

The Road Not Taken

“The Road Not Taken” is one song of seven-song suite entitled “Frostiana,” composed in 1959 by Randall Thompson. The songs is based on a poem by Robert Frost.

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Lyrics

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;

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.

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,

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.

I. Frostiana

Frostiana: Seven Country Songs is a piece for mixed chorus and piano composed in 1959 by Randall Thompson. It was premiered on October 18, 1959, in Amherst, Massachusetts. Thompson later scored the piece for chamber orchestra and chorus, in which version it was first performed on April 23, 1965.

Randall Thompson was commissioned to compose a piece to celebrate another 200th anniversary, similar to *The Testament of Freedom*, but this time the excitement focused on the incorporation of the town of Amherst, Massachusetts. The town was known for its association

with Robert Frost, who had lived there for some years. Frost had known Thompson for some time, and admired his music; accordingly, it was decided that the commemorative work would be a setting of some of Frost's poetry. The town suggested "The Gift Outright"; Thompson, however, feared that the text was inappropriate for the occasion, and asked to be allowed to choose his own texts. In the end, the composer selected seven poems, with which he constructed a seven-movement suite of choral art songs:

- "The Road Not Taken"
- "The Pasture"
- "Come In"
- "The Telephone Machine"
- "A Girl's Garden"
- "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"
- "Choose Something Like a Star"
-

A common thread unites the poems by emphasizing the importance of the many small choices we are called to make throughout life. Subtitled *Seven Country Songs*, the poems he selected provide a nostalgic glimpse of rural New England life. Thompson advises us to travel the road not taken, to keep our promises before we sleep, to focus our minds upon something like a star. Because the male and female choruses rehearsed separately, Thompson structured the work so that they sang together only in three of the seven movements; each of the other four was scored for either male voices or female voices alone.

Randall Thompson conducted the premiere at the Bicentennial Commemoration on October 18, 1959. A group of singers from throughout the township, The Bicentennial Chorus, was accompanied on the piano, as the orchestration of the work was not completed until 1965.

Frost was present at the world premiere. Accounts vary as to his response to Thompson's musical rendition of his poetry. One asserts that at the end of "Choose Something Like a Star" Frost sprang from his seat and bellowed, "Play it again!" Others assert that Frost was so disgusted by the abuse of his poetry that he forbade any of his verse from being set to music again. Some fanatics of Frost's work believe that during the poem 'The Telephone Machine', Frost himself rose to his feet and shouted 'Where's my hat!?' in correspondence to the line in the poem. A number of recordings of *Frostiana* exist, and it is still performed with some frequency.

II. The Road Not Taken (Poem)

"**The Road Not Taken**" is a poem by Robert Frost, published in 1916 in his collection *Mountain Interval*. It is the first poem in the volume, and the first poem Frost had printed in italics. The title is often misremembered as "The Road Less Traveled", from the penultimate line: "I took the one less traveled by".

The poem has two recognized interpretations. One is a more literal interpretation, while the other is more ironic. Readers often see the poem literally, as an expression of individualism. Critics typically view the poem as ironic. "'The Road Not Taken,' perhaps the most famous example of Frost's own claims to conscious irony and 'the best example in all of American poetry of a wolf

in sheep's clothing.” – and Frost himself warned "You have to be careful of that one; it's a tricky poem – very tricky."

"Frost intended the poem as a gentle jab at his great friend and fellow poet who was also best friends with Edward Thomas, and seemed amused at this certain interpretation of the poem as inspirational." Frost was making a joke when making this poem about a friend he travelled with on the path one day. He faced a huge dilemma on what path to take even though they were both the same. "Though as for that the passing there Had worn them really about the same, And both that morning equally lay"(lines 9-11) the paths being the same is proven in this quote from the poem.

According to the literal interpretation, the poem is inspirational, a paean to individualism and non-conformism. The poem's last lines, where the narrator declares that taking the road "less traveled by" has "made all the difference," can be seen as a declaration of the importance of independence and personal freedom. "The Road Not Taken" seems to illustrate that once one takes a certain road, there is no turning back. Although one might change paths later on, the past cannot be changed. It can be seen as showing that choice is very important, and is a thing to be considered. This interpretation is connected with misremembering the title as "The Road Less Traveled", since it places emphasis on the choice made, not the opportunities foregone.

