

# The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost

1916

“The Road Not Taken,” first published in *Mountain Interval* in 1916, is one of Frost’s most well-known poems, and its concluding three lines may be his most famous. Like many of Frost’s poems, “The Road Not Taken” is set in a rural natural environment which encourages the speaker toward introspection. The poem relies on a metaphor in which the journey through life is compared to a journey on a road. The speaker of the poem must choose one path instead of another. Although the paths look equally attractive, the speaker knows that his choice at this moment may have a significant influence on his future. He does make a decision, hoping that he may be able to visit this place again, yet realizing that such an opportunity is unlikely. He imagines himself in the future telling the story of his life and claiming that his decision to take the road “less traveled by,” the road few other people have taken, “has made all the difference.”

## Author Biography

Born in San Francisco, Frost was eleven years old when his father died, and his family relocated to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where his paternal grandparents lived. In 1892, Frost graduated from Lawrence High School and shared valedictorian honors with Elinor White, whom he married three years later. After graduation, Frost briefly attended Dartmouth College, taught at grammar schools, worked at a mill, and served as a newspaper re-

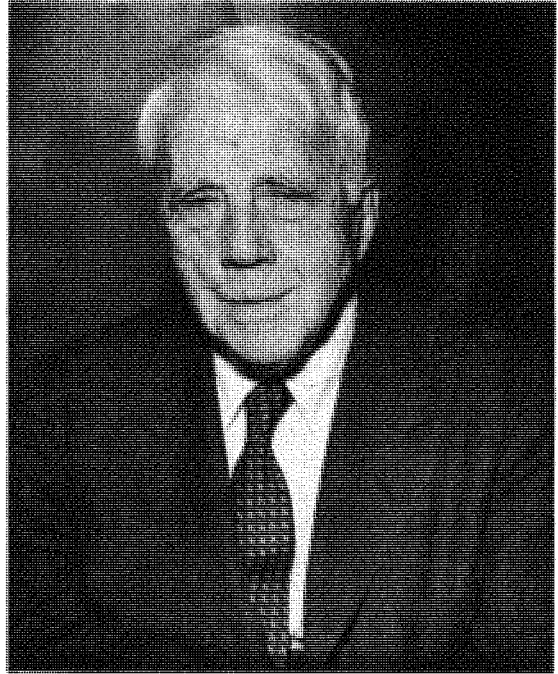


porter. He published a chapbook of poems at his own expense, and contributed the poem "The Birds Do Thus" to the *Independent*, a New York magazine. In 1897, Frost entered Harvard University as a special student, but left before completing degree requirements because of a bout with tuberculosis and the birth of his second child. Three years later the Frosts' eldest child died, an event which led to marital discord and which, some critics believe, Frost later addressed in his poem "Home Burial."

In 1912, having been unable to interest American publishers in his poems, Frost moved his family to a farm in Buckinghamshire, England, where he wrote prolifically, attempting to perfect his distinct poetic voice. During this time, he met such literary figures as Ezra Pound, an American expatriate poet and champion of innovative literary approaches, and Edward Thomas, a young English poet associated with the Georgian poetry movement then popular in Great Britain. Frost soon published his first book of poetry, *A Boy's Will* (1913), which received appreciative reviews. Following the success of the book, Frost relocated to Gloucestershire, England, and directed publication of a second collection, *North of Boston* (1914). This volume contains several of his most frequently anthologized pieces, including "Mending Wall," "The Death of the Hired Man," and "After Apple-Picking." Shortly after *North of Boston* was published in Great Britain, the Frost family returned to the United States, settling in Franconia, New Hampshire. The American editions of Frost's first two volumes won critical acclaim upon publication in the United States, and in 1917 Frost began his affiliations with several American universities as a professor of literature and poet-in-residence. Frost continued to write prolifically over the years and received numerous literary awards as well as honors from the United States government and American universities. He recited his work at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and represented the United States on several official missions. Though he received great popular acclaim, his critical reputation waned during the latter part of his career. His final three collections received less enthusiastic reviews, yet contain several pieces acknowledged as among his greatest achievements. He died in Boston in 1963.

