

On "Road Not Taken"

The American poet Robert Frost (1874-1963) typifies the aspirations of an entire nation at a critical time of American history. Known for his realistic depictions of rural life and his command of American colloquial speech, Frost frequently wrote about settings from rural life in New England in the early twentieth century, using them to examine complex social and philosophical themes. The poet/critic Randall Jarrell often praised Frost's poetry and wrote, "Robert Frost, along with Stevens and Eliot, seems to me the greatest of the American poets of this century. Frost's virtues are extraordinary. No other living poet has written so well about the actions of ordinary men; his wonderful dramatic monologues or dramatic scenes come out of a knowledge of people that few poets have had, and they are written in a verse that uses, sometimes with absolute mastery, the rhythms of actual speech." He also praised "Frost's seriousness and honesty," stating that Frost was particularly skilled at representing a wide range of human experience in his poems. In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, the editors state that "Frost's best work explores fundamental questions of existence, depicting with chilling starkness the loneliness of the individual in an indifferent universe." The critic T. K. Whipple focused on this bleakness in Frost's work, stating that "in much of his work, particularly in *North of Boston*, his harshest book, he emphasizes the dark background of life in rural New England, with its degeneration often sinking into total madness." In sharp contrast, the founding publisher and editor of *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe, emphasized the folksy New England persona and characters in Frost's work, writing that "perhaps no other poet in our history has put the best of the Yankee spirit into a book so completely." She notes his frequent use of rural settings and farm life, and she likes that in these poems, Frost is most interested in "showing the human reaction to nature's processes." She also notes that while Frost's narrative, character-based poems are often satirical, Frost always has a "sympathetic humor" towards his subjects.

"The Road Not Taken" is a poem by Robert Frost, published in 1916 as the first poem in the collection *Mountain Interval*. Among English speakers and especially in North America it is a comparatively famous poem. Its central theme is the divergence of paths, literal and perhaps also figurative, although its interpretation is noted for being complex and (like the road fork itself) potentially divergent. "The Road Not Taken" is a narrative poem. It reads naturally or conversationally, and begins as a kind of photographic depiction of a quiet moment in woods. It consists of four stanzas of 5 lines each. The first line rhymes with the third and fourth, and the second line rhymes with the fifth (ABAAB). The meter is basically iambic tetrameter,

with each line having four two-syllable feet. Though in almost every line, in different positions, an iamb is replaced with an anapest. The variation of the rhythm gives naturalness, a feeling of thought occurring spontaneously, and it also affects the reader's sense of expectation. In the only line that contains strictly iambs, the more regular rhythm supports the idea of a turning towards an acceptance of a kind of reality: "Though as for that the passing there ... " In the final line, the way the rhyme and rhythm work together is significantly different, and catches the reader off guard. It is one of Frost's most popular works. Some have said that it is one of his most misunderstood poems, claiming that it is not simply a poem that champions the idea of "following your own path", but that the poem, they suggest, expresses some irony regarding that idea.

Frost's biographer Lawrance Thompson suggests that the poem's narrator is "one who habitually wastes energy in regretting any choice made: belatedly but wistfully he sighs over the attractive alternative rejected". Thompson also says that when introducing the poem in readings, Frost would say that the speaker was based on his friend Edward Thomas. In Frost's words, Thomas was "a person who, whichever road he went, would be sorry he didn't go the other".

Regarding the "sigh" that is mentioned in the last stanza, it may be seen as an expression of regret or of satisfaction, but there is significance in the difference between what the speaker has just said of the two roads, and what he will say in the future. According to biographer Lawrance Thompson, as Frost was once about to read the poem, he commented to his audience, "You have to be careful of that one; it's a tricky poem—very tricky," perhaps intending to suggest the poem's ironic possibilities. A New York Times Sunday book review on Brian Hall's 2008 biography *Fall of Frost* states: "Whichever way they go, they're sure to miss something good on the other path."