

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

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.

Robert Frost¹

☞ Reflections

Many of you are probably already familiar with this poem, and if you happened to be at the Rector's Forum last week, you heard me claim that it's the *most widely misunderstood* poem in the English language. That could be an exaggeration, of course, but I have little doubt that while it's definitely one of the better known poems, it's also one of the lesser understood.

The story goes that Robert Frost wrote this as a joke for a friend, the poet Edward Thomas, who was notoriously indecisive. Thomas didn't get the joke—and it's lost on a lot of readers, too. There are published letters between Frost and Thomas and, after reading the poem to

¹ "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost from *The Poetry of Robert Frost*

an audience of university students, Frost complains to his friend that they had “taken [it] pretty seriously...despite doing my best to make it obvious by my manner that I was fooling.”

On first reading, we might gather that the “moral” of Frost’s poem is that to take the road less travelled is the very thing we should do, is a good thing, if not the superior choice. We use the “road less travelled” so often it’s become almost cliché, a phrase to talk about courage, and trail-blazing, and being unique. But pay close attention: the title is the “Road Not Taken.” Not “The Road Less Travelled” and not “The Road I Actually Took.”

But, it could be that we cannot help but be drawn to those last lines, clinging to them as though they gave us an answer.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Again, the poem does not say, “I took the one less traveled by / and I have positively benefited from this choice.” We might *assume* that much, but remember that the poem is not hiding anything from us. It isn’t obscuring a “real meaning”; nowhere on the page does the poem say that this is advice for a life well lived and so there’s no need for us to impose that kind of meaning on it. Instead, the poem says simply what is true, that it “has made all the difference.” Because of course it has! Because, and this is true for all of us: we *are* our choices. We get on one road and therefore cannot take another road—nor do we ever get to know what was on that other road in the first place. We don’t get to be in two places at once; whichever place we are is the place of our actual life.

When Frost says, “I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence,” we might interpret it to be a wistful sigh, one of nostalgia, or sorrow even, or a resignation that because life went in one particular direction, it could not go in another. So, the poem is not advice about which road to take. Rather, the poem claims that you must, at some point, choose. You must get on a road and start walking.

☞ Other questions to consider

1. This poem begins with a dilemma—a fork in the road—but it’s only as much a dilemma as we allow it to be. Interestingly, “different” does not imply better or worse. When Frost says it “has made all the difference,” it is the reader who constructs a narrative. The joke is lost on us if we assume that “the difference” is qualitative. We’ve all been here before: a fork in the road, a decision to be made. Now might be an appropriate time to indulge in a “wistful sigh” about a road you did not take. You are at the mercy of your own imagination here. What could have happened had things been different (not better, not worse, but different)? What if you had you moved to a different city, married a different person, taken a different job? What if you had not said yes, or no, to something? Who are all the people you did not meet?

2. The roads are, upon closer look, equally untravelled. One is “just as fair” as the other and in terms of one being “less travelled,” “the passing there / Had worn them really about the same.” It might lead us to conclude that this is a poem about choice and inevitability, an insistence that our fate is inescapable. What do you think this poem contributes to a discussion about free will?
3. A decision feels much different than a whim or an impulse. A decision feels responsible and thoughtful; a whim might seem irrational or even accidental. One critic writes that this poem “masquerades as a meditation about choice” but, perhaps suspiciously, does not offer an idea about what this mask is covering? If it is NOT a poem about choice, what is it about? (Absence? Division? Instinct?)

✂ Writing in response

1. The yellow leaves become emblematic of the entire forest so that the whole landscape is pared down to that unmistakably autumnal and transitional color. One might argue that this kind of singular image is connected to the heart of the poem itself and the idea that a single decision changes a life. What do you make of the association between autumn and wistfulness? See if you can rewrite this poem and place it in a different season. For example, if the wood is not yellow, but bare, how does it affect your understanding? What if the trees were just barely in bloom?
2. Yellow leaves remind us that soon they’ll be falling. Offer a reflection about the use of “coverage” in this poem. The speaker looks down “one [road] as far I could / to where it bent in the undergrowth.” Imagine what might lie ahead that is invisible to the speaker, remembering that of course as the leaves fall, they obscure the road—*both* roads—by which we travel.
3. In a letter to his friend Edward Thomas, Frost writes “no matter which road you take, you’ll always sigh, and wish you’d taken another.” Envision an alternate version for your life. Notice if in your writing you are including imagined pleasures a different road would have offered. But, in an alternate version, what are the things or people or experiences from this life you would miss, or for which you would grieve?
4. I had a teacher once who cautioned against ever writing a poem about the season you are currently experiencing, in order to avoid what she called “preciousness.” But break the rules and write a seasonal poem. For a grim response to those exclaiming the beauty of fall, here is a line from Wallace Stevens’s poem “Motive for Metaphor”: “You like it under the trees in autumn / Because everything is half dead.” I suppose it is hard to ignore the relationship between the dying of nature and the witnessing of beauty. See if you can, in your seasonal poem, explore something about the way we find beauty in what is leaving, dying, disappearing from us.

☞ Poet info

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was a four-time Pulitzer Prize winner in poetry. He is widely read and known for his often meditative depictions of rural life, particularly in New England. During his lifetime, he received more than 40 honorary degrees and he continues to be one of the most celebrated poets in American letters.



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