### Poem Text

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



Robert Frost

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

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

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

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

### Poem Summary

#### Line 1:

In this line Frost introduces the elements of his primary metaphor, the diverging roads.

#### Lines 2-3:

Here the speaker expresses his regret at his human limitations, that he must make a choice. Yet, the choice is not easy, since "long I stood" before coming to a decision.

## Media Adaptations



- An audio record titled “Robert Frost Reads the Poems of Robert Frost” was released in 1957 by Decca.
- A video titled *Robert Frost*, part of the Poetry America Series, is available through AIMS Media.
- *Robert Frost*, a videocassette from volume 3 of the Voices and Visions Series, is available from Mystic Fire Video.
- A 1958 interview with Robert Frost is available from Zenger Video.

### Lines 4-5:

He examines the path as best he can, but his vision is limited because the path bends and is covered over. These lines indicate that although the speaker would like to acquire more information, he is prevented from doing so because of the nature of his environment.

### Lines 6-8:

In these lines, the speaker seems to indicate that the second path is a more attractive choice because no one has taken it lately. However, he seems to feel ambivalent, since he also describes the path as “just as fair” as the first rather than more fair.

### Lines 9-12:

Although the poet breaks the stanza after line 10, the central idea continues into the third stanza, creating a structural link between these parts of the poem. Here, the speaker states that the paths are “really about the same.” Neither path has been traveled lately. Although he’s searching for a clear logical reason to decide on one path over another, that reason is unavailable.

### Lines 13-15:

The speaker makes his decision, trying to persuade himself that he will eventually satisfy his desire to travel both paths, but simultaneously ad-

mitting that such a hope is unrealistic. Notice the exclamation mark after line 13; such a punctuation mark conveys excitement, but that excitement is quickly undercut by his admission in the following lines.

### Lines 16-20:

In this stanza, the tone clearly shifts. This is the only stanza which also begins with a new sentence, indicating a stronger break from the previous ideas. The speaker imagines himself in the future, discussing his life. What he suggests, here, though, appears to contradict what he has said earlier. At the end of the poem, in the future, he will claim that the paths were different from each other and that he courageously did not choose the conventional route. Perhaps he will actually believe this in the future; perhaps he only wishes that he could choose “the one less traveled by.”

## Themes

### Individualism

On the surface, “The Road Not Taken” seems to be encouraging the reader to follow the road “less travelled by” in life, a not-very-subtle metaphor for living life as a loner and choosing independence for its own sake when all other considerations come up equal. There is some evidence that makes this interpretation reasonable. The central situation is that one has to choose one road or the other without compromise—an absolutist situation that resembles the way that moral dilemmas are often phrased. Since there is really no distinction made between the roads except that one has been travelled on more than the other, that would be the only basis on which to make a choice. The tone of this poem is another indicator that an important decision is being made, with careful, deliberate concentration. Since so much is being put into the choice and the less travelled road is the one chosen, it is reasonable for the reader to assume that this is what the message is supposed to be.

The poem’s speaker, though, is not certain that individuality is the right path to take. The less travelled road is said to only “perhaps” have a better claim. Much is made about how slight the differences between the paths are (particularly in lines 9-19), and the speaker expects that when he looks back on this choice with the benefit of increased knowledge, he will sigh. If this is a testament to in-

dividuality, it is a pretty flimsy one. This speaker does not celebrate individualism, but accepts it.

