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A Comparative look at the theme of nature in the poems “ The Oak” Alfred Lord Tennyson and “ The Road Not Taken” Robert Frost

Both Alfred Lord Tennyson’s The Oak and Robert Frost’s The Road Not Taken deals with the theme of nature. Both poets incorporate each word in a specific manner that adds literal and figurative meanings to the overall essence of the poems. Robert Frost and Alfred Lord Tennyson use symbolism, figurative language, and rhyme to convey their views of the road that Frost cannot choose and the oak tree that develops from a human perspective. Tennyson and Frost make use of themes of nature to communicate the theme which reflects the personal journey of growth and change in humans. Although both two poems are different in some respects, they also share similar ideas. In each poem, the poet uses the physical environment or nature as a simile and metaphor to add meaning to the views of how mankind makes choices and the effect of these choices.

“ The Road Not Taken” is one of Frost’s most popular and most debated poems because it is appealing to readers at all levels. The symbolism and theme that exist in the poem has caused controversial interpretations within the world of poetry. As many critics wonder at the description of the roads that Frost gives, and the ultimate choices he makes based on the difficulty of his situation. However, the most common interpretation of the poem is the symbolism of the never-ending inquisitiveness that lives within the minds and nature of humans. The fact is that whatever decisions or choices an individual makes, the need to question that choice is always present. With all the controversial interpretations of the poem, “ Frost himself claimed the inspiration came from his dear friend Edward Thomas, a welsh poet whom

he'd met in England" (Encyclopedia of American Poetry) who had difficulty being satisfied with the choices he made in his life.

Critics point out that the poem represents Frost's teasing of his friend who constantly regrets the decisions he makes because he was curious about the effect of the alternate choice. The delicate or slight humor that ends the poem makes fun of the curiosity of humans and their dissatisfaction with the choices they make. In addition, the final stanzas represent the finality of the choices we make and Frost implies that one must make his choices work.

The symbolic nature of the crossroads is uncomplicated. One can grasp the fact that the choices that one encounters have many possibilities, nevertheless there can be only one choice. As a result, Frost emphasizes "long I stood/ And looked down one as far as I could/ To where it bent in the undergrowth;" ("The Road Not Taken," 3-5), which helps the reader to recognize that, on the one hand, choices are never simple, but in fact they require careful thought as the end result is final. Conversely, some critics note that the decision that Frost makes is impulsive, but in the end he accepts the choice he makes.

Similar to Tennyson's "The Oak", Frost's "The Road Not Taken" presents the idea of life's journey and how one reaches the end of one's journey. Frost shows a literal internal, yet creative passage through time. He compares this to a metaphorical bodily journey that includes making the appropriate decisions of life. In the poem, Robert Frost presents his perspectives on the choices one has to make in life; the process one uses to come to a decision about which choices are superior and have a more profound effect; and the outcome of the choices one makes in life.

The reader can relate to the choices that Frost has to make on this metaphorical road in life. He writes " Two roads diverge in a yellow wood/ And sorry I could not travel both/ And be one traveler, long I stood". (" The Road Not Taken")" With these lines, Frost explains that he has to make a decision about his life. He wonders if he should choose a life that is easy or travel the metaphorical road that " wanted wear" (" The Road Not Taken"). The internal conflict hints at the time people spend calculating the best choices they have to make and often how they procrastinate in deciding whether to take the metaphorical road that is travelled least or the road that is worn.

In The Road Not Taken, Frost " emphasizes the ambiguity associated with life choices" (Clugston, 2010, p. 46). This concept is clear as Frost attempts to make the choice between what appears to be easy and what is definitely harder. In addition, Frost makes use of metaphors to express " the nature of choice making" (Clugston, 2010, pg. 46). The poet conveys the natural reasoning that every aspect of life's choices is similar to the pieces in a puzzle that embodies the process of making decisions. It is clear that the metaphorical nature present in The Road Not Taken creates a distinctive tone as one gathers knowledge as one takes the journey of life. The poem is in fact, an inspiration the wider audience as the poet teaches that the path that is not worn is often the right choice to make.

