

"the road not taken"
and "when death
comes" poems
comparison essay



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Whether there is value or purpose inherent in our lives, other than that which we ascribe to, has remained a matter of speculation. And if one was to consider the idea of the immortality of the human soul, the possibility of the afterlife and the certitude of our physical death, life becomes an affair of profound perplexity; and at times, one of little value and significance. It is our conscious or unconscious take on these questions that shape our attitude on life and, consequently, how we go about living it.

These questions have plagued humanity for a long time and have made the subject of many a poem. This essay will be based on two poems; the "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost and May Oliver's "When Death Comes." I will show that implicit in these two poems is the celebration of the sublimity of the present moment and the intrinsic value of the novel experience. Indeed, I will show that, according to the two poems, life is nothing but an accumulation of experiences.

Mary Oliver's "When Death Comes" at first seems like a poem about death. This take is implied from the first three stanzas which, in quite morbid a manner, allude to the suddenness and inevitability of death. The use of 'when' as the first word in the first line may seem simple enough. The word though conveys certainty, an unquestionable surety of something to come. The use of similes such as 'like a hungry bear in autumn' and 'like the measles-pox' serves to show us the unannounced nature and unwanted presence of death in our midst (Oliver).

When one reads on and when closer attention is paid to the significance of every word however, one realizes that the poem is indeed a celebration of

life. From the fifth stanza onwards, the persona expounds how she, faced with the certainty of death, sees fit to lead his/her life.

The persona says that s/he will celebrate the uniqueness of every life and appreciate the harmony of our immortal nature: ' and I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular' (Oliver). Thus, Oliver gives life an almost surreal quality. She advocates for a holistic lifestyle, one in which we appreciate all living beings, where we connect with every other human, marveling at whatever one beholds, where nothing is taken for granted:

" and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

I was a bridegroom, taking the world into my arms" (Oliver).

The last line of the poem, ' I don't want to end up simply having visited this world,' foregrounds the significance of experiencing our world (Oliver). If we don't take it all in while we still had the time, we would have been mere visitors to the world. The supremacy of the ' now' has been brought out quiet forcefully in the poem. When death is certain and sudden, and eternity is ' just another possibility,' the only reality we know is now (Oliver).

The Road Not Taken on the other hand is a poem about decisions. The persona of the poem is faced by a moment where a decision has to be made. Frost has used the analogy of a forked road. The persona, after a lengthy consideration, takes the one less travelled; the one which was 'grassy and wanted wear' (Frost). In doing so, he hopes to travel the other road some other time: "Oh, I marked the first for another day! / Yet knowing how way leads on to way/ I doubted if I should ever come back" (Frost).

In this decision, to take the road that fewer people had trodden, while he knew that he probably will never come to travel the second, lies the meaning of the poem. Frost impresses upon us to be explorative, to not be afraid to find things out about which no one else seems to have bothered. Not taking the popular road made all the difference in the persona's life. The persona looks into the future and predicts that he will look back upon his life and be appreciative of that one moment that he dared to explore:

" 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" (Frost).

Implicit in the meaning of this poem is the value attached to new experiences. Such an attitude, where great significance is attributed to the present moment, is informed by a lack of certainty about the future and apparent distrust in the notion of immortality; a concern to be found in Oliver's "When Death Comes."

At first glance, the two poems seem to clearly expound divergent subjects. When deeper analysis is carried out though, it is revealed that they actually share thematic concerns and are informed by similar attitudes.

Frost, R. " The road Not Taken." 2012. Web.

Oliver, M. " When Death Comes." 2012. Web.