### Choices and Consequences

The road that forks into two different directions always presents a choice to be made, in life as well as in poetry. The speaker of this poem is not pleased about having to make this choice and says that he would like to travel both roads. This is impossible, of course, if the speaker is going to be “one traveler”: this raises the philosophical question of identity. What the poem implies, but does not state directly, is that the most important factor to consider when making a choice is that the course of action chosen should fit in with the decisions that one has made in the past. This speaker is distressed about being faced with two paths that lead in different directions because the wrong choice will lead to a lack of integrity. If there were no such thing as free will, the problem would not be about which choice to make: the decision would make itself. In the vision of another writer, this is exactly what would happen. Another writer, faced with the same two roads, would know without a second thought which one to follow. The speaker of “The Road Not Taken” is aware of the implications of choosing badly and does not see enough difference between the two roads to make one stand out as the obvious choice. But it is the nature of life that choosing cannot be avoided.

The only way to approach such a dilemma, the poem implies, is to study all of the details until something makes one direction more important than the other. The difference may be small, nearly unnoticeable, but it will be there. In this case, the speaker of the poem considers both sides carefully and is open to anything that can make a difference. From the middle of the first stanza to the end of the third, physical characteristics are examined. For the most part, the roads are found to be the same: “just as fair” in line 6; “really about the same” in line 10; “both ... equally lay” in line 11. The one difference is that one has been overgrown with grass from not being used, and, on that basis, the narrator follows it. There is no indication that this slight distinction is the sign that the speaker was looking for or that he feels that the right choice has been made. On the contrary, the speaker thinks that his choice may look like the wrong decision “ages and ages hence.” It would not be right, therefore, to say that choosing this particular road was the most important thing, but it is the fact that a choice has been made at all “that has made all the difference.”

## Topics for Further Study



- Give a detailed description of what the speaker will see on the less travelled road, bearing in mind that every object you mention will be considered symbolic for something in life.
- Many readers never realize that Frost wrote this poem as a parody of an indecisive friend. Choose one character trait of one of your friends and write a poem about it. Do not mention the character trait directly in your poem, but show someone acting it out.
- Why does the speaker say, “I shall tell this with a sigh”? Is this a sigh of relief? of frustration? Explain.

### Style

“The Road Not Taken” is arranged into four stanzas of five lines each. Its rhyme scheme is abaab, which means that the first line in each stanza rhymes with the third and fourth lines, while the second line rhymes with the fifth line.

Most of the lines are written in a loose or interrupted iambic meter. An iambic foot contains two syllables, an unstressed one followed by a stressed one. Because most of the lines contain nine syllables, however, the poem cannot be strictly iambic. Often, the extra syllable will be unstressed and will occur near the caesura, or pause, within the line. The meter can be diagrammed as follows (with the caesura marked //):

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

### Historical Context

The War: The symbolism of the two roads in this poem can be applied to any number of circumstances in life, and therefore we cannot identify any one particular meaning as the one that Frost had in mind. It is interesting to note, though, that in 1916,

## Compare & Contrast

- **1916:** An act of Congress created the National Parks Service to preserve millions of acres of forest land for the enjoyment of future generations.

**Today:** Many older United States cities are losing residents as corporations and their employees move to outlying areas. While this decentralization gives the earliest relocated residents an opportunity to experience the forest land that is missing in urban environments, the continual expansion, referred to as “urban sprawl,” is destroying woodlands at an unprecedented pace.

- **1916:** Albert Einstein published his general theory of relativity. Science soon accepted it as a more accurate way to measure the effects of gravity than Newton’s laws, even though, as the name suggests, measurement depended upon relative circumstances and not absolute knowledge.

**1928:** Using principles derived from Einstein’s theory, the uranium atom was split, opening the way for nuclear power and nuclear weapons.

**1945:** Two nuclear warheads were dropped on Japanese cities to end World War II.

**1963:** In a showdown over whether the Soviet Union would be allowed to place missiles in Cuba, the world’s two super powers came closer than ever to launching a nuclear war.

**Today:** Well aware of the consequences that follow choice, no country has yet used nuclear force in a war since the year the atomic bomb was first invented.

- **1916:** “I believe that the business of neutrality is over,” President Woodrow Wilson said in October. “The nature of modern war leaves no state untouched.” The next year America entered World War I.

