

"The Road Not Taken"

Author: Robert Frost

Date of birth: March 26, 1874

Place of birth: San Francisco, California

Date of death: January 29, 1963

Place of death: Boston, Massachusetts

Country: United States

Culture: American

Type of poem: Lyric

Appears in: *Mountain Interval*, 1916; *You Come Too: Favorite Poems for Young Readers*, 1959; *The Poetry of Robert Frost* edited by Edward Connery Lathem, 1969

Robert Frost is among the most popular and influential of all American poets, and "The Road Not Taken" is one of his most popular and influential poems. The poem is clearly written and readily accessible, but it is also somewhat mysterious and thought provoking. On one level, it simply discusses a walk through the woods; on another, it raises complex questions about life itself as a kind of journey. Moreover, it creates an interpretive uncertainty in its readers that resembles the uncertainty the speaker himself describes.

The poem opens by describing its central metaphor: two paths diverged from one another as the speaker once walked through some woods. The speaker meditates on and develops this idea throughout the text. In the meantime, though, readers will note that the woods are described as "yellow" (line 1), already suggesting an autumn setting and implying change or mutability, a central topic in much poetry. The autumn time frame also suggests that winter, the season of death, is approaching.

As is typical of Frost, the poem's language is simple, clear, and straightforward. Frost uses stanzas of even length, a conventional *abaab* rhyme scheme, and a regular, discernible meter. He was not a modernist in any radical ways—unlike, say, Ezra Pound or William Carlos Williams—and "The Road Not Taken" initially looks rather simple. Yet it later becomes more complex, if not in its language, then in its implications.

In line 2, the speaker, often believed to be either Frost himself or his friend Edward Thomas, reveals that he was "sorry [he] could not travel both" paths. This is a widely shared sentiment; already the speaker is suggesting the inevitable limitations humans face,

such as their need to choose between alternatives even when they would wish to explore multiple options. The speaker stood for a "long" time (3), contemplating his choice. Here, just as the speaker paused, so too does the poem encourage the reader to pause and contemplate, along with him, the choice he faces. As he looks down one path, he sees where it bends, beyond his sight, "in the undergrowth" (5). This imagery raises the possibility that the undergrowth symbolizes mystery, the unknown, or perhaps even death. The "undergrowth" aroused the speaker's curiosity and now arouses similar curiosity in the reader. Many readers find themselves wondering, in suspense, which path the speaker took.

Just when the speaker has led the reader to think he took the path moving toward the undergrowth, he suddenly reveals that in fact he took the other. This abrupt shift is part of a key pattern in this poem: just when readers have been led to expect one thing, they encounter something else. Frost's repeated undermining of readers' expectations makes the experience of moving through this poem one partly of uncertainty and surprise. In a sense, the poem forces the reader to experience the same kinds of dilemmas that the speaker himself experienced and now describes.

In the second stanza, the speaker suggests that the path he did choose had "perhaps the better claim" (7), but "perhaps" is the key word. Frost rarely states anything definite in the poem; instead, he constantly leaves options open, for both the speaker and the reader. The speaker goes on to reveal that the path he chose was the less-traveled one, leading many readers to conclude that he is a bit of an individualist or adventurer, someone who enjoys going his own way, both literally and figuratively. One might have expected him to say that the more well-traveled path had the "better claim," if only because it would probably be the easier path to travel, but the poem undermines this expectation, as it undermines so many others.

Another example of this pattern of undermined expectations occurs in the next few lines. Having just said that one path perhaps had the "better claim" because it was grassier and more covered with leaves, the speaker now undercuts the distinction, too, revealing that in fact both paths were really "worn . . . about the same" (10) and that both were equally covered with freshly fallen leaves. But even this statement is somewhat equivocal: just as the speaker had earlier said that one path "perhaps" had the better claim, leaving room for doubt, now he says that the two paths are "about" equally worn, thus creating further wiggle room. Little seems certain in this poem, either in the speaker's recollections of his perceptions as he moved through the woods

or in the reader's experience as the reader moves through the poem. The speaker repeatedly suggests clear distinctions, only to collapse them.

More emphasis on mutability enters in stanza 3: now the leaves are not only yellow, but some of them have fallen and been "trodden black" (12). This detail is quickly followed by yet another instance of the poem creating an expectation and then undercutting it. No sooner does the speaker suggest that he may return "another day" (13) to tread the path he rejected than he admits that, "knowing how way leads on to way" (14), he "doubt[s] if [he] should ever come back" (15). However one chooses to interpret the poem's ultimate meaning, the experience of reading the text is one of being led down one path only to suddenly contemplate another. Poems, unlike paintings, cannot be seen altogether and at once; like music, they exist in time, as unfolding processes. The process of moving through "The Road Not Taken" is the process of constantly being surprised by various false starts.

Another example of this pattern occurs in stanza 4. Whereas all the imagery of autumn and mutability might have suggested that the speaker is already old, line 17 reveals that he expects to live for "ages and ages hence." And, whereas he claims in line 16 that he will be telling of his experience "with a sigh" at some very distant time, he is in fact telling of it right now, by writing the poem. Finally, when the speaker asserts that the choice of the less-traveled path "has made all the difference" (20), he again leaves the reader hanging, never revealing why or how the difference has been so great.

Thus, a poem that might have seemed a simple reflection on the choices humans face in life becomes, instead, a work that makes it intriguingly difficult to be sure of anything. The uncertainty the speaker describes is uncertainty the reader also experiences. Based on Lawrance Thompson's 1966–76 biography of Frost, a number of critics, in fact, have suggested that this apparently serious poem was in fact intended by Frost as a joke at the expense of the speaker—a reading that would be one more (and perhaps the greatest) example of undercutting expectations.

Further Reading

Orr, David. "The Most Misread Poem in America." *The Paris Review*, 11 Sept. 2015, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/09/11/the-most-misread-poem-in-america. Accessed 13 Mar. 2018.

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