The Road Not Taken Analysis

The Poem (Critical Guide to Poetry for Students)

“The Road Not Taken” is one of Robert Frost’s most familiar and most popular poems. It is made up of four stanzas of five lines each, and each line has between eight and ten syllables in a roughly iambic rhythm; the lines in each stanza rhyme in an *abaab* pattern. The popularity of the poem is largely a result of the simplicity of its symbolism: The speaker must choose between diverging paths in a wood, and he sees that choice as a metaphor for choosing between different directions in life. Nevertheless, for such a seemingly simple poem, it has been subject to very different interpretations of how the speaker feels about his situation and how the reader is to view the speaker. In 1961, Frost himself commented that “The Road Not Taken” is “a tricky poem, very tricky.”

Frost wrote the poem in the first person, which raises the question of whether the speaker is the poet himself or a persona, a character created for the purposes of the poem. According to the Lawrance Thompson biography, *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph* (1971), Frost would often introduce the poem in public readings by saying that the speaker was based on his Welsh friend Edward Thomas. In Frost’s words, Thomas was “a person who, whichever road he went, would be sorry he didn’t go the other.”

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker, while walking on an autumn day in a forest where the leaves have changed to yellow, must choose between two paths that head in different directions. He regrets that he cannot follow both roads, but since that is not possible, he pauses for a long while to consider his choice. In the first stanza and the beginning of the second, one road seems preferable; however, by the beginning of the third stanza he has decided that the paths are roughly equivalent. Later in the third stanza, he tries to cheer himself up by reassuring himself that he will return someday and walk the other road.

At the end of the third stanza and in the fourth, however, the speaker resumes his initial tone of sorrow and regret. He realizes that he probably will never return to walk the alternate path, and in the fourth stanza he considers how the choice he must make now will look to him in the future. The speaker believes that when he looks back years later, he will see that he had actually chosen the “less traveled” road. He also thinks that he will later realize what a large difference this choice has made in his life. Two important details suggest that the speaker believes that he will later regret having followed his chosen road: One is the idea that he will “sigh” as he tells this story, and the other is that the poem is entitled “The Road Not Taken”—implying that he will never stop thinking about the other path he might have followed.

The Road Not Taken Forms and Devices (Critical Guide to Poetry for Students)

In his essay “The Constant Symbol,” Frost defined poetry with an interesting series of phrases. Poetry, he wrote, is chiefly “metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority.” His achievement in the poem “The Road Not Taken” is to bring these different uses of metaphor into play in a delightfully ironic balancing act. That is to say, the speaker solemnly uses the metaphor of the two roads to say one thing, while Frost humorously uses the speaker as a metaphor to say something very different.
The speaker is a solemn person who earnestly believes in metaphor as a way of “saying one thing in terms of another.” The speaker uses the details, the “terms,” of a situation in nature to “say” something about himself and his life: that he has difficulty making a choice and that he is regretfully certain that he will eventually be unhappy with the choice that he does make. When he first considers the two roads, he sees one as more difficult, perhaps even a bit menacing (“it bent in the undergrowth”), and the other as being more pleasant (“it was grassy and wanted wear”). Even in taking the second path, though, he reconsiders and sees them both as equally worn and equally covered with leaves. Changing his mind again, he believes that in the future he will look back, realize that he did take the “less traveled” road after all, but regret “with a sigh” that that road turned out to have made “all the difference” in making his life unhappy. The speaker believes that in the future he will be haunted by this earlier moment when he made the wrong choice and by the unfulfilled potential of “the road not taken.”

In contrast to the speaker, Frost uses metaphor to “say one thing and mean another.” That is, Frost presents this speaker’s account of his situation with deadpan solemnity, but he uses the speaker as a specific image of a general way of thinking that Frost means to mock. The speaker first grasps at small details in the landscape to help him choose the better path, then seems to have the common sense to see that the two roads are essentially equivalent, but finally allows his overanxious imagination to run away with him. The reader is meant to smile or laugh when the speaker scares himself into believing that this one decision, with its options that seem so indistinguishable, will turn out someday to be so dire as to make him “sigh” at “all the difference” this choice has made. Frost’s subtle humor is most likely what Frost was referring to when he described the poem in 1961 as “tricky,” for the Thompson biography documents two letters Frost wrote near the time of the poem’s publication (one to Edward Thomas and one to the editor Louis Untermeyer) to convince these readers that the poem is meant to be taken as a joke on the speaker and as a parody of his attitudes.

**The Road Not Taken Bibliography (Masterpieces of American Literature)**