**1941:** Although many European nations were already involved in World War II, America did not become involved until American property at Pearl Harbor was directly attacked.

**1991:** Over 60 nations from around the world gathered together to oppose Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, a key supplier of the world’s petroleum.

**Today:** Various regional conflicts around the world are bring multinational peacekeeping forces together to help stabilize the situations.

- **1916:** The first radio news broadcast was made.

**Today:** Radio, television, and the internet have channels devoted to narrow subjects of interest.

- **1916:** The first supermarket chain, Piggly Wiggly, was begun in Memphis, Tennessee.

**Today:** Franchising has made identical versions of chain stores and restaurants familiar in every small town across the country and in most countries.

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when it was written, changes of great importance were occurring, both in the author’s life and in the social order of the entire Western world. There are many ways in which the sort of choice presented in this poem would have had meaning for Frost and also for his audience.

The Industrial Revolution in the late 1800s brought about advances in travel and communications that led to advances in international commerce. It became difficult for any country, especially growing economic powers like the United States and Japan, to stay uninvolved. The Ameri-

can public wanted to stay out of the conflict we have come to call World War I: as late as 1916, President Woodrow Wilson won reelection with the campaign slogan “He Kept Us Out Of War.” It was not until the year after this poem was published that pressure to protect trading interests forced America to join the battle.

Early in his career as a poet, from 1912 to 1915, Frost and his family lived in England. When they moved back home, England was already involved in the war. The central question of “The Road Not Taken” reflects the positions taken by the

two countries Frost had lived in: Britain joined other countries in the fight, while America struggled to remain isolated. Each side had a good case to make for its own position. Britain, as part of Europe, had been involved in various wars on the continent for centuries, as well as wars in Africa, India, Australia and North America, in defense of British colonies. Through the years, various treaties and alliances helped to end old wars, but as a result of them, Britain had to participate in new wars, even ones that did not directly threaten English land. On the European continent, with so many small countries squeezed in closely together, this sort of cooperation was taken for granted. In the early part of this century, Britain was allied with the Triple Entente, a cooperative defense agreement with France and Russia. When war broke out in 1914 following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, one country after another joined the fighting. Britain held out just a few months after the assassination, but eventually joined too.

**Urbanization:** The relationship between the individual and society is at the center of "The Road Not Taken." The poem raises questions about whether one should do things to be part of the majority or follow the "grassy" untraveled path. In 1916 this question was particularly open to debate, due to the growing impersonal control of industrialization. Industrialization was the dominant social force in the last half of the nineteenth century. The Civil War, for example, fought from 1861 to 1865, is generally remembered as a struggle for civil rights, but most historians believe that the reason the two sides had such different views of slavery was a result of each area's different economic base. The South, the Confederacy, was basically agricultural, with huge plantations that were tended by slave labor, while the Union had manufacturing and some small farms that could be tended by hired hands. The Union's victory was a huge step in the global movement toward industrialization. As factories went up, families came to cities to obtain jobs in them, and immigrants came from other countries for the same reason. The new city dwellers were not self-reliant, as they had been in the country, but were now cogs in the wheels of a vast machine. The living quarters that cities constructed to house these new workers were cramped together on top of one another—an especially frustrating situation for people who had come from open land. By 1916, artists and philosophers were questioning the de-personalizing effects of urban life and were worried that it had changed the nature of human

thought. Frost lived most of his life on farms and in small towns and avoided city life. Although it is not social in content, this poem raises questions about independence and individuality.

In 1916 the growth of Communism in Russia produced a rising feeling of hope that the laborer could win back control of his own life. The stated goal of Communism was to let all workers benefit equally from production by having the government collect profits and redistribute them. The year 1917 marked a high point for those who believed in Communism: the Russian czarist government was overthrown and the new government made Communism a practice, not just a theory. All over the world, the intellectuals who were familiar with the economic principles of Karl Marx, the economist who provided the basis for Communism, believed that a better way of live would finally prevail. Those concerned about how the spread of Communism would affect individuals predicted two very different results. On the one hand, equal distribution of wealth could mean that no one person would be mistreated while someone with more money was treated well. On the other hand, this kind of equality discouraged individual personal achievement. Personal achievement and self-reliance are considered Yankee character traits: Yankees are the people of the New England area of the country, where Frost lived since he was ten years old.

