

Invisible clues for the clueless literature review examples

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The poem "The Road Not Taken," by Robert Frost, is an interesting poem because it cries out to be interpreted in a symbolic or metaphorical way. Published in 1916, "The Road Not Taken" has been interpreted by many readers to be an inspirational work that tries to stir a feeling of individualism in the reader. This, however, might be a misunderstanding of Frost's cryptic, and very unspecific words, which, based on his close friendship with Edward Thomas, could have been intended to convey a completely different message all together - a message not so uplifting, as many readers may have thought. Matthew Hollis argues in "Edward Thomas, Robert Frost and the Road to War" that Frost intended "The Road Not Taken" as a light-hearted reference to the walks that he and Thomas took in 1914 through the English countryside and Thomas's habit of indecision and also his sense of failure if the chosen path failed to live up to their expectations. How far is it possible to find evidence to support Thomson's claim that the poem is a satirical attack on Edward Thomas?

The conventional reading of "The Road Not Taken" is that the two roads faced by the first-person speaker of the poem represent some difficult decision or choice in life: two different courses of action between which the speaker must choose. The two alternatives appear equally attractive, but the speaker, who is simply walking in a "yellow wood" (Frost, p. 43, line 1), "could not travel both" (line 2) and has to decide between the two. He chooses the "the one less traveled by" (line 15), in other words the path that no-one else had taken before, and claims in the final line of the poem that his unconventional choice "has made all the difference" (line 16). That phrase - "the one less traveled by" - is seen by many readers as the crux of

the poem and has led to the poem being seen by many readers as a celebration of the attractions of being individual and unconventional, being true to yourself, rather than following the path that the majority of people follow. There is more to the poem than that, of course. By rejecting one road in favor of another, the speaker admits that he will “be telling this with a sigh”(line 13) – in other words, that he will always regret the choice he made and reflect on what might have happened if his choice had been different. In addition, despite the reading of the poem being one of unashamed individualism and non-conformity, he also comments that “both [roads] that morning equally lay/In leaves no step had trodden back” (lines 9 – 10), which seems to contradict the speaker’s later assertion that he took the road less traveled by” (line 15). Thus the poem, although commonly seen as a celebration of independence, non-conformity and self-reliance, also contains elements of regret at the road not taken and sad reflection on the way our choices in life determine our future: in the poem the speaker says that he will return one day and take the path he rejected (“I marked the first for another day” line 11), but in fact admits “I doubted I should ever come back” (line 12).

It is possible to interpret “The Road Not Taken” as a lighthearted poke at Edward Thomas for being so indecisive. If the reader knows that Robert Frost and Edward Thomas were very close, and that Thomas always had trouble making decisions, the poem, then, becomes much more restricted in its range of meanings. Though “The Road Not Taken” provides no direct evidence to whom it is about, it is generous enough to leave the reader with

plentiful subtleties that suggest the disposition of the narrator. And with this evidence, it is possible to infer that the poem, “ The Road Not Taken,” is not about walking a tougher, or less travelled road, and reaping the benefits of the right choice, but, rather, a narrative told from the perspective of a very indecisive person (e. g., Edward Thomas) and one who, as Hollis points out, was plagued by self-recrimination if the road they chose (or that Thomas suggested since he was the local and Frost the American outsider) turned out to be disappointing.

However, in the poem itself there is no evidence that the poem is about Edward Thomas. Frost could have made the link clearer by using a dedication like “ To Edward Thomas” or “ For Edward Thomas” – it is not uncommon for poets to do this. In addition, Frost’s use of the first person voice suggests that he is writing from a personal perspective; the idea that it is really about Edward Thomas might have been made clearer had Frost written in the third person. Nonetheless, Hollis puts forward convincing evidence from letters and journals that it was Frost’s intention for the poem to be understood, certainly by Edward Thomas himself, as being specifically about him and based on the long walks they took during Frost’s sojourn in England. Indeed, according to Hollis, Frost sent a copy of “ The Road Not Taken” to Thomas before it was published and before he had even read it aloud to a wider audience. In the letter which accompanied the poem, Hollis asserts that Frost “ chided him, “ No matter which road you take, you’ll always sigh, and wish you’d taken another”. Even this quotation is enough to show that the poem is not merely about Thomas’s indecision: it is also

clearly about his feelings of regret about the road not taken which demonstrates that the poem is more than a poem merely about Thomas's indecision: the word "sigh" used by Frost in the poem and in the letter to Thomas introduces a note of regret which leads to a tone of sadness.

For decades readers who were not aware of the friendship between Frost and Thomas and the precise details of their walks together, have happily read the poem and interpreted it as "an emblem of individual choice and self-reliance, a moral tale in which the traveler takes responsibility for – and so effects – his own destiny" (Hollis). Does Hollis's article invalidate all the readings of the poem that were not aware of the facts about the relationship between Frost and Thomas, and Frost's intention in writing the poem? Surely not: once any work of art is made public how readers respond to it becomes, over time, a crucial part of its accrued meaning. It could also be argued that knowing what Hollis knows about the poem and its biographical context actually lessens the impact of the poem and diminishes its stature.

Furthermore, although Hollis makes a convincing case for the poem being about Edward Thomas, its mocking tone (if that, indeed, was intended by Frost) seems wholly inappropriate and crass given the real choices that Edward Thomas was faced with when he received a hand-written copy of the poem by mail. When Frost returned to America from England, the plan, according to Hollis, had been for Thomas to emigrate with his family and set up home close to Frost in New England. However, in the summer of 1915, Thomas was torn between emigrating as planned to America and joining the British Army to serve in the First World War. He chose to enlist in the army

and died at Easter, 1917, on the opening day of the battle of Arras: he managed to survive just over two months in France. In other words, he did not take “ the road less traveled by”; he joined up - as millions of his fellow British citizens did, and as millions more were forced to do when conscription was introduced later in the war. Thus, Thomas made a decision that was conventional and died an early tragic death. Hollis throws an interesting light on the poem, but within the poem itself there is no evidence that the poem is about Edward Thomas and, in any case, the information that Hollis presents diminishes and demeans a poem that many readers have found inspirational.

Bibliography

Frost, Robert. Selected Poetry. 1999. London: J. M. Dent. Print.

Hollis, Matthew. “ Edward Thomas, Robert Frost and the Road to War”. The Guardian. July 29th, 2011. Online.