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Frost wrote "The Road Not Taken" at the start of World War I, just before returning to the United States from England. As a poem about the impossibility of understanding the significance of one's life choices, "The Road Not Taken" can be read in the context of Frost's personal life, as he moved his family overseas, just as easily as it can be read in the context of world history, with a global war suddenly and unexpectedly erupting and upending people's lives. Take, for example, the case of Frost's

friend, Edward Thomas, after whom Frost reportedly modeled the speaker of "The Road Not Taken." Thomas, after reading an advance copy of Frost's poem, decided to enlist in the army and died two years thereafter.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/23/books/review/the-road-not-taken-by-david-orr.html>

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- [Acquainted with the Night](#)
- [After Apple-Picking](#)
- [Fire and Ice](#)
- [Mending Wall](#)
- [Nothing Gold Can Stay](#)
- [Out, Out—](#)
- [Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening](#)



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- ["The Most Misread Poem in America"](#) — An insightful article in the Paris Review, which goes into depth about some of the different ways of reading (or misreading) "The Road Not Taken." <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/09/11/the-most-misread-poem-in-america/>
- [Robert Frost reads "The Road Not Taken"](#) — Listen to Robert Frost read the poem. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ie2Mspukx14>
- [Book Review: "The Road Not Taken," by David Orr](#) — Those looking for an even more in-depth treatment of the poem might be interested in David Orr's book, "The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong."



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