### Critical Overview

Although critics tend to agree about the thematic concerns of "The Road Not Taken," they are less consistent in evaluating its success. John T. Ogilvie, in an article published in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, suggests that the road is a metaphor for the writerly life, and that the choice the speaker makes here "leads deeper into the wood" which "though they [the woods] hold a salutary privacy, impose a stern isolation, an isolation endured not without cost." Roy Harvey Pearce, in his *The Continuity of American Poetry*, agrees that this poem illustrates Frost's tendency to write about "moments of pure, unmediated realization" which are "by definition private." The speaker is able to achieve insight, but only through solitude and separation from others.

Isadore Traschen, however, in an article in *The Yale Review*, critiques the poem (and its admirers) quite harshly, accusing Frost of unrestrained senti-

mentality. In this poem, she suggests that “Frost acknowledges that life has limits . . . , yet he indulges himself in the sentimental notion that we could be really different from what we have become. He treats this romantic cliché on the level of the cliché; hence the appeal of the poem for many.” Traschen is arguing here that the common reader is attracted to this poem because its ideas are already so familiar and because many people prefer romantic ideas to realistic ones. Yvor Winters, writing in *The Function of Criticism: Problems and Exercises*, refers to the speaker as a “spiritual drifter.” Although Winters acknowledges that the poem has some positive qualities, he faults the poem because he believes that Frost was inadequate to his task: “Had Frost been a more intelligent man, he might have seen that the plight of the spiritual drifter was not inevitable, he might have judged it in the light of a more comprehensive wisdom. Had he done this, he might have written a greater poem. But his poem is good as far as it goes; the trouble is that it does not go far enough, it is incomplete, and it puts on the reader a burden of critical intelligence which ought to be borne by the poet.”

## Criticism

### David Kelly

*David Kelly is a freelance writer and instructor at Oakton Community College and College of Lake County, as well as the faculty advisor and co-founder of the creative writing periodical of Oakton Community College. He is currently writing a novel. In the following essay, Kelly argues that Frost's reputation for aptly rendering the common man and his overall skill in manipulating language has fostered misinterpretation of the ironic tone of "The Road Not Taken."*

Irony is frequently used in literature to make a point indirectly, by presenting an apparent meaning that is the opposite of the actual meaning of a piece. Writers find this method most productive in provoking a reader to think. To say “Nice day out” on a sunny day, for example, is merely stating the obvious, while the same words spoken on a cloudy day can make one take a second look out of the window. This distinction between the actual situation and the way it is presented in words reveals more truths than a simple, direct account: in a sense, the reader is invited for a glimpse backstage in the writer’s art, to examine the artifice that most

writers try to hide or deny. Robert Frost was so comfortable with words, so masterful at creating a convincing reality, and so skilled at presenting situations that normally went unnoticed that he was ineffective at making his point ironically when he tried in “The Road Not Taken”; readers tend to accept whatever Frost wrote as coming from the same sincere inspiration that guided most of his work. In “The Road Not Taken,” Frost tried his hand at dressing weak, vain thought in the garb of nobility, and instead of the joke he had intended, he wound up with a source of inspiration.

