Robert Frost And A Summary of The Road Not Taken

"The Road Not Taken" is an ambiguous poem that allows the reader to think about choices in life, whether to go with the mainstream or go it alone. If life is a journey, this poem highlights those times in life when a decision has to be made. Which way will you go?

The ambiguity springs from the question of free will versus determinism, whether the speaker in the poem consciously decides to take the road that is off the beaten track or only does so because he doesn't fancy the road with the bend in it. External factors therefore make up his mind for him.

Robert Frost wrote this poem to highlight a trait of, and poke fun at, his friend Edward Thomas, an English-Welsh poet, who, when out walking with Frost in England would often regret not having taken a different path. Thomas would sigh over what they might have seen and done, and Frost thought this quaintly romantic.

In other words, Frost's friend regretted not taking the road that might have offered the best opportunities, despite it being an unknown.

Frost liked to tease and goad. He told Thomas: "No matter which road you take, you'll always sigh and wish you'd taken another." So it's ironic that Frost meant the poem to be somewhat light-hearted, but it turned out to be anything but. People take it very seriously.

It is the hallmark of the true poet to take such everyday realities, in this case, the sighs of a friend on a country walk, and transform them into something so much more.

"The Road Not Taken" is all about what did not happen: This person, faced with an important conscious decision, chose the least popular, the path of most resistance. He was destined to go down one, regretted not being able to take both, so he sacrificed one for the other.

Ultimately, the reader is left to make up their own mind about the emotional state of the speaker at the end. Was the choice of the road less travelled a positive one? It certainly made "all the difference," but Frost does not make it clear just what this difference is.

All of Robert Frost's poems can be found in this exceptional book, The Collected Poems, which I use for all my analyses. It contains all of his classics and more. It's the most comprehensive collection currently on offer.

"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.

What Is the Main Theme of "The Road Not Taken?"

The main theme of the "The Road Not Taken" is that it is often impossible to see where a life-altering decision will lead. Thus, one should make their decision swiftly and with confidence. It is normal to wonder what the outcome would have been if the other road, the road not taken, was the road chosen. But to contemplate this hypothetical deeply is folly, for it is impossible to say whether taking the other road would have been better or worse: all one can say is that it would have been different.

What Is the Central Message of "The Road Not Taken?"

"The Road Not Taken" suddenly presents the speaker and the reader with a dilemma. There are two roads in an autumnal wood separating off, presumably the result of the one road splitting, and there's nothing else to do but to choose one of the roads and continue life's journey.

The central message is that, in life, we are often presented with choices. When making a choice, one is required to make a decision. Viewing a choice as a fork in a path, it becomes clear that we must choose one direction or another, but not both.

In "The Road Not Taken," Frost does not indicate whether the road he chose was the right one. Nonetheless, that is the way he is going now, and the place he ends up, for better or worse, was the result of his decision.

This poem is not about taking the road less travelled, about individuality or uniqueness. This poem is about the road taken, to be sure, as well the road not taken, not necessarily the road less traveled. Any person who has made a decisive choice will agree that it is human nature to contemplate the "What if..." had you made the choice you did not make. This pondering about the different life one may have lived had they done something differently is central to "The Road Not Taken."

The speaker opts, at random, for the other road and, once on it, declares himself happy because it has more grass and not many folk have been down it. Anyway, he could always return one day and try the 'original' road again. Would that be possible? Perhaps not, life has a way of letting one thing leading to another until going backwards is just no longer an option.

But who knows what the future holds down the road? The speaker implies that, when he's older he might look back at this turning point in his life, the morning he took the road less travelled, because taking that particular route completely altered his way of being.

What Is the Structure of "The Road Not Taken?"

