The Road Not Taken
By Robert Frost

A Line-by-Line Analysis

Line 1
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

- Our speaker is describing a fork in the road. This poem was first published in 1916, when cars were only just beginning to become prominent, so these roads in the wood are probably more like paths.
- The woods are yellow, so it's probably fall and the leaves are turning colors.

Lines 2-3
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood

- The speaker wants to go down both roads but can't. He has to choose one.
- He is "sorry" he can't travel both roads, suggesting regret.
- Because of the impossibility of traveling both roads, the speaker stands there trying to choose which path he's going to take. Because he's standing, we know that he's on foot.

Lines 4-5
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

- The speaker is staring down one road, trying to see where it goes. But he can only see up to the first bend, where the undergrowth, the small plants and greenery of the woods, blocks his view.
- This is where we start to think about the metaphorical meanings of this poem. If our speaker is, as we suspect, at a fork in the road of his life, and not at an actual road, he could be trying to peer into his future as far as he can. But, since he can't really predict the future, he can only see part of the path. Who knows what surprises it could hold?

Line 6
Then took the other, as just as fair,

- So after all this buildup about one road, which he's looked down for a long time, our speaker seemingly spontaneously, takes the other path.
- Then we get a tricky little phrase to describe this road. It's "as just as fair." Read without the first "as," this phrase is clear, if you think of fair as meaning attractive, or pretty. But the first "as" makes the phrase a little more difficult. Combining the words "just" and "fair" in the same phrase is a play on words – both of these words have multiple
meanings. The phrase could mean something like "as just as it is fair," as in proper, righteous, and equal. But this doesn't quite apply to a road.

- Yet we trust that our speaker wouldn't let things get awkward without meaning it. We're guessing that he means the road is just as pretty, but that in the metaphorical world of this poem, he thinks he made the fair, or right, choice.
- But it's not fairer – it's just as fair. So he was choosing between two roads, or futures, that were different but potentially equally good.

**Lines 7-8**

*And having perhaps the better claim,*  
*Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*

- The speaker still seems pretty uncertain when he explains that this second path is better. It is only "perhaps" better.
- Then the speaker tells us why the path is better – it seems like it hasn't been walked on very much, because it's grassy and doesn't look worn.
- Is "wanted wear" a use of personification? (it is alliteration, though). "Wanted," in this instance, probably means something more like "lacked."

**Lines 9-10**

*Though as for that the passing there*  
*Had worn them really about the same,*

- The speaker of this poem really can't seem to make up his mind! Think Prufrock!!! Just when we think we've got a declaration about which path is better, he changes his mind and admits that maybe they were equal after all.
- The "as for that" refers to the path being less worn.
- "The passing there" refers to traffic, that had worn the path about the same as the one more “traveled by.”

**Lines 11-12**

*And both that morning equally lay*  
*In leaves no step had trodden black.*

- Here, again, we hear that the paths are equal, but we find out something new, that it's morning. It's possible that our speaker is the first to travel to this place on that day.
- The paths are covered with leaves, which haven't been turned black by steps crushing them.
- Wait, we thought one path was grassy…and now it's covered with leaves. Possibly, the leaves aren't very thick, or the grass sticks up in between them. Or maybe the speaker isn't being quite honest.

**Line 13**

*Oh, I kept the first for another day!*
• The speaker seems like he's already regretting his decision. He is rationalizing his choice of path by saying he'll come back to the one he missed later.

• This is a familiar way to deal with difficult choices; "you can always come back and try it again later," we think.

• **With an "Oh" at the beginning and an exclamation point at the end, this line is emphatic. The speaker feels strongly about what he's saying here.**

Lines 14-15

*Yet knowing how way leads on to way,*  
*I doubted if I should ever come back.*

• The speaker realizes that his hopes to come back and try the other path may be foolish.

• He knows how "way leads on to way" – **how one road can lead to another, and then another, until you end up very far from where you started.** Because of this, he'll probably never be able to come back and take that other path.

• Here we return to the metaphorical meaning of this poem. In any life decision, we can hedge our bets by thinking we can always come back, try a different option later. But sometimes our decisions take us to other decisions, and yet still others, and it's impossible for us to retrace our steps and arrive back at that original decision.

Lines 16-17

*I shall be telling this with a sigh*  
*Somewhere ages and ages hence:*

• **Now we jump forward in time.** We don't know exactly when, but we know that it's ages and ages "hence," or, from now. So we're probably talking years.

• We know that this story is important, because the speaker will still be telling it many years later.

• He'll be telling it with a sigh, though, which is interesting because sighs can be happy, sad, or merely reflective – and we don't know what kind of sigh this is.

• So, we know that this choice is probably going to be important for the speaker's future, but we don't know if he's going to be happy about it or not.

Line 18

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*

• This line is a repetition of the first line of the poem, with the subtraction of the word "yellow" and the addition of the words "and I."