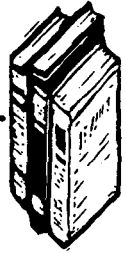
Biographical accounts make it clear that Frost did not intend the message of this poem to be taken at face value. His biographer, Laurence Thompson, explained in *Robert Frost: The Years of Triumph 1915-1938*, that the poet wrote “The Road Not Taken” as a satire of his friend Edward Thomas. Frost was amused by Thomas’ indecisiveness, by the way he would dither over decisions, unable to make up his mind. The inability of the poem’s speaker to settle comfortably upon a course of action and to follow it without looking back “with a sigh” was, to Frost, a clear indicator that this poem testifies to ideas that belong more to Thomas than to the author. The satire was not so clear when he sent a copy of the poem to Thomas, though. In the end, Frost had to explain to his friend that he was the subject of the poem. The simple conclusion and inappropriately convoluted thought process that leads to it, which Frost assumed would make the humor of his piece obvious, are handled with such gentle subtlety and grace that the final product rings more of truth than of jest.

The strength of a poem should come from the truth that it tells, regardless of the circumstances from which grew. In considering “The Road Not Taken,” we have to ask whether readers who are unaware of Thomas’ personality or Frost’s intentions can be expected to recognize irony independently, from the work alone. Contradictions abound. The two roads are described as being “just as fair,” but the very next line says that one has “a better claim”; the speaker says he “kept the first for another day,” but immediately says he would probably never come back to it. But the contradictions of this world, and especially of human perception, are the business of serious poetry and not necessarily indicators that the poet who points them out is being insincere about his beliefs. In order to tip the general reader off to his intent, to let us all in on his joke, Frost’s premise would have to be so weak or lame that anyone would know not to take it seriously.

Since its initial publication in 1916, "The Road Not Taken" has endeared itself to generations of readers as a testimony to independent thought and to the courage of the individual who leaves the safety of the crowd and strikes out into the unknown. To an extent, this truly is a noble gesture. It is intrinsic to the American tradition, to the pioneers who blazed uncharted paths and the entrepreneurs who invested in an unprovable future. But the presentation of the poem does not bestow such heroic status on the less-travelled road. To those readers who are already inclined toward romantic fondness for the rugged loner, the phrase "all the difference" in the last line is a bold trumpet blast—an announcement that an action of lasting significance has been taken. The poem itself says only, though, that the speaker has reluctantly made a decision. In the absence of any clue about the outcome, "all the difference" simply indicates that the speaker feels his choice to turn right or turn left was monumental. Even a reader unfamiliar with Edward Thomas' indecisiveness can sense a speaker who is too nervous about taking a step forward and too delighted (but still uncertain) once he or she has acted.

In attempting to portray this comic personality whose emotions are inappropriately hesitant and then suddenly triumphant, Frost's weakness apparently was that he was too good of a poet. The use of language in this poem is too adroit, too glowing with warm melancholy, to signal to any but the most sensitive reader that the speaker is supposed to be unduly timid. A phrase such as "sorry I could not travel both / and be one traveler" does pose a childishly obvious puzzle, as poetry will often do, but it is worded so uniquely and cleanly that a reader is inclined to give it more respect than a parody deserves. Also, Frost's central subject of the individual choosing his or her own course in the absence of physical or rational clues is too close to the backbone of religious faith (itself a subject of serious poetry), for most readers to suspect Frost of duplicity. Finally, there is Frost's reputation as a poet. His humanity was celebrated, not just by the public and the critics, but by the toughest judges: other poets. Carl van Doren wrote that Frost "felt, indeed, the pathos of deserted farms, the tragedy of dwindling townships, the horrors of loneliness pressing upon silent lives"; Randall Jarrell said that "no other poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men"; Amy Lowell, reviewing Frost's book that immediately preceded the publication of "The Road Not Taken," noted that "Mr. Frost's work is not in the least objective."