The ironic interpretation, widely held by critics, is that the poem is instead about regret and personal myth-making, rationalizing our decisions. In this interpretation, the final two lines:

“I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.”

are ironic – the choice made little or no difference at all, the speaker's protestations to the contrary. The speaker admits in the second and third stanzas that both paths may be equally worn and equally leaf-covered, and it is only in his future recollection that he *will call* one road "less traveled by".

The sigh, widely interpreted as a sigh of regret, might also be interpreted ironically: in a 1925 letter to Crystine Yates of Dickson, Tennessee, asking about the sigh, Frost replied: "It was my rather private jest at the expense of those who might *think* I would yet live to be sorry for the way I had taken in life."

III. The Road Not Taken (Poem)

"The Road Not Taken" can be read against a literary and pictorial tradition that might be called "The Choice of the Two Paths," reaching not only back to the Gospels and beyond them to the Greeks but to ancient English verse as well. In *Reson and Sensuallyte*, for example, John Lydgate explains how he dreamt that Dame Nature had offered him the choice between the Road of Reason and the Road of Sensuality. In art the same choice was often represented by the letter "Y" with the trunk of the letter representing the careless years of childhood and the two paths branching off at the age when the child is expected to exercise discretion. In one design the "Two Paths" are shown in great detail. "On one side a thin line of pious folk ascend a hill past several churches and chapels, and so skyward to the Heavenly City where an angel stands proffering a crown. On the other side a crowd of men and women are engaged in feasting, music, love-making, and other carnal pleasures while close behind them yawns the flaming mouth of hell in

which sinners are writhing. But hope is held out for the worldly for some avoid hell and having passed through a dark forest come to the rude huts of Humility and Repentance." Embedded in this quotation is a direct reference to the opening of Dante's *Inferno*:

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.
Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say
What was the forest savage, rough, and stern,
Which in the very thought renews the fear.
So bitter is it, death is little more.

From the beginning, when it appeared as the first poem in *Mountain Interval* (1916), many readers have overstated the importance of "The Road Not Taken" to Frost's work. Alexander Meiklejohn, president of Amherst College, did so when, announcing the appointment of the poet to the school's faculty he recited it to a college assembly.

"The Choice of Two Paths" is suggested in Frost's decision to make his two roads not very much different from one another, for passing over one of them had the effect of wearing them "really about the same." This is a far cry from, say, the description of the "two waies" offered in the seventeenth century by Henry Crosse:

Two waies are proposed and laide open to all, the one inviting to vertue, the other alluring to vice; the first is combersome, intricate, untraded, overgrowne, and many obstacles to dismay the passenger; the other plaine, even beaten, overshadowed with boughes, tapistried with flowers, and many objects to feed the eye; now a man that lookes but only to the outward shewe, will easily tread the broadest pathe, but if hee perceive that this smooth and even way leads to a neast of Scorpions: or a litter of Beares, he will rather take the other though it be rugged and unpleasant, than hazard himselfe in so great a daunger.

Frost seems to have deliberately chosen the word "roads" rather than "waies" or "paths" or even "pathways." In fact, on one occasion when he was asked to recite his famous poem, "Two paths diverged in a yellow wood," Frost reacted with such feeling—"Two *roads!*"—that the transcription of his reply made it necessary both to italicize the word "roads" and to follow it with an exclamation point. Frost recited the poem all right, but, as his friend remembered, "he didn't let me get away with 'two paths!'"

Convinced that the poem was deeply personal and directly self-revelatory Frost's readers have insisted on tracing the poem to one or the other of two facts of Frost's life when he was in his late thirties. (At the beginning of the *Inferno* Dante is thirty-five, "midway on the road of life," notes Charles Eliot Norton.) The first of these, an event, took place in the winter of 1911-1912 in the woods of Plymouth, New Hampshire, while the second, a general observation and a concomitant attitude, grew out of his long walks in England with Edward Thomas, his newfound Welsh-English poet-friend, in 1914.

