

Stanza by stanza explication of "the road not taken"



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"The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost is one of the most anthologized, widely-read, beloved, and analyzed poems in the American canon. A short poem consisting of four stanzas of five lines each composed of simple direct language constructed overwhelming from words of two syllables or less, the poem clearly has not achieved its high status as a result of experimentation with elements of the form like rhyme scheme, meter or even the use of unusually figurative imagery. In fact, "The Road Not Taken" sets itself apart from most other poems held in equitable academic esteem precisely because a reader need not be a graduate college student—or even a high school graduate—in order to understand any of the individual words or arrive at a arguable interpretation of meaning.

The simplicity of "The Road Not Taken" is what allows the ultimately ambiguous ending to transform the poem into one with such a universally recognized meaning that it is equally suitable for hanging on a kitchen wall of a farm in Iowa and for being analyzed by English majors throughout the libraries of the world's most esteemed colleges. Frost endows each stanza with its own individual consideration of the titular concept of choices one makes in life and how every choice one makes also allows for the potential of at least one alternative choice that was not make. The first stanza is not just about coming to a fork in the road of life, it is also quite specifically about how the choices we make must so often be made with the undergrowth of the unknown blocking our access to fully seeing the future consequences.

The second stanza offers a hint of the ambiguity to come at the poem's close and always seems to be the one which has led so many readers to misinterpret the poem under its misapprehended title "The Road Less

Traveled." Frost purposely aims to convince the reader that the speaker is full of the spirit of Yankee individualism and non-conformity by appearing ready to make the quick decision to go down the road less traveled. By stanza's end, however, not only does he appear to have retracted from that rebellious impulse, but now seems even to be wavering over which of trail actually is the one less traveled

The third stanza would seem to confirm that the common interpretation of the poem as if it actually were about "The Road Less Traveled" is very simplistic, indeed. Within a span of moments Frost offers us an eternity of possibilities that have little if anything to do with the vaunted reading of the poem as a tour de force of non-conformist thought. What may initially seem to be a decision entirely grounded in rebellious nose-thumbing at joining the crowd quickly becomes an abject lesson in rationalization: he can always come back and try out that other path later on, which is more characteristic of someone hedging their bets than the mark of a rugged individualist. But then, just when such a dismissal of the speaker's commitment seems entirely grounded, such rationalization for choosing one path over the other is jettisoned on the rapid realization and even swifter acceptance that such an opportunity to try taking paths down two divergent roads is so rare as to be non-existent.

The final five lines reflect directly back upon the imagery of the first stanza in which the undergrowth acts as metaphor for the obstructed vision of the future that lies within every choice we made. The poem concludes with the speaker comfortably situated within that cloudy future, not exactly sure the road he chose takes him, but emotionally aware that the choice he made will

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have been consequential enough to describe it to others in the future. What has been a poetic description of an unusually vacillating form of rebellious non-conformity marches inexorably toward its concluding ambiguity on the wings of a sigh.

The sigh with which this first-person exploration of choice, anxiety, doubt, rebellion, regret and acceptance is told to others at some point in the future is one of the clearest examples of how the simplicity of poem's language is deceptive. This feature also becomes one of the strongest elements in making the poem's ambiguous meaning both ripe for unsophisticated misunderstanding and fodder for millions of pages of scrutiny. The initial reaction to hearing a story that commences or concludes with a sigh is that it will be tinged with regret. When positioned in reference to the consistently conflicted nature of the speaker as well as the overriding thematic quality of ambiguity of meaning, such a facile response to the imagery of the speaker sighing as he recounts the story of the road he chose to take over the road he chose not to take seems entirely in appropriate.

The final assertion that having chosen to take the road less traveled has made all the difference in the world is a powerhouse example not just of poetic ambiguity, but also how there is no guarantee that rebellion leads to feast or famine any more than there is a guarantee of feast or famine by choosing to follow the crowd and reject attempts at carving out the right path through seeking individuality. Indeed, it can be effectively argued that the definitive reason for why such an unnervingly open-ended meaning could lend a poem such universal adulation is that no path one chooses can truly be defined as either right or wrong, since there is absolutely no way of

knowing whether it is the destination that has resulted in a path being well traveled or not.