## What Do I Read Next?



- The philosopher Jean Paul Sartre based his existential philosophy on the idea that we have the freedom to choose every action we make, and that, in spite of the way we talk about freedom as a good thing, choosing is a horrible responsibility. Many of Sartre's philosophical books are very dense and complicated, but his drama *Dirty Hands* (1947) gives readers a good idea of his thoughts about responsibility.
- *Robert Frost: Landscapes of Self* (1975) gives the reader an in-depth examination of the uses of nature imagery in Frost and in poetry in general. The author, Frank Lentricchia, stretches some theories too far, but it does not hurt to be aware of them.
- *Modern American Poetry: 1865-1950* by Alan Suchard, Fred Moramarco and William Sullivan, is part of the Twayne Publisher's Critical History of Poetry Series. This volume, published in 1989, covers Frost's life, places him into the context of his peers, and discusses where his work fits into American history.
- Frost's New England Yankee sensibilities have often been compared to those of Henry David Thoreau, whose book *Walden* is also about coming to philosophical decisions in the forest. Thoreau's Transcendental ideas are usually linked to Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American poet who comes from the same area of the country.
- For a study of Frost's impact on the world of poetry, George Montiero's *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance*, published in 1988, gives a good start.

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Why would any reader suspect this author of standing apart from his speaker, of passing judgement? If readers do not see that this portrayal was meant to be unflattering (though good-natured), at least part of the reason must be the other cases in which we have been patient with Frost's characters and





... Frost's poem is more intricate and more complex than the popular understanding of it would indicate; it is also better: more subtle, more perceptive, more analytical, more deeply concerned with human motivation."

in the end seen that their apparent simplicity is not really so simple at all. For Frost to expect readers to "get" that this indecisive character's dilemma actually is as simple as it seems shows a touch of naivete on the author's part.

Poems often are said to take on lives of their own, apart from the intentions of their authors, but usually when an author loses control of his or her work the result is more simplistic and more basic than intended. Writers who relinquish control, who write "as" someone else rather than addressing their audiences directly, often end up being taken less seriously than they had hoped. That "The Road Not Taken" reverses this situation is a testimony to the depth of Robert Frost's humanity: he was incapable of achieving the shallowness and distance from his subject that humor needs. Subjects such as indecisiveness or the romanticizing of independence are surely ripe for parody, but they are also appropriate for serious inspection, and Frost's poem examines them with more wisdom than most serious writers achieve. It is no discredit to the poet to say that he had the Midas touch, that he could not help creating beauty when homeliness might have been more fitting, but because his intent is lost on most readers, there is a narrow way in which we can see "The Road Not Taken" as a failure.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1997.

### Robert W. French

In the following essay, French stresses the importance of reading "The Road Not Taken" carefully to avoid misinterpreting its simplicity.

Is there any poem in American literature more often and more consistently misinterpreted than Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"?

Again and again the final three lines are used not only to describe Frost's life, but also, and more generally, to characterize anyone who has broken with convention and set out on a lonely, independent course of action. For students these concluding lines are particularly attractive, since they seem to be a succinct and lucid summary of the poem's "message"; and thus the poem appears to reinforce the attitude that many students bring to poetry, that poetry is nothing more than circuitous language perversely concealing plain statement.

A careful reading of the poem, however, will show that it is by no means the ringing affirmation of independence it is often taken to be, but, rather, a poem of defeat and failure. What's more, a careful reading will show that the standard interpretation can only be derived from a persistent refusal to see what the words are actually saying. Most students, like their elders, will ignore the poem in favor of their own preconceptions; and therefore this poem is particularly apt for classroom teaching, since it demonstrates clearly the faulty perceptions that arise when we neglect what might be called the first law in reading poetry: *look at the words*.

When we look at the words, we should note that the poem contradicts itself in a curious and significant way (a profitable class discussion might begin by asking students to explain this contradiction). The speaker tells us in the famous last lines that he took "the road less traveled by," thus implying that he followed an independent, adventurous way of life, perhaps at some risk or cost to himself. Earlier in the poem, however, the speaker tells us that the roads were approximately the same, with no essential difference between them. One was "just as fair" as the other, and as for travel, "the passing there/Had worn them really about the same,/And both that morning equally lay/In leaves no step had trodden black." Were the roads different, as in the last stanza, or much alike, as in stanzas two and three? Why can't the speaker make up his mind?

