

# **Learning to Appreciate Poetry**

**Presented by Paul Rogers**

# Robert Frost



## The Road Not Taken

## A few words in advance

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco in 1874 and died in Boston in 1963. He lived much of his life in New England and also taught there for many years.

In 1970, Daniel Hoffman, writing a critical review of Frost's poems called him "the American Bard." He also said of him: "He became a national celebrity, our nearly official poet laureate, and a great performer in the tradition of that earlier master of the literary vernacular, Mark Twain."

*The Academy of American Poets* says of him:

"Though his work is principally associated with the life and landscape of New England — and though he was a poet of traditional verse forms and metrics who remained steadfastly aloof from the poetic movements and fashions of his time — Frost is anything but merely a regional poet. The author of searching and often dark meditations on universal themes, he is a quintessentially modern poet in his adherence to language as it is actually spoken, in the psychological complexity of his portraits, and in the degree to which his work is infused with layers of ambiguity and irony."

As we have seen with other poets, Frost can be deceptively simple, but his work is often far more complex than first appears.

# The Poem

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, 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.

# Rhyme Scheme & Imagery

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

There are 4 stanzas, each with the same rhyme scheme: a b a a b  
It is structured as iambic tetrameter, so that each line has 4 beats,

While there is no figurative language as such in this work, the whole poem can be seen as a metaphor for the choices we make in life. We call this type of imagery allegory: the decision on which road to take in passing through the woods is a symbol of the choices confronting us as we journey from birth to death.

# Basic Meaning

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  
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Frost is telling us that at some unspecified time in the past, he had to make an “either/or” decision in his life. He compares this with deciding which pathway to take when walking through the woods. He realises the decision will be binding and irrevocable: there can be no going back.

The implication is that we all have occasions like this in our lives and our whole future history hinges on the decision we make. There is a cliché that makes the same point: “Actions have consequences.”

There have been famous moments of decision time such as this throughout history. A good example is that of Julius Caesar. When ordered by the senate not to cross the river Rubicon, he debates with himself on whether to obey or disobey. Finally, he disobeys and “crosses the Rubicon” – a phrase we often use to this day. Frost’s poem covers similar ground. The fascination for us is that we don’t know what his decision was about, nor how it turned out. All he tells us is that what he eventually decided “has made all the difference.”



# Concluding Remarks

**This poem has had an enormous influence. Deceptively simple, it forces us to consider potentially life-changing choices and the reasons we employ to make them. It offers no comfort or help in making the choices, nor does it make any value judgments about the final decision. This moral ambiguity gives the poem its deep meaning and profound philosophical strength.**

**I know of no other poem that so brilliantly captures the dilemma of being forced to decide something which might have far-reaching consequences. It is also notable that Frost's narrator of the poem is on his own, thereby implying that such decisions are lonely ones, where we only have ourselves to blame for the outcome.**

# Preparing for the Next Unit

