

Poetry
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Lecture No. 52
Robert Frost

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Robert Frost (1874-1963)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Robert Frost
- Frost's Theory of Poetry
- "The Road Not Taken"
- Analysis
- The Most Misunderstood Poem
- Parodic Readings/ Writings
- "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"



Hello, for a common people, American Poetry is Robert Frost. "The woods are lovely, dark and deep," that is Robert Frost. Born in 1874 and he died in 1963. First, we will the historical and literary context, pay attention to his life then his own theory of poetry. Then we will specifically analyze only one poem "The Road Not Taken," one of the most famous poems from Robert Frost which is also the most misunderstood poem. We will see some periodic readings which have come out of this poem "The Road Not Taken" and lastly, we will read "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" just for pleasure.

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Historical and Literary Context



- The First World War (1914-1918)
- The Second World War (1939-1945)
- The decline of Britain and the emergence of the US as a world power
- The Cold War (1947-1991)
- **A world of misunderstanding, conflict, and confusion**
- New England poetry [Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont]
- Modernist poetry from London, Paris, and Chicago



Robert Frost was writing against the background of the First World War, the Second World War, the American Depression. And in this period, we have the decline of Britain and the emergence of US as a world power. The whole world was clouded by the cold war between America and Russia. This was a world of misunderstanding, conflict, confusion. It was in this context Robert Frost was writing from New England. New England is an area of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. From here, we have this modernist poet Robert Frost and many other modernist poems coming from London, Paris and Chicago.

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Literary Context



- Frost began his career at a time of competing "isms" making up the modernist movement.
- Visited England to build his poetic career.
- Published two volumes from England.
- **> *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914)**
- Befriended Edward Thomas, Ezra Pound, and others
- Returned to the US as a famous American poet.
- He was in the thick of modernism but he differentiated himself from Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Williams.
- A modernist with a difference (Kern, 1988)
- He was also new but in the old-fashioned way and endeared himself to readers across the world.



That takes us to the Literary Context. Frost began his career at the time of competing “isms.” Modernism is a major term but there are many other terms like Cubism, Futurism, Impressionism, Imagism and many other isms. He visited England to build his own poetic career and publish two of his volumes from England. One is *A Boy’s Will*; another is “North of Boston.” When he returned to America, he found himself a famous poet. And he was able to make friends with Edward Thomas, Ezra Pound and others in England.

Frost was in the thick of modernism but he differentiated himself from Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Stevens, William Carlos Williams and many other poets, that is why a critic called Kenner calls Frost a modernist poet with a difference. He was also new but in the old-fashioned way and endeared himself to readers across the world. There is no other American poet like Robert Frost who could touch the heart of every reader across the world everywhere.

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Frost’s Poetic Theory



A poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom.”

A poem is “a momentary stay against confusion.”

“Originality and initiative are what I ask for my country. For myself the originality need be no more than the freshness of a poem run in the way I have described: from delight to wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting.”

Frost, “The Figure a Poem Makes”

(Preface to *Collected Poems*, 1939)



Frost has his own theory of poetry. He has written some essays. This is one well known essay. “The Figure a Poem Makes”. According to Frost, “A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom.” Further a poem is “a momentary stay against confusion.” Remember we referred to the world of misunderstanding, confusion, conflict and everything so he wrote a poem to cater to that times of confusion.

Let us read this quotation from his essay,

“Originality and initiative are what I ask for my country. For myself, the originality need be no more than the freshness of a poem run in the way I have described: from delight to wisdom. The figure is a same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove, the poem must ride on its own melting.”

If you want to call it “spontaneous, overflow.” Frost is not a British romantic poet but an American modernist influenced romantic poet.

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“The Road Not Taken”: Context



- Frost's stay in England during 1912-1915
- Frost wrote the poem for his British poet-friend **Edward Thomas**
- Both Frost and Thomas used to walk and choose certain roads over others.
- Thomas often felt sorry about the choice of roads.
- When Frost sent the poem to Thomas, he misunderstood it as a poem about decision-making.
- Like Thomas, many readers continue to misunderstand the poem even today.



We have chosen to focus on this poem “The Road Not Taken.” It is a famous poem read by children in schools and colleges, everywhere but let us see how this poem can mean for us as students of poetry. Frost stayed in England during 1912 and 1915. At this time, Frost wrote this poem for his friend Edward Thomas. Both Frost and Thomas had this experience of walking around their place and they used to come across certain crossroads and at that time, they would discuss which road to choose and Thomas often felt sorry about their choice of roads because they could not choose both.

And when Frost sent this poem to Thomas, he misunderstood it as a poem about decision making. Like Thomas, the friend of Frost, many readers throughout the world have continued to

misunderstand this poem. Let us see the poem and then see how this misunderstanding has occurred and how we can have a better understanding of his poem.