Well, he can, and has. Does he *in fact* say that he took the road less traveled by? It is generally assumed that he does, but the words of the poem say something rather different. The speaker does *not* say that he took the road less traveled by; he says that he *will say*, in the distant future ("Somewhere ages and ages hence"), that he took the road less traveled by. The first two lines of the last stanza

make this distinction clear, but they are usually ignored as though they did not exist. The speaker is by no means looking back on his life and commenting with pride on his rugged independence. For one thing, he is neither independent nor decisive; as the first stanza tells us, he is a long time making up his mind, and even when he has done so, he likes to think that the choice is not final, that he may yet be able to return and choose again ("Oh, I kept the first for another day!"). Furthermore, the speaker can hardly be looking back on a life nearing its end, since his reference to "ages and ages hence" indicates that he still has much life to live. To say this, however, raises several questions: since the speaker's future still lies wide open before him, how can he know what he will be saying near the end of it? What makes him so ready to offer premature judgments on the whole course of his life? What "difference" is he talking about? And why will he say that the roads were dissimilar, when he has clearly revealed that they were practically identical?

Back to the text. The speaker notes that when he will say that he took the road less traveled by, he will say it "with a sigh." If he were asserting his individualism, he would certainly not be doing it "with a sigh." For what are the implications of a sigh? What mood does it suggest? Not happiness, surely, nor confidence, nor pride, but something like regret, or melancholy, or wistful sorrow. Contributing to this mood is the curious phrase, "Somewhere ages and ages hence." Why would anyone refer to his future in just these words? The phrase suggests, among other things, that the speaker sees his future as extremely long. We are accustomed to think of life as too short, in no way extending beyond us for "ages"; so that if one's future can be conceived in terms of "ages and ages," one must indeed be weary of living. In any case, the speaker can hardly be said to face the future with enthusiasm or eager anticipation; the future seems, rather, to be something of a burden.

What, then, are we to make of this person? We know that he has, of necessity, made a choice, one "road" instead of another, and that the choice will have significant bearing on the course of his life (the last stanza makes clear that he is talking about more than roads). Furthermore, we know that he is going to tell a lie: he is going to say (he has told us so) that he took the road less traveled by when in fact both roads were about the same, equally attractive and equally worn. Why is he going to lie? And how does he *know*, so soon, that "Somewhere ages and ages hence" he is going to lie?

Only reference to the details of the poem can answer these questions; but it is just these details that are often overlooked. When they are all before us, however, they form a consistent pattern. In the end, it becomes apparent that the speaker is preparing his excuses; he expects to fail, and having done so, he will blame his failure on the independent course of his life. By claiming to have taken the road less traveled by, he will be implying that he has chosen to avoid the world's ways and therefore could not be expected to succeed on the world's terms. He will be lying, of course, for we know that he did *not* take the road less traveled by; but the lie will provide a respectable excuse for the failure that he sees as certain and inevitable—indeed, if the lie is believed, it may even make failure look like heroism, which is no doubt the speaker's intent. He is anticipating a life of failure and defeat, with a sigh at the end of it; no wonder the future seems so long.

As this brief reading suggests, Frost's poem is more intricate and more complex than the popular understanding of it would indicate; it is also better: more subtle, more perceptive, more analytical, more deeply concerned with human motivation. As a subject for classroom discussion, "The Road Not Taken" has many virtues, not the least of which is its apparent simplicity: it seems so easy. The poem is deceptive, however, for only the language is simple, not the technique. Still, its accessibility encourages exploration; and as it is explored, the poem reveals itself, piece by piece, until the pieces form a coherent whole. It is not, then, a *difficult* poem so much as a *demanding* poem: in order to read it at all, we must sit up and pay the closest attention to detail, if the poem is not to be lost. It is a poem that can teach us, finally, that most important of lessons, the necessity of taking language seriously.

**Source:** Robert W. French, "Reading Frost: 'The Road Not Taken,'" in *The English Record*, Vol XXVI, No. 2, Spring, 1975 pp. 91–93.

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