• This repetition helps to bring the poem to a conclusion. It reminds us what's important in the poem – the concept of choosing between two different paths.

• Then, we get the hesitation of "and I" and the dash. This lets us know that whatever the speaker is about to say next is important.

Line 19

*I took the one less traveled by,*
• In this line, the speaker sums up his story and tells us that he took the road less traveled by. With the hesitation in the line before, this declaration could be triumphant – or regretful.

• Also, remember it wasn't exactly clear that the road our speaker took was the one that was less traveled. He said at first that it looked less worn, but then that the two roads were actually about equal.

• Before you start getting mad at our speaker for stretching the truth, remember that he's telling his story far in the future, a long time from when it actually happened. He's predicting that his memory will tell him that he took the road less traveled by, or that he'll lie in the future, no matter what the reality of the situation was.

Line 20
And that has made all the difference.

• At first glance it seems that this line is triumphant – the narrator took the path that no one else did, and that is what has made the difference in his life that made him successful.

• But he doesn't say that it made him successful – an optimistic reader wants the line to read positively, but it could be read either way. A "difference" could mean success, or utter failure.

• Remember, the speaker is telling us about what he's going to say in the future. From where he is now, just beginning to go down the path as far as he can see, he can't tell if the future that it leads him to is going to be good or bad. He just knows that his choice is important – that it will make all the difference in his life.

• The speaker of this poem could be saying that his choice made all the difference while he's surrounded by his grandchildren, by a fire in a cozy little house. Or he could be saying it to the wind, while walking alone on the streets. At this point, he doesn't know – and neither do we.

Symbol Analysis The Road

This poem is about actual and figurative roads: the roads we walk and drive on, and the roads we take through life. As the speaker of this poem discusses, for every road we take, there's a road we don't take. Wrong turn or not, the roads we take can end up making significant changes in our lives. And we'll always wonder about the roads that we didn't try.

• Line 1: This line sets the scene for the literal and metaphorical fork in the road that the speaker faces. The road splitting in the woods is a metaphor for a choice. Wherever the speaker's life has taken him so far, he has come to the point where, to go any farther, he needs to make a choice that takes him down one path and precludes him from taking the other. Because the fork in the road is a metaphor for choices throughout the poem, it's called an extended metaphor.
• Lines 4-5: This description of the road is a metaphor for the future. Just like we can only see a path in the woods for so far, we can only see the consequences of our decisions for a short while into our future.

• Line 6: Here, the speaker decides that, even though he's spent a long time looking down one road, he's going to take the other, which seems just as interesting. This is probably a metaphor for a sudden decision – when we think about doing one thing, like, say, staying with a boyfriend or girlfriend, for a long time. But then, of a sudden, we find ourselves doing something else – dumping the boy or girl, and setting out on a new path. We don't know why we did it, other than that we thought we'd be just as happy with one choice as the other.

• Lines 13-15: The speaker wants to be able to take both roads, but realizes that the nature of these roads is such that he probably will never be able to come back to this place. This is a metaphor for a decision that changes everything – once you've made it you can never go back.

• Lines 18-20: The repetition of the first line brings us back to the beginning of the extended metaphor, and then the last two lines conclude the metaphor. In line 19, one of the roads is being affirmed as less traveled, even though the narrator seemed unsure before. And then we get the famous line "and that has made all the difference," which solidifies the figurative level of this poem by saying that taking the road that the speaker took, making the choice that he made, has changed his life.

Symbol Analysis Nature
You might not associate roads with nature, but remember, we're talking about a Robert Frost poem here. We're not talking highways – highways didn't even exist when this poem was written. Instead, this poem centers on two roads (more like paths) going through the woods in autumn. Nature in this poem sets the scene, and could hold metaphorical meaning as well.

• Line 1: This line gives us the setting of the poem. The speaker tells us the woods are yellow, so we can infer that it's autumn. The metaphorical significance of this poem taking place in autumn could be that the speaker is making this choice in the fall of his life, when he's beginning to grow old.

• Line 5: We find out here that these woods must be pretty thick, because a road can disappear in the undergrowth. Metaphorically, the undergrowth could represent aspects of the speaker's future that are unclear.

• Lines 7-8: The speaker is biased in favor of nature. He thinks one path could be better because fewer people have worn it down. These lines are not just about nature, but are a metaphor for a decision that is less commonly made.

• Lines 11-12: Here, we see the autumn imagery continue, and we find out that it's morning. We also see a contradiction of the earlier claim that one path is less worn than the other. This line shows us that the leaves have freshly fallen – perhaps masking which path was more or less traveled the day before. So, metaphorically, this line points out that sometimes there's no way to tell which decision is better.

• Line 18: The first line is repeated here. The detail that the woods are yellow is left out, but the repetition shows that nature is still important to the speaker.