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“The Road Not Taken,” Stanzas 1-2



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; 5

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, 10



“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; 5

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.” 10

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The Road Not Taken, Stanzas 3-4



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. 15

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. 20



“And both that morning equally lay
In leave 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.

We have highlighted some words which we will see next.

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Questions for Discussion



1. What is the dominant feeling in the first stanza?
2. What logic of choice does the poet employ in the second stanza?
3. What is the difference between the two roads?
What does the poet **do**?
What does he **know**?
4. What does he foresee in the future?
Why does he use the word **sigh**?
Does the choice make any real difference?
Why is the "yellow" missing in the last stanza?
5. A larger question to consider: how does our **living/ existing** relate to our **knowing** and **doing**?
6. How do we resolve the conflict between **ontology** and **epistemology** in our **praxis**?



We have some questions for discussion. What is the dominant feeling in the first stanza when the speaker faces a forked road, a road diverging into two paths? What logic of choice does the poet employ in the second stanza? One is not used very often so let me take that, that is a kind of logic that he uses. What is the difference between the two roads? Are they really different? What does the poet do? What does he know about the roads? What does he foresee in the future? Why does he use the word 'sigh' in the last stanza? Does the choice make any real difference? Though the poet claims that and that has made all the difference. Why is a yellow missing in the last stanza? That is why we had highlighted the first line 'two roads diverged in a yellow wood' and then in the last stanza, that yellow word missing, why is it so?

A larger question to consider is, how does our living existing relate to our own knowing and doing? We are existing, we are living and we know something, we do something, how is our life related to this kind of situation that Frost presents to us? Philosophically, how do we resolve the conflict between ontology and epistemology? that is, living and knowing in our action that is praxis.

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Thematic Contrast



- Convergence and Divergence
- Straight and Bent Roads
- Fair and Unfair Paths
- Better and Worse Claims
- Morning and Evening
- Existing, Knowing, and Doing
- Silence and Sigh
- Faith and Doubt
- Past and Future (in the Present)
- Similarity and Difference



Now, let us see this thematic contrast. Convergence and Divergence. Two roads diverge from convergence. Then we have straight roads, bent roads, fair and unfair paths. We also have better and worse claims; morning and evening, existing, knowing and doing, silence and sigh, faith and doubt, past and future in the present, similarity and difference. The last point similarity and difference is very important because are their roads similar? Are their roads different? And what is the logic that the poet uses to make his choice?

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Theme



- **Convergence** (clarity? closed?)
- **Divergence** (confusion? open-ended?)
- Journey as a metaphor of life
- Labyrinth as a metaphor of life (forest, jungle)
- Conflict between free will and fate
- **Can human beings choose and feel happy about the choices they make in their life?**
- Do we have some control over our life?
- Does some fate control us?
- Is it a picture of the critical moments in life?
- Do we tend to regret about whatever we choose to do?



Now let us pay attention more to the theme of the poem. Convergence. When we converge, does it mean we have more clarity? When it is a closed situation, we have no option. That means is it clear for us? Then when we come to the state of diversions, do we have confusion? Does the open-ended situation cause difficulty? In the whole poem, we have this journey as a metaphor of life. Not only as a metaphor of life, we also have another one, labyrinth. This is another metaphor of life. So, this major metaphor of life called journey is not just a journey, it is a journey with a labyrinth that means more difficulties in the form of forest, jungle where we have to make choices.

So, we are presented with the conflict between free will and fate. Are we choosing the path ourselves or are we forced to choose some path because of something called fate? So, we have a very important question here, can human beings choose and feel happy about their choices that they make in their own life? Do we have some control over our life? Or some does fate control us? Is it a picture of critical moments in life? Do we tend to regret about whatever choices we make in our life?

The poem seems to raise so many questions. It is for us as readers by interacting with the poem, interacting with our oneself, with our own background experience, we have to come up with some kind of answers. All of us may not have similar answers but some answers we have to arrive at which are convincing for ourselves.

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Poetic Devices

Metaphor: Life as a journey with difficulties

Metaphor/Symbol: The road

Metaphor/Symbol: The wood

Metaphor/Symbol: The way

Assonance and Consonance: oa/ d sounds (1)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood

Polysyndeton and Anaphora: And (2-4)

Repetition: way (14) and ages (17)

Syntax: one sentence from the first to the 12th line.

Diction: mostly monosyllables and common words



A number of poetic devices we can find in this poem. We mentioned this journey metaphor, metaphor as a journey of life is the first one. Then, another metaphor symbol we have in the road, further we have the wood, the way. All of them have something metaphorical, something symbolic in this context of the poem. Then we have assonance and consonance in one line, in the very first line: “Two roads diverged in a yellow word,” we have shown the assonance and consonance through the highlights. ‘Oa’ sound represented by this assonance and then ‘da’ sound for consonance we have in this poem.