Tennyson's earlier poems show his aptitude to link the " external scenery to interior states of mind" (SparkNotes Editors, 2002). In contrast to the other Romantic poets of his time, who created " nature poems [to] present a scene that raises an emotional or psychological problem" (SparkNotes Editors,

2002), although “ his allegiance to the eternal beauty of nature seems peculiarly Victorian” (Journey to the Interior). Tennyson combines nature with the emotional type of poems. The Oak is a beautiful poem that uses figurative language to compare and contrast the development of humans to the seasonal cycle of an oak tree.

Tennyson looks at the way in which mankind ages throughout life with the use of personification. The oak tree is personified as “ All his leaves/ Fall’n at length/ Look, he stands/ Trunk and bough/Naked strength” (The Oak”). The stanza suggests that the tree possesses human qualities. It is evident that the oak tree is going through the changes that are similar to humans as there is birth, growth, strength, aging, and ultimately death. The changes in the seasons reflects spring, summer, and autumn which are significant as the oak tree is young and vibrant in spring yet changes as the seasons change. The leaves change their color, just as a man gets older, then the leaves fall off sooner or later, just as a man will age and die. It is important for the reader to note that even as the oak tree changes with the seasons it still stands with “ Naked strength” (“ The Oak”). Similarly, mankind ages, but maintains his beauty that creates a naked strength.

The use of symbols and symbolism in poetry is important as it adds to the theme of the poem. The oak tree is a symbol of strength and wisdom. It is similar to mankind as mankind develops wisdom and strength with age and maturity. The seasons are also symbolic as spring symbolizes “ birth and new beginnings” (Clugston, 2010); summer symbolizes “ maturity”, and autumn symbolizes for “ aging” (Clugston, 2010) as the leaves fall from the trees. The nature in the poem is similar to the way in which mankind

progresses in the cycle of life. Humans are born with new hopes and new beginnings, then they later become strong with age and wisdom, and later there is death after the proverbial season of life. Just as the trees shed their leaves over time, mankind changes physically, whereby they lose their hair and their bodies become weaker.

However, with all the changes that occurs in the seasons of life, Tennyson points out that people should “ Live thy Life/ Young and old/ Like yon oak/ Bright in spring/ Living gold” (“ The Oak”). In fact, Tennyson seems to enjoy the changes that life brings and encourages his audience to embrace the changes that life brings, regardless of one’s age. It is interesting that the poet does not include the season of winter in his poem. One could interpret this as the symbolism of the season is morbid as it reflects death. In addition, his zest for life suggests that he does not want to damper the beauty of nature by adding the element of death to the poem. However, the tree stands “ Naked in strength” (“ The Oak”) suggests the season of winter. Obviously, Tennyson conveniently does not mention this and one can conclude that this deliberate attempt is to point out that while life has its changes and problems, one should only dwell on what is good and vibrant in nature, as it is in life.

In “ The Oak”, it is clear that the use of simile aids in the arrangement of the theme of nature in the poem. Tennyson skillfully uses the natural environment to enhance his comparisons of youth and aging to spring. In addition, the poem presents the literal growth and development of an oak tree that is a symbolic illustration of the various changes that the tree undergoes during the seasons. Similar the Frost’s “ The Road Not Taken”,

Tennyson's entire poem is symbolic in nature, as both poets correlates nature's uniqueness with mankind's physical unique traits. The poems share similar qualities in the use of personification.

Both poems give human characteristics to inanimate objects. In addition, they show clear pictures of personification, for example the oak tree " he stands" (" The Oak") and " the two roads" (" The Road Not Taken", 1) represent the human decision making experience. Both poems make use of detailed imager because " using imagery, or sensory details, can help bring a story or poem to life" (Vleet, 69). These attributes, in " The Oak Tree", symbolize the relationship that is common to the human cycle of life and the lifecycle of an oak tree and its changes with the season. In " The Road Not Taken", the poet presents diverse characteristics of nature in the physical settings of the country road. The theme is similar in Tennyson's poem as he looks at nature in relation to human. However, while Frost looks as nature in relation to decisions, Tennyson looks at nature as the stages that one must go through in order to have a full life.

When taken literally, the roads in Frost's poems are natural. There are no interferences from technology to alter the " virgin" roads. Frost's lesson here is that life choices are to be pure and one should not allow the influences of life to interfere with the decision that one makes about one's life. The symbolism of the roads is present throughout the entire poem. It clearly shows the nature of human contemplations and indecisiveness that people face when they have choices to make.

