Olivia Diaz

Professor Anderson

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The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost is regarded as one of the most famous poets during the modernist era. One of his best-known poems, “The Road Not Taken”, has been widely speculated over, as most people interpret it in terms of simple decision making although there is much more underneath the surface of the poem. This poem is about a someone who encounters a fork in a path and must choose the right direction to take. Growing up, Frost had to deal with the death of his father and wife, and due to this, he had many difficult choices to make in his life such as where to live and what to do with his future. His upbringing and his past experiences shaped who he was as a person through the choices he made such as moving to England to focus on his writing. His past is reflected in this poem as the reoccurring theme in his life of making the right decisions is the main focus.

While analyzing this poem it is easy to get confused with the message about simple decision making. Frost himself used to boast about how “tricky” his poem was and how he bet that not a lot of people would be able to interpret “The Road Not Taken” correctly (Orr, 2017). The poem has an obvious truth to it: we all make decisions and sometimes wonder if the wrong one was taken. However, it leads to different, more in-depth explorations, concerning the relationship of the author with the speaker in the poem, whether the story is literal or figurative, and whether free will determines our paths in life. When discussing the work, scholars note that Frost’s ambiguity creates “an openness to a wealth of interpretive analyses and leaves it to readers to construct divergent meanings” (Moosavinia and Morteza, 2018). Frost purposefully uses a confusing style of writing in order to allow the reader to make their own assumptions as to the meaning of his poems. In “The Road Not Taken”, the seemingly obvious meaning to the poem distorts readers perception until they are able to explore alternative possibilities.

Frost was one of the most well-known modernist poets of his time. While emerging into the world of poetry, Frost looked up to other well recognized authors such as T.S Eliot and Ezra Pound. His ability to emulate the way they wrote their poems allowed him to thrive and become a key figure in modernism. He became self-conscious of his language and his claims about coherence (Poetry Foundation, 2019). The modernist form of poetry often featured a confusing writing style that allows for deeper interpretation. Frost develops the confusion in his poem in the first line, “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood” (Frost, 1916). This sentence leaves readers wondering who is standing at the two roads, the author or another person. The poem also leaves the setting unknown. The confusion allows for the reader to develop their own decisions about the path ahead as they begin the poem.

While first reading the poem, it is easy to think the poem is just about a man who needs to make a decision about what road to go down. Although, with further reading and analyzing, it quickly becomes clear that the poem is also about choices a person must make in their life. Decisions always lead to some form of regret, thinking about what would have happened if a different decision was made. In the poem, Frost develops this by saying, “I shall be telling this with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence: / Two roads diverged in a wood…” (Frost, 1916). The sigh that is written into the story informs the reader that there was regret about missing what was on the road that was not taken. This development confirms Frost’s writing style of trying to create openings for the reader.

The poem also includes a simplistic and upfront style. The meaning of his poems is not woven in and made to be difficult, like most poems, they are put in the words allowing for the writing to affect the reader more. Although there is simple wording, the plain language is very useful at disguising hidden meanings such as, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I⎯ / I took the one less traveled by” (Frost, 1916). These two lines suggest that he simply took a path most people haven’t taken before, but he also could be suggesting his independence and not having to follow others. His poems are also very short, with the Road Not Taken being only four stanzas. The short, simplistic reasoning of writing the poem like this is so that the meaning comes across fast and simple.

The ambiguity in the writing challenges the readers to develop a better understanding on how to recognize the theme or lesson behind the poem, and Frost does this and knows as he claims it is a very tricky poem. The contrasting use and tension of ambiguity and plain language is the main factor as to why his poem is tricky. The plain language disguises the ambiguity that Frost includes in the poem as it develops a screen to the real meaning. This poem digs into the readers emotions as it allows them to remember what it was like to make a difficult decision, and also allows them to think about what could have happened if they chose another path. The real meaning behind this poem was not meant to make readers confused, because once the real truth is uncovered, the poem becomes clear once read again.

This poem is a perfect example of how poets are able to incorporate the meaning of the poem into a short four stanzas. Modernist poets purposefully make the reading harder to interpret so that the readers are able to come up with different analyses of the meaning of the work. This poem explores the effects of contemplating on a decision and then acting on it. It also shows the regret that could result from not knowing what would have happened if another decision was made instead. “The Road Not Taken” is a literary art that is an example of how poems can be mentally stimulating and also provide life lessons for the future.

Works Cited

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