Then a clear case of Polysyndeton and Anaphora we have in just one word ‘and.’ The whole poem is interposed with and but we have mentioned only line number 2, 3 and 4. We have repetition of words like ‘way’ and ‘ages’ and then, the syntax of this poem, that is the sentence structure of this poem is notable because from the first line to the twelfth line, we have just one sentence. The diction is just common, all single syllable words, all common words. That is why this poem appeals to us.

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Rhyme, Rhythm, and Meter

Rhyme: ABAAB

1 stanza: wood, both, stood, could, growth

2 stanza: fair, claim, wear, there, same

3 stanza: lay, black, day, way, back

4 stanza: sigh, hence, I, by, difference?

Rhythm: primarily iamb with a variation of anapest

Meter: tetrameter

Two roads | diverged | in a yell | ow wood,

And so | rry | could not tra | vel both

And be | one tra | veler, long | I stood

And looked | down one | as far | as I could

To where | it bent | in the un | dergrowth;

Tone: ironic; **Mood:** regret



Now let us come to this Rhyme, Rhythm and Meter. ABAAB is the rhyme scheme of this poem. In the first stanza, we have words like wood, both, stood, could growth forming this rhyme and we have underlined certain words also highlighted certain words, we will pay attention to them. In the second stanza, we have fair, claim, wear, there, same. Third stanza, we have lay, black,

day, way, back and then lastly, we have sigh, hence, I, by, difference. In the case of difference, we have raised a question mark ‘hence difference?’

When we combine these rhyming words in the last stanza, even we can make a sentence like ‘hence, I sigh by difference.’ We can have some kind of meaning out of these, two words, ‘hence,’ ‘difference.’ Hence, he chose a different path. Is that the kind of meaning that we have through this rhyming pattern that we have in this poem? It is for us to explore further into this poem. The rhythm is primarily iambic. On the whole, we have iambic tetrameter. So, let us see this stanza:

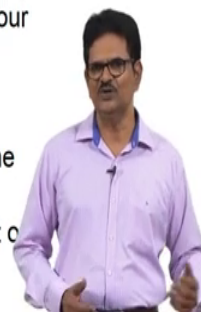
“Two roads|diverged|in a yell|ow wood,
And so|rry, I|could not tra|vel both
And be|one tra|veler, long|I stood
And looked|down on|as far|as I could
To where|it bent|in the un|dergrowth;”

The tone is ironic and the mood, for some, maybe regretful and some, they may consider it to be a clear choice.

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Overall Impression

- The speaker encounters a forked road in a wood and reflects on the choice that he makes.
- By evaluating which road is less or more used, he decides to choose the less trodden road.
- In the end, however, the speaker feels that there is not much of a difference between the roads/ choices in our life, though he claims “and that has made all the difference.”
- The metaphor of life as a journey with its twists and turns and the choices we make in our life pervade the whole poem.
- The poem leaves us with the impression that the act of choosing is more important than what we choose.



On the whole, we have this overall impression about this poem. The speaker encounters a forked road in a wood and reflects on the choice that he makes. By evaluating which road is less or more used, he decides to choose the less trodden road. In the end, however, the speaker feels that there is no much of a difference between the roads or choices in our life. Though he claims and that has made all the difference. The metaphor of life as a journey with its twists and turns and the choices we make in our life pervade the whole poem. The poem leaves us with the impression that the act of choosing is more important than what exactly we choose.

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The Most Misunderstood Poem

- David Orr considers the poem to be the most misread poem in America.
 - “The Road Not Taken” is more than a poem, as it is a cultural symbol.
 - It is found everywhere but misunderstood to mean that the two paths in the poem differ.
 - But the poet clearly mentions in the second stanza:
“**Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same**”
 - Interestingly, readers misidentify the poem as “The Road Less Travelled”, Orr claims.
- **The poem is about the roads equally travelled.**



This is considered to be one of the most misunderstood poems in American literature. We have a critic called David Orr, who considers the poem to be the most misread poem in America. He says “The Road Not Taken” is more than a poem as it is a cultural symbol for America. It is found everywhere. The poem is found everywhere but misunderstood to mean that the two paths in poem differ. So, by bringing these two lines together in the second stanza, David Orr tells us these two lines do not really differ. These two roads are almost the same:

“**Though as for that the passing there**

Had won them really about the same.”

Interestingly, readers misidentify the poem, even the title as “The Road Less Travelled.” So, finally he concludes the poem is about two roads equally travelled not with much of a difference.