In *Robert Frost: The Trial by Existence*, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant locates in one of Frost's letters the source for "The Road Not Taken." To Susan Hayes Ward the poet wrote on February 10, 1912:

Two lonely cross-roads that themselves cross each other I have walked several times this winter without meeting or overtaking so much as a single person on foot or on runners. The practically unbroken condition of both for several days after a snow or a blow proves that neither is much travelled. Judge then how surprised I was the other evening as I came down one to see a man, who to my own unfamiliar eyes and in the dusk looked for all the world like myself, coming down the other, his approach to the point where our paths must intersect being so timed that unless one of us pulled up we must inevitably collide. I felt as if I was going to meet my own image in a slanting mirror. Or say I felt as we slowly converged on the same point with the same noiseless yet laborious stride as if we were two images about to float together with the uncrossing of someone's eyes. I verily expected to take up or absorb this other self and feel the stronger by the addition for the three-mile journey home. But I didn't go forward to the touch. I stood still in wonderment and let him pass by; and that, too, with the fatal omission of not trying to find out by a comparison of lives and immediate and remote interests what could have brought us by crossing paths to the same point in a wilderness at the same moment of nightfall. Some purpose I doubt not, if we could but have made out. I like a coincidence almost as well as an incongruity.

This portentous account of meeting "another" self (but not encountering that self directly and therefore not coming to terms with it) would eventually result in a poem quite different from "The Road Not Taken" and one that Frost would not publish for decades. Elizabeth Sergeant ties the moment with Frost's decision to go off at this time to some place where he could devote more time to poetry. He had also, she implies, filed away his dream for future poetic use.

That poetic use would occur three years later. In 1914 Frost arrived in England for what he then thought would be an extended sabbatical leave from farming in New Hampshire. By all the signs he was ready to settle down for a long stay. Settling in Gloucestershire, he soon became a close friend of Edward Thomas. Later, when readers persisted in misreading "The Road Not Taken," Frost insisted that his poem had been intended as a sly jest at the expense of his friend and fellow poet. For Thomas had invariably fussed over irrevocable choices of the most minor sort made on daily walks with Frost in 1914, shortly before the writing of the poem. Later Frost insisted that in his case the line "And that has made all the difference"—taken straight—was all wrong. "Of course, it hasn't," he persisted, "it's just a poem, you know." In 1915, moreover, his sole intention was to twit Thomas. Living in Gloucestershire, writes Lawrance Thompson, Frost had frequently taken long countryside walks with Thomas.

Repeatedly Thomas would choose a route which might enable him to show his American friend a rare plant or a special vista; but it often happened that before the end of such a walk Thomas would regret the choice he had made and would sigh over what he might have shown Frost if they had taken a "better" direction. More than once, on such occasions, the New Englander had teased his Welsh-English friend for those wasted regrets. . . . Frost found something quaintly romantic in sighing over what might have been. Such a course of action was a road never taken by Frost, a road he had been taught to avoid.

If we are to believe Frost and his biographer, "The Road Not Taken" was intended to serve as Frost's gentle jest at Thomas's expense. But the poem might have had other targets. One such target was a text by another poet who in a different sense might also be considered a "friend": Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose poem, "My Lost Youth," had provided Frost with *A Boy's Will*, the title he chose for his first book.

"The Road Not Taken" can be placed against a passage in Longfellow's notebooks: "Round about what is, lies a whole mysterious world of might be,—a psychological romance of possibilities and things that do not happen. By going out a few minutes sooner or later, by stopping to speak with a friend at a corner, by meeting this man or that, or by turning down this street instead of the other, we may let slip some great occasion of good, or avoid some impending evil, by which the whole current of our lives would have been changed. There is no possible solution to the dark enigma but the one word, 'Providence.'"

Longfellow's tone in this passage is sober, even somber, and anticipates the same qualities in Edward Thomas, as Frost so clearly perceived. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant had insisted that Frost's dream encounter with his other self at a crossroads in the woods had a "subterranean connection" with the whole of "The Road Not Taken," especially with the poem's last lines:

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.

Undoubtedly. But whereas Longfellow had invoked Providence to account for acts performed and actions not taken, Frost calls attention only to the role of human choice. A second target was the notion that "whatever choice we make, we make at our peril." The words just quoted are Fitz-James Stephen's, but it is more important that Frost encountered them in William James's essay "The Will to Believe." In fact, James concludes his final paragraph on the topic: "We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? 'Be strong and of a good courage.' Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better." The danger inherent in decision, in this brave passage quoted with clear-cut approval by the teacher Frost "never had," does not play a part in "The Road Not Taken." Frost the "leaf-treader" will have none of it, though he will not refuse to make a choice. Nothing will happen to him through default. Nor, argues the poet, is it likely that anyone will melodramatically be dashed to pieces.

