"The Road Not Taken" (1916)

The narrator comes upon a fork in the road while walking through a yellow wood. He considers both paths and concludes that each one is equally well-traveled and appealing. After choosing one of the roads, the narrator tells himself that he will come back to this fork one day in order to try the other road. However, he realizes that it is unlikely that he will ever have the opportunity to come back to this specific point in time because his choice of path will simply lead to other forks in the road (and other decisions). The narrator ends on a nostalgic note, wondering how different things would have been had he chosen the other path.

Analysis

This poem is made up of four stanzas of five lines, each with a rhyme scheme of ABAAB.

Along with “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” this poem is one of Frost’s most beloved works and is frequently studied in high school literature classes. Since its publication, many readers have analyzed the poem as a nostalgic commentary on life choices. The narrator decided to seize the day and express himself as an individual by choosing the road that was “less traveled by.” As a result of this decision, the narrator claims, his life was fundamentally different that it would have been had he chosen the more well-traveled path.

This reading of the poem is extremely popular because every reader can empathize with the narrator’s decision: having to choose between two paths without having any knowledge of where each road will lead. Moreover, the narrator’s decision to choose the “less traveled” path demonstrates his courage. Rather than taking the safe path that others have traveled, the narrator prefers to make his own way in the world.

However, when we look closer at the text of the poem, it becomes clear that such an idealistic analysis is largely inaccurate. The narrator only distinguishes the paths from one another after he has already selected one and traveled many years through life. When he first comes upon the fork in the road, the paths are described as being fundamentally identical. In terms of beauty, both paths are equally “fair,” and the overall “…passing there / Had worn them really about the same.”

It is only as an old man that the narrator looks back on his life and decides to place such importance on this particular decision in his life. During the first three stanzas, the narrator shows no sense of remorse for his decision nor any acknowledgement that such a decision might be important to his life. Yet, as an old man, the narrator attempts to give a sense of order to his past and perhaps explain why certain things happened to him. Of course, the excuse that he took the road “less traveled by” is false, but the narrator still clings to this decision as a defining moment of his life, not only because of the path that he chose but because he had to make a choice in the first place.