

Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken": Regret in the Human Psyche - A Critical Essay

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Abstract

This critical essay argues that Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken" is not a poem about taking a road less traveled but about regret and the state of the human psyche during the process of decision. Frost argues against indecisiveness and regret via the speaker's battle to decide between two virtually identical roads—neither one more or less traveled than the other. Readers should look beyond the last two lines of Frost's poem in order to develop a structured perspective concerning Frost's point. Historical contextualization provides readers with a sense of the biographical elements of the poem, written in 1916 and inspired by his friend Edward Thomas. Thomas was indecisive about which path to take when they both proceeded into nature for a walk, giving Frost a beginning for the speaker in the poem. Close analysis of each stanza, reveals that Frost's "The Road Not Taken" has psychological implications of regret and uncertainty regarding decision-making and provides a solution by having the speaker immediately imagining himself in the future romanticizing his choice.

*"I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."*

Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" (19-20)

Since its publication, Robert Frost's (1874-1963) masterpiece "The Road Not Taken" (1916) has been subjected to much misconstrued analysis, which has led to its being stereotyped as a poem about "following his [the speaker's] instinct, choosing the road less traveled by" (Booth 1057 and Sampley 197). As such, choosing the right, less traveled "road" in life leads to a beneficial future. Although taking a more tedious or moral "road" may provide a great future, this does not seem to be Frost's focus in "The Road Not Taken." In fact, Frost seems, instead, to allude to the psychological struggle inherent in decision-making. Furthermore, he illustrates through a speaker—who not only comes to an important decision in his life but who also imagines himself in the future romanticizing his "good" decision—an alternative to the regret often associated with difficult decisions. Breaking the poem down by stanza, one can see that Frost wishes to reveal to his readers a possible strategy for overcoming regret.

Frost's original inspiration for "The Road Not Taken" came from his friend Edward Thomas. Frost once said in a letter to Louis Untermeyer, "I'll bet not half a dozen people can tell you who was hit and where he was hit in my 'Road Not Taken'" (Pritchard 128). The "he" Frost refers to is none other than Thomas, because when the two would take walks together, Thomas "castigated himself for not having taken another path than the one they took" (Pritchard 128). Frost sent "The Road Not Taken" to Thomas to inform him of his habits through his mischievous style in the poem. However, Thomas missed the meaning of the poem and did not realize the poem was about him. Thomas, and many critics since the poem's composition, did not see Frost's attempts to provide a solution for regret by allowing the speaker to face and overcome his regretful thoughts and continue with his journey.

In the introductory stanza, Frost provides readers with his setting, his speaker, and the intellectual qualities of his speaker. Frost also manipulates metaphors in his poem in order to achieve his purpose. Readers often assume his symbols of the "roads" and the "traveler" as not merely a traveler in the woods but as a person on a journey through life. Frost uses the scenario of the "life-altering" decision to relate not only to Thomas but to his readers as well. In reality, life presents many choices that sometimes are in an "either-or" context as the speaker finds himself within the first line of our poem. Frost describes this situation with a fork in the road for the purposes of pointing out the human qualities in the speaker; thus, he further attempts to relate the speaker to his readers. The speaker must make a choice between the two roads on his journey and is sorry that he "could not travel both" (Frost 2). The desire for extracting ourselves from our human situations to overpower them is a common trait of human psychology, as Frost demonstrates here; however, the speaker cannot travel both and still be human and "be one traveler" (3). He must choose. Therefore, as is common practice, he attempts to look down the first road as far as he can, beginning to rationalize which one is better (4). However, as he does not have the power of overcoming his circumstances, he cannot see what each path may hold for him; thus, he is subordinate

to the world about him (5). Frost must first set up the human qualities in the speaker by his limited sight of the roads (into the future) and the important occurrence of the choice in the opening stanza before pressing on to his primary focus of human psychology in decision-making.