It is useful to see Frost's projected sigh as a nudging criticism of Thomas's characteristic regrets, to note that Frost's poem takes a sly poke at Longfellow's more generalized awe before the notion of what might have happened had it not been for the inexorable workings of Providence, and to see "The Road Not Taken" as a bravura tossing off of Fitz-James Stephen's mountainous and meteorological scenario. We can also project the poem against a poem by Emily Dickinson that Frost had encountered twenty years earlier in *Poems, Second Series* (1891).

Our journey had advanced;
Our feet were almost come
To that odd fork in Being's road,
Eternity by term.
Our pace took sudden awe,
Our feet reluctant led.

Before were cities, but between,
The forest of the dead.
Retreat was out of hope,—
Behind, a sealed route,
Eternity's white flag before,
And God at every gate.

Dickinson's poem is straightforwardly and orthodoxically religious. But it can be seen that beyond the "journey" metaphor Dickinson's poem employs diction—"road" and "forest"—that recalls "The Choice of the Two Paths" trope, the opening lines of the *Inferno*, and Frost's secular poem "The Road Not Taken."

IV. Randall Thompson

Randall Thompson (April 21, 1899 – July 9, 1984) was an American composer. He attended Harvard University, became assistant professor of music and choir director at Wellesley College, and received a doctorate in music from the University of Rochester School of Music. He went on to teach at the Curtis Institute of Music, at the University of Virginia, and at Harvard. He is particularly noted for his choral works. He was an honorary member of the Rho Tau chapter of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Fraternity at Appalachian State University.

Thompson composed three symphonies and numerous vocal works including *The Testament of Freedom* and *The Peaceable Kingdom*, inspired by Edward Hicks's painting. His most popular and recognizable choral work is his anthem, *Alleluia*, commissioned by Serge Koussevitzky for the opening of the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood. He also wrote the operas *Solomon and Balkis* and *The Nativity According to St. Luke*.

Leonard Bernstein was one of Thompson's students at Harvard. His other notable students include Samuel Adler, Leo Kraft, Juan Orrego-Salas, John Davison, Thomas Beveridge, Charles Edward Hamm, William P. Perry, Christopher King, Frederic Rzewski, and David Borden.

In honor of Thompson's vast influence on male choral music, on May 2, 1964 he became the first recipient of the prestigious University of Pennsylvania Glee Club Award of Merit. Established in 1964, this award sought "to bring a declaration of appreciation to an individual each year that has made a significant contribution to the world of music and helped to create a climate in which our talents may find valid expression." He was also a recipient of Yale University's Sanford Medal.

V. Randall Thompson

Randall Thompson's works include the "Alleluia" anthem, three symphonies, two string quartets, and a scattering of instrumental pieces. But his writing for voice spans his whole life, from *The Five Odes of Horace*, written in 1924, to *Twelve Canticles*, written a year before his death. The Harvard undergraduate who, in trying out for the Glee Club, was unaccountably turned down by

Archibald T. "Doc" Davison concluded: "My life has been an attempt to strike back." And indeed he did. His compositional output is striking in two ways. First, it is predominantly choral and unfailingly accessible to amateur choruses; second, for that very reason, most of his works—whether religious, commemorative, or celebratory—were composed, enviably, in response to commissions.

In 1935, for example, the League of Composers, of which he had become an officer, commissioned him to write a work for a particular college chorus: the combined Harvard Glee Club and Radcliffe Choral Society. That summer the Worcester Art Museum acquired a version of *The Peaceable Kingdom* by the American primitive painter Edward Hicks. Thompson went to view the painting and became aglow not only with what he saw but also with the biblical passage portrayed (Isaiah, 11:6-9), which ends: "For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." Like Hicks, Thompson was drawn to the theme that the wicked will be destroyed and the good will go to heaven.

The composer next read all 60 chapters of Isaiah and copied out passages that appealed especially. The care with which he met the challenge to arrive at a choral sequence based on the unfolding of a dramatic narrative is reminiscent of how Brahms prepared verses for his *German Requiem*. Thompson's dream of composing a cycle based on sacred texts was realized for the first time, and he would benefit from the experience in composing many large works to come: *Mass of the Holy Spirit*, *Requiem*, and settings based on Saint Luke: *The Nativity* and *The Passion*. This kind of creative challenge was for Thompson the most stimulating for the exercise of his craft.

