

The Road Not Taken: Robert Frost's Walk into Self-Delusion

Robert's Frost's poetry often slyly reveals truths that the human psyche manages to conceal from itself. Such is the case in "The Road Not Taken."

By Laura Bernell

Robert Frost's poetry is not as simple as it appears. Simple on the surface, Frost's poems often slyly reveal self-delusions and self-deprecating humor. Such is the case with one of his most often quoted, and perhaps most misunderstood, poem "The Road Not Taken."

Two Roads Diverged

The "Road Not Taken" tells a story in four rhyming stanzas. The first stanza sets up a simple, real-life dilemma: a traveler comes upon a place where two "roads diverged in a yellow wood," and has to choose which way to go. It's as simple as the proverbial fork in the road. We've all been there: a point at which a choice between two options must be made. Do I take this job, or that job? Go to school or go to work? Marry this man, or stay single? Take a drink, or stay sober?

Seems simple enough: At some point, being human, we're beset with a choice between two options. We'd all like to be saved the trouble of decision-making by the capacity to be more than "one traveler" and travel both roads. But, alas, we cannot clone ourselves. A choice between two appealing, yet uncertain options must be made. How are we to choose? On what bases?

The Road Less Traveled

The answer to that question seems to be given in the final two lines of the poem: "I took the [road] less traveled by/ And that has made all the difference." These two memorable, quaint and beloved lines seem to offer solid advice: When beset with a tough decision, make the tough choice. Don't do the easy thing; do the right thing, the hard thing - even if it means going it alone.

This seems to be a life-lesson worth learning.

Furthermore, these lines inspire the young person traveling through life to make that

same courageous decision, to go the way that a lesser man or woman might pass up, because it's too hard, or too perilous, or too ambitious, or too self-sacrificing—the final line is vague enough for anyone to fill in with a particular, favorite value.

But it is important to notice that the speaker is projecting into the future when he says these lines. And it is these last two lines of the poem that contain the delusion. How do we know? If we go back to the middle two stanzas, we see that the future retelling of the story doesn't quite hold up to the truth of the situation.

Was One Road Really "Less Traveled"?

In the second and third stanzas, the reader finds the speaker/traveler back in time, standing there in front of that fork in the road, wondering what to do. But it turns out that neither road was really “less traveled.” Indeed, the speaker notes that the one he took was “just as fair” and that “the passing there/Had worn both about the same.”

The next stanza corroborates this perplexing point, when the speaker notes that “both roads that morning equally lay/In leaves no step had trodden black.” Not many folks had trodden on either road. Truth is, then, these roads looked about the same.

Accounting for the Disparity

So how is the reader to account for this indisputable disparity between the present telling of the poem, and the speaker's future rendition?

Here's the explanation: The speaker likes to imagine that he was faced with a difficult, self-defining decision, one that may have determined his destiny. Further, being a red-blooded individuality-loving American, he imagines that he made the more difficult but admirable choice: That of going his own way, being his "own man," like Frank Sinatra in that great testament to American individualism, "I Did it My Way."

Sly Fox

But Robert Frost's cunning craft doesn't end there. This speaker might not be sadly deluding himself.

Upon re-reading the last stanza, the reader finds a sly chuckle, a bit of self-deprecating humor. The speaker admits, standing there in the present, that he might, "ages and ages hence," fudge on the truth of that moment by the fork in the road. We can imagine this speaker, now an older man, puffing out his chest and saying to a son or grandson, with some self-aggrandizement: "Yes. I had to make a tough decision once. But did I choose the easy road? No, not me! I took the road less traveled by."

We All Have a Road Less Traveled By

We all do it: we try to make ourselves sound better—more noble, more courageous, more individualistic—than we really are, by embellishing our experiences in the retelling of them. But if we're honest with ourselves, we recognize our self-aggrandizing embellishments.

The truth in this poem is true for most of us about life: I lived my life; I went along half-conscious and half blind, hoping for the best. And I wound up here.

But hey— I did it my way: Wink Wink.

Post Script: Teaching this poem is tricky. Students like to see the lesson in the poem. They like the idea that taking the road less traveled makes all the difference. It's up to the teacher, whether or not to shatter their illusions about the poem's moral. But learning to see the pedantry in lesser poetry might be worth the disillusionment.