In the second stanza, the speaker further analyzes his choice. I must call attention to Frost uses the term *wanted* to describe the second road, as it “was grassy and wanted wear” (8). However, this term is ambiguous in the sense that it can mean both “to be lacking” (“Want,” def. 1a) and “to desire or wish for” (“Want,” def. 5a). Frost was almost certainly aware of this ambiguity. If one employs the definition “to desire,” the speaker is personifying the second road, suggesting that it wants him to travel it. However, inanimate objects do not want things; rather, this is the speaker revealing a hidden desire for the second road without directly expressing it. This is another instance where readers see that the Frost’s focus is the human psyche. However, if one interprets the term as “to be lacking,” then this might change the focus of the line from the speaker’s psychological condition to the condition of the road, which also becomes an important feature in Frost’s perspective since the speaker describes both roads as identical. Either interpretation of the term “wanted” leads readers to the possibility that Frost’s objective is to draw parallels between the speaker’s psychological condition and the condition of the roads, which are both significant and crucial later in the poem.

Frost uses descriptive and weighted lines both here at the midpoint of the poem and at the end of the poem in order to contrast the two ideas he presents in them. Frost’s form here gives us a more focused idea of his objective by ensuring the significance of the last two lines in the stanza. Although one knows that the speaker takes the second road (6-7), one also knows that there is no difference between it and the first road in terms of deterioration; neither shows more wear than the other (9-10). If Frost is aware of the ambiguity of *wanted*, the term more arguably refers to a personification of the speaker’s desire to take the second road. The first road lies in nature’s wood and responds neutrally to the speaker; it has not made an impression upon the speaker as wanting or otherwise. Recalling the understanding that the roads are both the same, strong implications arise that Frost wants his readers to see the first stage of the speaker’s justification for his choice of the second road amidst indecision.

Once Frost sets up the indecision and mental qualities of the speaker, he intensifies his expression of choice by the third stanza. One now knows by connection that there is no difference between either road. In this stanza, Frost presents his readers with another reference to the roads’ appearances, yet this time he refines the setting by mentioning that it is morning (11). In addition, “no step had trodden black” the leaves on the ground, indicating that it is likely fall (12). This statement builds the speaker’s character by metaphorically depicting the speaker’s declining stage of life, which might explain the speaker’s wisdom and knowledge of himself, as we will see in the last stanza. Otherwise, this might be a further reference to Frost’s friend, Thomas, and the time(s) that they would walk together during the fall. Both views support Frost’s objective of illustrating how regret affects the

human psyche. Nevertheless, more importantly in this stanza, the speaker conducts a second stage of justification for his choice of the second road by convincing himself that he “kept the first for another day” even though he knows “how way leads on to way,” and he will never return to that point, that choice, in his journey again (13-14). Usually when one attempts to rationalize a choice in this way, one is attempting to relieve guilt or feelings of doubt regarding one’s choice. The speaker purges his worries and curiosities from his mind temporarily by comforting himself with something he knows is not true. The last line in this stanza adds a sense of regret to the speaker’s tone by revealing his doubts that his travels will ever return him to this place in his journey again. The speaker knows he cannot relive a defining moment such as this and must choose to keep moving forward.

Probably the most crucial word to an efficient reading of this poem occurs in the last stanza and provides support for my interpretation of Frost’s argument against regret – “sigh” (16). Many readers focus more on the over-popularized last two lines of the poem, “I took the one less traveled by/And that has made all the difference,” and read them with a positive and inspirational meaning, missing the fact that the poem rests on the single word, *sigh* (19-20). The word *sigh* can denote a number of conflicting feelings, “especially indicating or expressing dejection, weariness, longing, pain, or relief” (“Sigh,” def. 1). Whether “sigh” is construed as positive or negative leads to varying interpretations of the poem. That is, whether the speaker rejoices with a sigh of relief about his achievement, regrets with a sigh of pain his choice, or sighs with dejection, since he withholds the truth of the roads’ conditions from himself. By examining the speaker’s psychological patterns thus far, we can see that he must have some sense of regret about what he has chosen considering his previous efforts to rationalize and wishes to take the more traveled road, and it seems as though all three views of *sigh* will be evident in the speaker.