This poem consists of four stanzas, each five lines in length (a quintrain), with a mix of iambic and anapaestic tetrameter, producing a steady rhythmical four beat first-person narrative. Most common speech is a combination of iambs and anapaests, so Frost chose his lines to reflect this:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

This simple looking poem, mostly monosyllabic, has a traditional rhyme scheme of ABAAB which helps keep the lines tight, whilst the use of enjambment (where one line runs into the next with no punctuation) keeps the sense flowing.

The whole poem is an extended metaphor; the road is life, and it diverges, that is, splits apart–forks. There is a decision to be made and a life will be changed. Perhaps forever.

What Is the Mood and Tone of "The Road Not Taken?"

Whilst this is a reflective, thoughtful poem, it's as if the speaker is caught in two minds. He's encountered a turning point. The situation is clear enough - take one path or the other, black or white - go ahead, do it. But life is rarely that simple. We're human, and our thinking processes are always on the go trying to work things out. You take the high road, I'll take the low road. Which is best?

So, the tone is meditative. As this person stands looking at the two options, he is weighing the pros and cons in a quiet, studied manner. The situation demands a serious approach, for who knows what the outcome will be?

All the speaker knows is that he prefers the road less travelled, perhaps because he enjoys solitude and believes that to be important. Whatever the reason, once committed, he'll more than likely never look back.

On reflection, however, taking the road "because it was grassy and wanted wear" has made all the difference, all the difference in the world.

What Are the Poetic Devices Used in "The Road Not Taken?"

In "The Road Not Taken," Frost primarily makes use of metaphor. Other poetic devices include the rhythm in which he wrote the poem, but these aspects are covered in the section on structure.

What Is the Figurative Meaning of "The Road Not Taken?"

Frost uses the road as a metaphor for life: he portrays our lives as a path we are walking along toward an undetermined destination. Then, the poet reaches a fork in the road. The fork is a metaphor for a life-altering choice in which a compromise is not possible. The traveler must go one way, or the other.

The descriptions of each road (one bends under the undergrowth, and the other is "just as fair") indicates to the reader that, when making a life-altering decision, it is impossible to see where that decision will lead. At the moment of decision-making, both roads present themselves equally, thus the choice of which to go down is, essentially, a toss up–a game of chance.

The metaphor is activated. Life offers two choices, both are valid but the outcomes could be vastly different, existentially speaking. Which road to take? The speaker is in two minds. He wants to travel both, and is "sorry" he cannot, but this is physically impossible.

What Is the Literal Meaning of "The Road Not Taken?"

Literally, "The Road Not Taken" tells the story of a man who reaches a fork in the road, and randomly chooses to take one and not the other.

What Is the Symbolism of "The Road Not Taken?"

The road, itself, symbolizes the journey of life, and the image of a road forking off into two paths symbolizes a choice.

As for color, Frost describes the forest as a "yellow wood." Yellow can be considered a middle color, something in-between and unsure of itself. This sets the mood of indecision that characterizes the language of the poem.

Frost also mentions the color black in the lines:

And both the morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Clearly, this is to emphasize that both roads appeared untouched, not having been tarnished by the foot of a previous traveler. The poet is the first to encounter this dilemma.

What Is the Point of View of "The Road Not Taken?"

The point of view is of the traveler, who, walking along a single path, encounters a fork in the road and stops to contemplate which path he should follow.

How Do the Two Roads Differ in "The Road Not Taken?"

The two roads in "The Road Not Taken" hardly differ.

The first road is described as bending into the undergrowth. The second road is described as "just as fair," though it was "grassy and wanted wear."

At this, it seems the second road is overgrown and less travelled, but then the poet writes:

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no steps had trodden black.

So, again, the roads are equalized. Yet, as if to confuse the reader, Frost writes in the final stanza:

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

With that, we are left to wonder how Frost knew the road he took was the one less traveled by. But Frost likely left this ambiguity on purpose so that the reader would not focus so much on condition of the road, and, instead, focus on the fact that he chose a road (any road, whether it was that which was less traveled by or not), and that, as a result, he has seen a change in his life.