

An Analysis of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"

Consuelo Dequito-Samson

Mindanao State University-Maguindanao, Dalican, Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao, Philippines

Abstract: This paper aimed to analyze Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" from the vantage point of the New Criticism. The analysis runs in the poem's title, symbolism, rhyme, form and meter, point of view, setting, sound, and themes.

New Criticism is the name given to a style of criticism advocated by a group of academics writing in the first half of the 20th century. New Criticism, like Formalism, tended to consider texts as autonomous and "closed," meaning that everything that is needed to understand a work is present within it. The reader does not need outside sources, such as the author's biography, to fully understand a text; while New Critics did not completely discount the relevance of the author, background, or possible sources of the work, they did insist that those types of knowledge had very little bearing on the work's merit as literature. Like Formalist critics, New Critics focused their attention on the variety and degree of certain literary devices, specifically metaphor, irony, tension, and paradox. The New Critics emphasized "close reading" as a way to engage with a text, and paid close attention to the interactions between form and meaning.

Keywords: New Criticism, diverged roads, less traveled.

I. INTRODUCTION

Living a meaningful life is making small and big decisions. Regardless of its degree of seriousness, a decision requires making choices. At certain point in every man's life, he is faced with a "fork in the road" and battles which path to take. The real challenge of decision-making is its possible impact on one's life especially if the decision is life altering.

In many instances in his life, man has to choose from the different paths such as which religion to embrace, which side to take, which proposal to accept, who to accommodate, and so on and so forth. In the end, man becomes what he is by the decision he makes. "Between two roads, the one we choose takes us to where we are" (<http://www.shmoop.com/road-not-taken/analysis.html>). This is why examining the pros and cons as well as considering the consequences of the decision we make is always important.

"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost speaks of a reality relative to making decisions in life as encountered by the human race. Oftentimes, decisions are made between choices which are not popular but correct and not correct but popular. At times, man is left with no choice but to do or not to do. Under any of the mentioned difficult circumstances, man has to make a final choice which at the moment he thinks is "the better choice" but later continues to doubt it.

This paper is the writer's humble attempt to analyze one of Frost's very famous pieces from the vantage point of the New Criticism.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

BY: ROBERT FROST

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;
 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.

The analysis of “The Road Not Taken” in this paper runs in its title, symbolism, rhyme, form, meter, point of view, setting, sound and themes.

II. THE ANALYSIS

The Title:

The title “The Road Not Taken” gives way to its interpretation. In an ordinary reading, one may interpret the poem to be about two choices, “The Road Less Traveled” and “The Road Not Taken” as Frost identified in his poem. This is suggested in the lines “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood”, “And looked down one as far as I could”, and “Then took the other as just as fair.”

Most readers misinterpret the poem to focus on the road chosen by the traveler mentioned in the line “I took the one less traveled by” which refers to the path that is the less popular choice of most people. But looking at the title and the details of the poem, it is evident that the focus of the poem is “The Road Not Taken”. A careful analysis of the symbolism will hint the reader that the poem is actually a metaphor of the traveler’s reflection of his lost opportunities in life by taking the other road.

Yes, “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood”. “A close look at the poem reveals that Frost’s walker encounters two nearly identical paths” (Pritchard, 1984). These similarities made him reflect which one to take for the two seem equal. He is faced

with a difficult situation. He cannot take both. Though unsure what lies ahead he has to make a choice and follow one path. In consequence, he has to give up his chance of following the other one. Thus the haunting questions of “What if I choose the other road?” and “Would life be different?” make this poem and justifies the title.

The Symbolism:

One dominant and symbolic term used in the poem is ROAD. In the poem, it refers to the decision the speaker made in his life. It likewise refers to us. In every decision we make, we reject the other choice and lose our chance to see what it may offer. Right or wrong, the decision we make contributes to what we are. The rejected choice on the other hand is not actually rejected because it leaves one significant question which keeps as wonder “what if I took the other choice, would it make a difference?”

Below are lines in the poem “The Road Not Taken” which contain or suggest the word ROAD along with their symbolic analysis.

Line 1 *Two roads diverged in a yellow wood*

Road here is a metaphor for a choice man has to make. Regardless of any status in life, certain circumstances will force him to make a choice which prohibits him from taking other choices.

Lines 4-5 *And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth*

In this two lines ROAD is a metaphor for the future. The traveler tries to look into his future but it was not possible for him to predict the consequences of his choice.

Line 6 *Then took the other (road) just as fair,*

This line presents a metaphor of a difficult decision made between two different but potentially equally good choices or futures.

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 three lines present a metaphor for life-changing decision. Sometimes we regret our decisions and we wish to have taken the other choices but it is not possible. There are decisions that affect other decisions and retracing is no longer possible.