It is interesting to notice that the speaker seems to hold a certain expectation for a destination he will reach by stating “Somewhere ages and ages hence,” when the speaker mentions no destination but seems to expect a point of reflection with a sigh for his past, far into his future (17). Arguably, the speaker does seem to recognize the importance of the decision of the road he took and notices it was a fundamental point in his journey, potentially making the choice either worthwhile or pointless. Thus, the speaker calls more attention to romanticizing his choice in the future, since he has greater worries to consider. The speaker appears very intelligent and aware of how to manipulate his own psychological condition, because immediately after he makes his choice, he imagines himself far in the future romanticizing this moment by saying he took “the one less traveled by” (19). The reader is aware that both roads are essentially identical, apart from the speaker’s personification of the second road, which ultimately leads to his choosing it. The speaker seems quite confident that he will be thinking about this choice in the future with a sigh, especially by Frost’s repetition of the pronoun *I* repeated twice, not just for the *abaab* rhyme scheme, but also to show the speaker desires to be in control of his circumstances. The speaker emphasizes that he has chosen heroically on his own.

Another interesting perspective on the speaker's thoughts is that he fantasizes telling someone of his personal choice when he is on his journey alone. Perhaps the psychology of decision-making that Frost wants to highlight for readers stems from the loneliness of the speaker on his journey. Nevertheless, whether he is telling someone else in the future or relishing his past to himself, there is still an underlying sense of regret and a need to romanticize that moment to overcome his regret and indecision. Frost knew Thomas's desire to go back and choose the path they never took on their walks. To contrast Thomas with Frost's speaker, the speaker seems to come to a point in his journey where he romanticizes and attempts to support his choice rather than regret it and chastise himself as Thomas did. The speaker imagines a stronger self who is able to overcome regret with a knowing sigh that the other road was not important in comparison to his choice. Understanding this, the sigh becomes slightly regretful with a suggestion of the personal knowledge that it was never the road less traveled that was important and he had created a myth about what caused all the difference in his life. It is particularly odd that the speaker should become sorrowful because of the road he chose. When he is actually imagining the future, he does not know what the second road may hold for him or whether it will be beneficial or not, but the speaker comes to realize this and imagines the scenario positively in order to assuage any doubt he has about making his choice. The reader sees that the speaker is actually pessimistic in several ways. The speaker wants to travel down both roads but cannot and thus regrets this; he also regrets his choice after he makes his decision, implying that he regrets his humanity and his subordination to the world around him. However, by imagining himself romanticizing his choice in the future, he is able to overcome his doubts, a significant accomplishment and, perhaps, a subtle implication from Frost that though his readers do not have direct power over circumstances, they do have power over themselves.

Frost informs readers of the psychological implications of decision-making and warns readers regarding their mindset in their individual lives by revealing the speaker's regret and the methods the speaker uses to overcome that regret and make the choice. Frost attempts to convince readers not to regret our choices by providing a speaker who must make a choice and battle his own contested feelings regarding it, and who uses his imagination to overcome doubt and indecision. Even though the sigh may still evidence some regret on the speaker's part, it also reveals that the speaker recognizes the true condition of the roads and that he is relieved that he chose to live no longer with regret and indecision by setting this goal for himself in the future. When he states that he chose the less traveled path "And that has made all the difference" (20), Frost uses *that* not to refer to the choice (19), as might be traditionally thought by readers and critics, but to refer to the change in the speaker's implied state of mind in the previous line. Removing the doubt associated with choice has made all the difference as the speaker attempts to let go of any regret by confidently imagining himself in the future, relishing in his power over his journey, and as a result, conquering his inner pessimist along the way.

Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" has another meaning, contrary to popular theories that tend to focus on the last two lines of the poem. Understanding that the poem

was written with a particular “traveler,” Edward Thomas, in mind allows us to interpret the poem’s emphasis on psychological processes and importance of overcoming regret. By providing us with a speaker who comes to terms with his humanity and attempts to purge regret and the doubt associated with choosing the second road over the first, Frost alludes to the psychology of human decision-making and argues against the regret of irrevocable decisions by proposing a solution to overcome regret.

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