

Study Material

Department of English

Semester: IV

Name of the course: EM 09- AMERICAN POETRY

Name of the topic: **“The Road Not Taken”** of Robert Frost

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The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost

The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost takes on an appearance of being just a simple narration, however, the seemingly straightforward narrative serves as a disguise for a deeper significance. So, what is the deeper meaning? To answer this question, it would be better to split this poem into two halves— the first half is the presentation and contemplation of the two paths, whereas the second is the final choice.

The first line of the poem sets the scene and immediately exhibits the narrator’s problem. Frost cuts straight to the point and explains how the narrator came across the two diverged roads— as that is not relevant in making a choice in the end. In the first stanza, the narrator is faced with two roads (options). The speaker, regretting that he or she is unable to travel by both

roads, stands at the fork in the road for a long time and tries to see where one of the paths leads. However, the speaker can't see very far because the forest is dense and the road is not straight. The speaker intends to say that the results of our choice are unknown. Frost points out that we are free to choose, but we really don't know what we are choosing between until we go down that path, so our route is determined by choice and chance— with no way to separate the two. A statement of life is brought up here by Frost through words “be one traveler”.

The second half of the poem is even more realistic and the façade of casualness is consistent. Here, the speaker points out that both of the roads were similar and were equally untravelled “And both that morning equally lay/ In leaves no step had trodden black”. The next line announces the narrator's choice, yet there is a hint of uncertainty and it was almost as if the narrator had talked himself/herself into choosing one and trying to tell himself/herself that if it was wrong, s/he could always turn back. This is emphasized through the exclamation “Oh” at the start of the line and “for another day”.

But then immediately the narrator realizes in life, one road tends to lead onward to another, so it's therefore unlikely that he or she will ever actually get a chance to return to that first road. “Yet knowing how way leads on to way, /I doubted if I should ever come back”. These lines outline a basic principle in making choices in our life—once we make a decision in life, it is more likely that we cannot take it back or remake it. A choice in life leads to another, and eventually, we will be too far from the starting point to start all over again.

In the fourth stanza, the narrator foretells his/her future. The speaker imagines him or herself in the distant future, recounting, with a sigh, the story of making the choice of which road to take. The narrator predicts that in the future, s/he would turn back and regret his decision. The

narrator also predicts, in future s/he would also think that choosing that particular path “has made all the difference”. Only time would reveal whether this difference is positive or negative.

However, Frost tries to highlight an important point here with just one single word. With the addition of the word “all”, so that it is “all the difference” and not just “made the difference” says that one single choice in life, no matter how trivial could alter your life in unexpected ways.

The entirety of “The Road Not Taken” is an extended metaphor in which the two roads that diverge symbolize life’s many choices. In much the same way that people are generally unable to see what the future holds, the speaker is unable to see what lies ahead on each path. Furthermore, what little the speaker thinks he or she understands about each path at the moment of a decision later turns out to have been less clear cut, underscoring the impossibility of predicting where one’s life choices will lead. Just as there are no “do-overs” in life, the speaker acknowledges (in lines 2-3 and 14-15) that he or she can only travel one road, and will not be granted the chance to “come back” and try another route. In these ways, the diverging roads in the poem symbolize all of life’s choices—the confusion of having to make choices at the moment, the painful impossibility of foreseeing their consequences, and the sense, when looking back, that those choices defined your life, even when you can't know in what way, or even whether they did at all.

The entirety of “The Road Not Taken” is an extended metaphor in which the road “less traveled” symbolizes the path of nonconformity. The speaker, when trying to choose which road to take, looks for the road that seems less worn. At the end of the poem, the speaker asserts that choosing the road less traveled “has made all the difference”—the suggestion being that he or she has led a life of nonconformity, and is happier because of it. However, the status of the road less traveled as a symbol of nonconformity is complicated somewhat by the fact that the poem

makes it clear that the speaker has no way of actually knowing whether the road he or she chose was really the road less traveled: both roads, after all, are “worn...really about the same”. This, in turn, raises questions about the speaker’s notions of individualism and nonconformity, suggesting that these ideals may not be as easily definable as the speaker of the poem thinks. In this way, the road less traveled is as much a symbol of nonconformity as it is a symbol of the difficulty of defining that ideal.

Resources

Orr, David. “The Road Not Taken by David Orr: 9780143109570: PenguinRandomHouse.com: Books.” *PenguinRandomhouse.com*, Penguin Adult HC/TR, www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/315303/the-road-not-taken-by-david-orr/.