

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
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.

The speaker, walking through a forest whose leaves have turned yellow in autumn, comes to a fork in the road. The speaker, regretting that he or she is unable to travel by both roads (since he or she is, after

all, just one person), stands at the fork in the road for a long time and tries to see where one of the paths leads. However, the speaker can't see very far because the forest is dense and the road is not straight.

The speaker takes the other path, judging it to be just as good a choice as the first, and supposing that it may even be the better option of the two, since it is grassy and looks less worn than the other path. Though, now that the speaker has actually walked on the second road, he or she thinks that in reality the two roads must have been more or less equally worn-in.

Reinforcing this statement, the speaker recalls that both roads were covered in leaves, which had not yet been turned black by foot traffic. The speaker exclaims that he or she is in fact just saving the first road, and will travel it at a later date, but then immediately contradicts him or herself with the acknowledgement that, in life, one road tends to lead onward to another, so it's therefore unlikely that he or she will ever actually get a chance to return to that first road.

The speaker imagines him or herself in the distant future, recounting, with a sigh, the story of making the choice of which road to take. Speaking as though looking back on his or her life from the future, the speaker states that he or she was faced with a choice between two roads and chose to take the road that was less traveled, and the consequences of that decision have made all the difference in his or her life.

The speaker describes him or herself as facing a choice between which of two roads to take. The speaker's choice functions as an extended metaphor for all the choices that the speaker—and all people—must make in life. Through the speaker's experience, the poem explores the nature of choices, and what it means to be a person forced to choose (as all people inevitably are).

The poem begins with the speaker recounting the experience of facing the choice of which road to take. The speaker's first emotion is "sorrow," as he or she regrets the reality that makes it impossible to "travel both" roads, or to experience both things. The poem makes clear that every choice involves the loss of opportunity and that choices are painful because they must be made with incomplete information. The speaker tries to gather as much information as possible by looking "down one [road] as far as I could," but there is a limit to what the speaker can see, as the road is "bent," meaning that it curves, leaving the rest of it out of sight. So the speaker, like anyone faced with a choice, must make a choice, but can't know enough to be sure which choice is the right one. The speaker, as a result, is paralyzed: "long I stood" contemplating which road to choose.

The speaker does eventually choose a road based on which one appears to have been less traveled, but the poem shows that making that choice doesn't actually solve the speaker's problem. Immediately after choosing a road, the speaker admits that the two roads were "worn... really about the same" and that both roads "equally lay" without any leaves "trodden black" by passersby. So the speaker has tried to choose the road that seemed less traveled, but couldn't tell which road was actually less traveled. By making a choice, the speaker will now never get the chance to experience the other road and can never know which was less traveled. The speaker hides from this psychic pain by announcing that he or she is just saving "the first [road] for another day!" But, again, reality sets in: "I doubted if I should ever come back." Every choice may be a beginning, but it is also an ending, and having to choose cuts off knowledge of the alternate choice, such that the person choosing will never know if they made the "right" choice.

The poem ends with the speaker imagining the far future, when he or she thinks back to this choice and believes that it made "all the difference." But the rest of the poem has shown that the speaker doesn't (and can never) know what it would have been like to travel down that other road—and can't even know if the road taken was indeed the one less traveled. And, further, the final line is a subtle reminder that the only thing one can know about the choices one makes in life is that they make "all the difference"—but how, or from what, neither the poem nor life provide any answer.

the speaker must choose between two roads without having complete information about how they differ. Even after having chosen the second road, the speaker is unable to evaluate his or her experience, because the speaker can't know how things would have been different if he or she had chosen the first road. In the final stanza, the speaker imagines him or herself in the distant future looking back on this choice. In this way, the poem engages not just with a choice being made, but with the way that the speaker interprets that choice and assigns it meaning after the fact. It is only when looking back, after all, that the speaker sees the choice of which road to take as having made "all the difference."

Many people read the poem straightforwardly, and believe the choice did make "all the difference." The poem, however, is not clear about whether the speaker's final assertion is true. The speaker explains that he or she chose to take the second road because it seemed more "grassy" and less worn than the first, but soon admits that the two roads were actually worn to "about the same" degree. By raising the question of whether there was actually anything special about the road the speaker chose to take, the poem further questions whether taking the second road could have possibly "made all the difference," or even any difference at all. The poem implies that the speaker in the future may look back and construct a narrative of his or her life that is simpler and cleaner, and which gives this choice more meaning than the truth would support. Using this interpretation, the poem can be read as commenting more broadly on how all people fictionalize their lives by interpreting their choices, in hindsight, as being more purposeful and meaningful than they really are.

The poem can also be read in a third and more positive way, though. In this third interpretation, the poem implies that it's less important whether the speaker's choice actually "made all the difference" than it is that he or she believes that it did. In this reading, the poem recognizes that the speaker—and all people—fictionalize their lives by creating meaning where there may not be any, but portrays such meaning-making not as fraudulent, but rather as a part of being human.

All three of these different possible readings co-exist in "The Road Not Taken." The poem does not suggest a solution to the question of the meaning in the speaker's choice, but rather comes to embody the question itself, allowing for contemplation of the mysteries inherent in defining or interpreting a life.