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Parodic Readings/ Writings



- Frost's "The Road Not Taken" is a source of inspiration for readers and writers across the world
- It has led to numerous parodies:
 - "The Pudding Not Eaten"
 - "The Lover Not Taken"
 - "The Line Not Taken"
 - "The Kichdi Not Taken," etc.
- Others do not have titles but are parodies.
- The success of the poem lies in its parodic potential.
- **How would an English teacher parody this poem?**



We have many parodic readings of this poem. We have some examples in "The Pudding Not Taken," "The lover not taken," "The Line Not taken," "The Kichdi Not Taken," others do not have titles but are parodies. The success of Frost's poem lies in its parodic potential. Suppose an English teacher parody this poem, how would it be like?

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The Word Not Spoken – I (SPD)



Two words diverged in a heated talk
And sorry I could not speak both
And be one speaker, long I tried
And looked into as deep as I could
To where it showed in the dictionary 5

Then checked the other just as clear
And having perhaps better claim
Because it was opaque and wanted cliché
Though as far that the meaning there
Had clichéd really about the same 10



Here is a version that I attempted.

"Two words diverged in heated talk

And sorry I could not speak both
And be one speaker, long I tried
And looked into as deep as I could
To where it showed in the dictionary

Then checked the other just as clear
And having perhaps better claim
Because it was opaque and wanted cliché
Though as far that the meaning there
Had clichéd really about the same.

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The Word Not Spoken – II (SPD)



And both that morning equivocally lay
In pages no finger had underlined.
Oh, I left the first for another day!
Yet knowing how word leads on to word,
I doubted if I should ever get back. 15

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two words diverged in a speech, and I—
I used the one less spoken by,
And that has made all the difference. 20



And both that morning equivocally lay
In pages no finger had underlined.
Oh, I left the first for another day!

Yet knowing how word leads on to word,
I doubted if I should ever get back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two words diverged in a speech, and I
I used the one less spoken by,
And that has made all the difference.”

Difference with a mark to indicate the kind of poststructuralist language that we have today.

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Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening



Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow. 4

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year. 8

Whose? A false question
“Here” (3) rhymes with “queer” (5)



We have “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” We have highlighted certain points here. ‘S, S’ to indicate alliteration in the title; ing, ing to indicate this internal rhyme in the poem and by snowy, y we have clearly indicated some kind of importance is there in the title itself, that is why we have paid attention to this. Then we have the rhyming words. We begin with this question in this poem? Whose woods? It appears to be a false question and then we have identified the rhyming. Just we will read the poem just for the sake of reading.

“Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

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Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening



He gives his harness bells a **shake**
To ask if there is some **mistake**.
The only other sound's the **sweep**
Of easy wind and downy **flake**. 12

The woods are lovely, dark and **deep**,
But I have promises to **keep**,
And miles to go before I **sleep**,
And miles to go before I **sleep**. 16

“Lake” (7) rhymes with “shake” (9),
“Sweep” (11) rhymes with “deep” (13)



He gives his harness bells a **shake**
To ask if there is some **mistake**
The only other sound's the **sweep**
Of easy wind and downy **flake**.

The woods are lovely, dark and **deep**,

But I have promises to **keep**,

And miles to go before I **sleep**,

And miles to go before I **sleep.**”

This is one of the most famous poems American literature, from Frost. Everyone loves this poem. In fact, we used this poem in our introductory video. That is why we want to have it again here. Hope you enjoy reading this poem and many other poems on your own.

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Summary



- Historical and Literary Context
- Robert Frost
- Frost's Theory of Poetry
- "The Road Not Taken"
- Analysis
- The Most Misunderstood Poem
- Parodic Readings/ Writings
- "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"



To give you a summary of this presentation on Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken,' we have seen the historical and literary context in which Robert Frost was writing his poem against the backdrop of this First World War, Second World War, the great depression and the literary movements, especially modernism. He came out with his own theory of poetry as a poem beginning in delight and ending in wisdom which we find in "The Road Not Taken" and many of his poems. We gave a linguistic and rhetorical analysis of the poem and consider this poem from the angle of the most misunderstood poem from one critic David Orr.

Then we attempted parodic readings of this poem. We just gave the titles and then we presented an English teacher's parody of this poem and lastly, we read "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" just for pleasure. We drew the attention of the listeners to the alliteration and internal rhyme and the kind of vowel sounds we have in this poem to indicate the power of poetry that many poets have attempted through 'words, words, words' in their poems. Words representing feelings, words touching the heart of human beings, that is what poetry is all about.

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References



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- Ward, David C. 2015. "What Gives Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" Its Power?" <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/what-gives-robert-frosts-road-not-taken-its-power-180956200/>



We have some references. Those of you who are interested, please go to some of these references and learn more about this poem and many others. Thank you.