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 repetition technique is the reinforcement of the extended metaphor in the beginning of the poem while the last two lines conclude the metaphor. There is an affirmation of one road being traveled less which was taken by the traveler. That choice of road has changed his life.

Rhyme, Form and Meter:

There are rhymes in the poem. For instance, lines 1, 3 and 4 in the first stanza rhyme. This is indicated by the words *wood*, *stood* and *could*. In the second stanza, lines 2 and 5 rhyme as evident by the words *claim* and *same* and lines 3 and 4 rhyme as evident in *wear* and *there*. In the third stanza, lines 1, 3 and 4 rhyme by using the words *lay*, *day* and *way*. The words *black* and *back* in the same stanza also rhyme. Finally, lines 1 and 5 rhyme as indicated by *I* and *by*.

The poem consists of four stanzas. Each stanza is composed of five lines. These are called quintains. Each quintain follows the ABAAB rhyme as illustrated in the first stanza:

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

Basically, the poem is iambic because it employs one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. However there are also variations most of which anapestic which employs two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable.

Usually iambic meter in poetry has five feet or units of stressed and unstressed syllables. But "The Road Not Taken" has only four.

Therefore, the rhythm and rhyme scheme of this poem does not necessarily follow the usual poetic meter. This element makes this particular piece of Frost different from other pieces in poetry just like the speaker in this poem who tries to be different by taking "The Road Less Traveled."

Point of View:

The voice that talks to the reader is owned by someone who experiences conflict in making a big decision in his life. This is manifested in "Two diverged roads" and "...I could not travel both."

Drawing a metaphor from "the falling leaves" and "the yellow woods" for the speaker's age, "we can say that he is in his forties or fifties". Decision-making during this period of man's life is typically critical and difficult. This is so because if decision is made and later doubted there is not enough time to change or retrace the path already taken.

Moreover, there is a manifestation of the speaker's impulsiveness in the line "Oh, I kept the first for another day!" after contemplating on one path but takes the other so fast when he realizes that both paths are almost the same.

Most often such impulses bring about regrets over decisions made and make the person sad in the end. This claim is illustrated in the line "I shall be telling this with a sigh".

Setting:

The poem used the forest as its setting. The plot starts with the speaker having contact with nature as he wanders in the "yellow woods". It is in this travel when he finds "two diverged roads". He is not in a hurry as he "stood there long" to study which path to take. This means that the speaker was in real difficulty deciding on something.

It is still early in the morning. Fresh leaves are falling on both roads. The view of the first road is blocked by small plants while the second road is grassy. Since it is early in the morning both roads show not much sign of use. This is manifested in the line "In leaves no step had trodden black."

The setting describes the overall effect of the speaker's difficulty in making one big life changing decision in his life.

Sound:

Like the speaker who walks slowly by the woods then stopping and contemplating which path to take, we feel the same experience as suggested by the rhythm of the poem. The speaker is unsure which way to go. He wants to be different by the choice he makes. The problem is that upon examination of the two paths, the speaker discovers that both roads appear about the same which complicates the speaker's decision-making.

This sound of complication is heard in the rhythm and form of the poem "The Road Not Taken". It has a complicated form and tricky rhythm. As described, "it is basically iambic with many variations most of which anapestic. Iambs in poetry are commonly in pentameter. However, this poem is in iambic tetrameter."

Just like the speaker who tries to be different from anyone else when he chooses his path, this poem isn't like many other poems.

Themes:

The prevailing theme of the poem centers on the concept of choice. Throughout the poem the speaker struggles in his decision-making.

Jay Parini as cited in Pritchard (1984) criticizes Frost's "The Road Not Taken" as a complicated poem about two choices that are nearly identical. According to Arp and Johnson (2009) the speaker in the poem wonders how his life would have been had he gone down the other path. Frost relates his poem with his readers' own lives. Most people are like the speaker in the poem. They hesitate to decide and once the decision is made they keep on wondering what if they take the other choice.

Expressing the trials man goes through in his life, dealing with the uncertainties of the future brought about by his life-changing decision today and being contented with the chosen decision are some realities faced by every man at some point in his life. This is what the poem is about.

Conclusion:

As we journey through life, oftentimes we come to diverged roads. Our examination of each road sometimes makes us realize that both are equally traveled or not travelled and the realization adds up to the difficulty of making the choice.

Depending on our values and priorities in life, we have to take one road at a time. However, as we decide we are never sure what lies ahead except that the choice we make will surely bring changes in our life.

Does anyone know whether he will be happy or not with his choice? None, except when the time comes. And when that time comes, he realizes that he needs to make another decision. This time the choice will spell out his happiness or loneliness and it is when the difference is made.

III. SOURCES

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