

The Choice

Analysis of “A Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost

By Rebecca Andersen

The traveler in the poem “A Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost faces two equal yet conflicting choices and must take one with the hope that the following consequences will be for his benefit. In this poem, we see that every choice has a consequence, and we do not always know ahead of time whether this consequence will be good or bad. But what Frost emphasizes is that the decision must be made. He shows that we cannot let fear of regret keep us from making the choice. Without choices, there is no life, and there are many choices that can only be made once, many opportunities that are only ours once. We cannot hesitate too long, or the opportunity will be lost. The imagery of this poem shows that the time is now to make the choice. The consequence is not known, and the choice is not easy, but it must be made, and it must be made now. Frost shows that we must act, using our best instincts, priorities, and hope that our actions will lead us to our desired destination. He proves that we cannot let the fear of regret hold us back, or life will be meaningless.

Frost uses language to furnish clues as to how our decisions in life will change the outcome of our future. The rhyme pattern used is ABAAB, and provides a sense of fate, where everything has its proper place. The first two lines of each stanza do not rhyme immediately, but we can predict the fact that they will affect the rest of the stanza, just as each of our decisions will affect our lives, although it may not be immediately seen.

Frost’s word choices emphasize the feeling of helplessness in determining which choice to make. Every action has an outcome. The choice, however, is not always clear. In the first line Frost says “roads *diverged*,” cluing the reader to the fact that the decision is not a minor one. The two options diverge, or are opposite of each other, taking the traveler down entirely different paths. The destinations are out of view, for the path “bent in the undergrowth,” but a choice must be made at the moment, even with the limited knowledge. If the traveler was to allow his

own fears and hesitations to guide his actions, he would lose the opportunity and the choices would never again be available to him.

We know that this choice is so impending because of the imagery of the poem. Frost uses imagery to conjure in our minds the fact that we cannot tarry simply for fear of regretting a decision. The setting is a “yellow wood,” in the morning, and the forest floor is covered with fresh leaves. In this, Frost is suggesting a crisp autumn morning, where one feels quiet, thoughtful, and possibly fearful of the coming winter. The traveler must make his decision before he can get any farther, and he must make it before the winter comes and it is too late. Just as repentance cannot be procrastinated and a fence sitter must choose which side he will be on before the dark winter comes and no more choices can be made, this decision is necessary right now. The speaker cannot travel one and then return to try the other, for it will be too late to start again. He wishes, perhaps, that he could be two people, and mourns, “sorry I could not travel both/And be one traveler, long I stood.” The choice he makes will be a permanent factor to the rest of his life, and he is afraid of making the wrong choice, so he hesitates.

Frost’s wording frequently reiterates the fact that at that time in the traveler’s life, he could not predict which would have the best ending, for both of these paths were good in their own rights. Simply the fact that they diverge does not mean that he is able to see that one path is better than the other. It was a difficult decision, but one that could only be made then, at that fork in the road. “Then took the other, as just as fair,” “And both that morning equally lay,” and “the passing there had worn them really about the same” all give a reader the idea that the two paths were similar in many ways, with the only dissimilarity being that they would have very different and specific outcomes. The traveler has understandable regret and hesitation that only one path can be taken and he will have to deal with the consequences whether they are good or bad. He stops, and proclaims, “long I stood,/And looked down one as far as I could.” Which choice was he to make? The fear of the unknown takes over, and he hesitates. Yet he could not allow fear to stop him from making that decision, despite his inability to see at the moment which one was the best option.

Frost shows that two options may appear equal, especially when given limited knowledge about the nature of each selection; it is easy to fear a wrong choice when a right choice is not apparent. Neither road was “trodden black” by the feet of previous travelers. The word “black” automatically denotes an image of something tarnished, desecrated, or stained. Nothing specifically gave the traveler any reason to doubt the worthiness of either choice. They were not, however, both for the speaker to take. He could only select one, for he was, unfortunately, only “one traveler.” This ultimately leads to a great fear of making the wrong choice. Two things are before him, and neither one asserts itself as being wrong, but he can only choose one. In this, Frost allows us to connect to the narrator by reminding us of our own choices and the times in our lives when we are forced to choose between two things we know very little about.

But the point that Frost makes is that those choices must be made. Despite the traveler’s indecision and fear of the unknown, “I kept the first for another day!” He made a choice, and he would have to live with the consequences as he came to them. “I shall be telling this with a sigh,/ Somewhere ages and ages hence,” he says. Unknowing where the path would leave him, he took it anyway. There was no way for him to stay and hesitate, for a life of waiting is no life at all.

Frost wants to show us that our choices affect the rest of our lives, for “way leads on to way,” and if we take one path, we will not be allowed to return and try the other one. But this should not stop us from making that choice. The traveler is not sure where he is going by his choice, as clued by his words, “Somewhere ages and ages hence.” It was taking him “somewhere,” to what would hopefully be a good decision. Hope is often the guide to our choices—we hope that we will not choose wrongly, just as this traveler suggests with his words, “I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made all the difference.” What that difference is we do not know, but we sense the hope that the traveler has for a good outcome. If he did not hope for a good outcome with the “road less traveled by,” why choose that one? Frost shows that we naturally hope that our choice is a wise one that we will not regret. But as long as we have that hope, we will continue to make choices, even when we do not know which of the paths that “equally lay”

will be the right one. And in making these choices, we will not fall into stagnancy and immobility.

The last stanza to this poem displays the most about what Frost was trying to tell us. In the second part of the poem, the traveler makes a choice, leaving the crossroads and heading down the path that “was grassy and wanted wear.” It is the choice that is the important thing. And when he gets to where that path will take him, he will recall that “two paths diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by,/And that has made all the difference.” Robert Frost himself lived a sorrowful life, and he probably regretted many of his decisions, but he does not regret making them, as evidenced by the actions of this traveler. He made the choices. They determined the course of his life, but without making those decisions, he would have no life at all. We cannot be afraid of regret and hesitate too long. Winter is coming and the opportunities that are ours will never be ours again.