One can safely conclude that the poem is an illustration of the difficulties and necessities of making decisions. It is often complicated to make choices that

determine the road one takes. Similarly, the oak tree goes through its lifecycle without any form of influence from mankind. The fact is one should live life based on personal standards, beliefs, and practices and not by the dictation of the society. The country road with the persona standing alone signifies that in the end, everyone is alone, and faces life as separate individuals. In addition, the oak tree stands alone in the face of the seasons. The ultimate meaning of the Frost's poem suggests that one should make life's decisions based on the "road that is less travelled" and that one should not make choices because everyone else has made the same choice. In fact, Frost reiterates that the "at the time of his choice, that the two roads were in appearance "really about the same," that they "equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black," (Montiero). In fact the choice that he made is one based on whim rather than logical reasoning. In fact, the road he takes is better as he realizes that the circumstances of his life allow him to make tough choices. The tense in the poem changes in the end as Frost looks towards the future without the indecision that he faced along the path. He speaks in the future tense which signifies that he will make his choice a reality regardless of the consequences. He notes "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I/ I took the one less traveled by/ And that has made all the difference" (The Road Not Taken).

In the final stanza, Frost states "I shall be telling this with a sigh" ("The Road Not Taken"). This "sigh" can be seen as a negative word, as the poet could feel burdened by the choice he has to make. On the other hand, the sigh can be a sigh of relief that whatever he decides, he has not lost all hope. In addition, the "sigh" can be seen as one of resignation because whatever

choices one makes, there is the possibility of “ what if” the choice being different. Tennyson’s poem is different in this regard as he watches the cycle of life runs its course, he has no choice or regrets. “ The Oak” therefore represents a poem of acceptance and this is what makes it different from Frost’s poem. Tennyson accepts the destiny of his life because it starts with birth and continues through to death, while Frost is at a standstill as he questions the changes or decisions that he has to make in his life.

In the first three stanzas, Frost points to the roads being similar. At first he notes that they are “ as just as fair” (“ The Road Not Taken”, 6), then he adds “ Though as for that the passing there/ Had worn them really about the same” (“ The Road Not Taken, 9-10), and finally he finishes by saying “ both that morning equally lay/ In leaves no step had trodden black” (“ The Road Not Taken”, 11 - 12). The reader concludes that to some extent Frost is confused as he contradicts himself in his attempt to delude himself into thinking the roads were travelled equally. Nevertheless, there is the possibility that after careful examination of the choices or the road he takes, Frost recognizes that regardless of the choices he makes, the end result is the same. In contrast, Tennyson does not worry about the reasons behind the changes in the seasons, or how it affects the oak, instead he embraces the seasons and the changes it brings in the same way he accepts the decisions he has to make in life.

The form and structure of both poems are quite simple. Both poets make use of a simple language that makes the poems easy to understand. One can say that the language and the simple ways in which Tennyson and Frost structure the poem, indicates that life can be quite simple. The fact is that

the decisions that one makes in life does not have to be complicated, but as Frost suggests, one needs to think carefully about the choices that are made so as to be able to accept the end results. Similarly, Tennyson shows that the cycle of life is not to be feared. In fact, the poet suggests that the oak accepts its destiny as the seasons change. As such mankind should accept his destiny without question. Both poems make use stanzas, with each idea being separated in different stanza which makes the reading of the poem simple.

In concluding, the theme of nature in both poems is quite clear as it relates to life. Bothe poets use nature to show mankind's place in the world and how the choices they make are related to nature. Though the poems are different in some respects, the poets look at the strength of the oak tree and force the reader too draw parallels from the way in which the tree withstands the challenges of life. On the other hand, Frost engages the reader in the decision of choice. Each poet presents the untouched natural environment, and the reader can conclude that life is based on the reality that each man stands alone in nature.

The idea that the choices Frost makes between two roads which at first appeared to be equal, makes a big difference, as it represents the influences of the situation and the possibilities that one faces in life. With the choices people make, there is never any turning back. In fact, the metaphorical road in life that appears to be the similar to the other choices often contain hidden differences that often leads to unexpected results. However, it is the nature of mankind to regret the decisions that they make because of their curiosity. This curiosity often prevents the individuals from becoming

contented with the choices that that are made in life, irrespective of the benefits of garnered along the way. The truth is, one will never know the possibilities of “ The Road Not Taken.”

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