Thompson's love of music was matched by his love of teaching the art to students. He began in 1927, at Wellesley College, teaching harmony and counterpoint and leading the choir. In 1935 he published *College Music*, which had a major impact on music courses for undergraduates. (In the same year, he served on the Harvard visiting committee that recommended the creation of what would become Music 1, "The History of Music," which aimed to instill an ability to listen discriminately and to provide a comprehensive sweep from Gregorian chant to the present.) Thompson would teach at Berkeley, the Curtis Institute of Music, the University of Virginia, and Princeton before returning to Harvard in 1948, where he chaired the music department from 1952 to 1957, and became the first Walter Bigelow Rosen professor of music.

A man of great wit and a bon vivant whose charm was infectious, Thompson was also a self-assured artist. His one-time junior colleague, James Haar, has written: "Randall Thompson's choral works are a shining reflection of the joy and creative skill with which he taught musical craft—of Palestrina and Lasso, of Monteverdi and Schütz, of Bach and Handel. It has been his belief that music of this craft is timeless in its nature, and can form part of the basis of a composer's working vocabulary without loss to his individual talent. In this he is a true classicist and an academic in the best sense."

VI. Robert Frost

Robert Lee Frost (March 26, 1874 – January 29, 1963) was an American poet. He is highly regarded for his realistic depictions of rural life and his command of American colloquial speech.

His work frequently employed themes from the early 1900s rural life in New England, using the setting to examine complex social and philosophical themes. A popular and often-quoted poet, Frost was honored frequently during his lifetime, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry. Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California to journalist, William Prescott Frost, Jr. and Isabelle Moodie. His mother, was of Scottish descent, and his father, a descendant of colonist Nicholas Frost from Tiverton, Devon, England who had sailed to New Hampshire in 1634 on the *Wolfrana*.

Frost's father was a teacher and later an editor of the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* (later merged into the *San Francisco Examiner*), and an unsuccessful candidate for the city tax collector. After his father's death in May 5, 1885, in due time the family moved across-country to Lawrence, Massachusetts under the patronage of (Robert's grandfather) William Frost, Sr., who was an overseer at a New England mill. Frost graduated from Lawrence High School in 1892. Frost's mother joined the Swedenborgian church and had him baptized in it, but he left it as an adult.

Despite his later association with rural life, Frost grew up in the city, and published his first poem in his high school's magazine. He attended Dartmouth College long enough to be accepted into the Theta Delta Chi fraternity. Frost returned home to teach and to work at various jobs including delivering newspapers and factory labor. He did not enjoy these jobs at all, feeling his true calling as a poet.

In 1894 he sold his first poem, "My Butterfly: An Elegy" (published in the November 8, 1894 edition of the *New York Independent*) for fifteen dollars. Proud of this accomplishment he proposed marriage to Elinor Miriam White, but she demurred, wanting to finish college (at St. Lawrence University) before they married. Frost then went on an excursion to the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia, and asked Elinor again upon his return. Having graduated she agreed, and they were married at Harvard University where he attended liberal arts studies for two years.

He did well at Harvard, but left to support his growing family. Grandfather Frost had, shortly before his death, purchased a farm for the young couple in Derry, New Hampshire; and Robert worked the farm for nine years, while writing early in the mornings and producing many of the poems that would later become famous. Ultimately his farming proved unsuccessful and he returned to education as an English teacher, at Pinkerton Academy from 1906 to 1911, then at the New Hampshire Normal School (now Plymouth State University) in Plymouth, New Hampshire.

In 1912 Frost sailed with his family to Great Britain, living first in Glasgow before settling in Beaconsfield outside London. His first book of poetry, *A Boy's Will*, was published the next year. In England he made some important acquaintances, including Edward Thomas (a member of the group known as the Dymock Poets), T.E. Hulme, and Ezra Pound. Pound would become the first American to write a (favorable) review of Frost's work. Surrounded by his peers, Frost wrote some of his best work while in England.

As World War I began, Frost returned to America in 1915. He bought a farm in Franconia, New Hampshire, where he launched a career of writing, teaching, and lecturing. This family homestead served as the Frosts' summer home until 1938, and is maintained today as 'The Frost Place', a museum and poetry conference site at Franconia. During the years 1916-20, 1923-24,

and 1927-1938, Frost taught English at Amherst College, Massachusetts, notably encouraging his students to account for the sounds of the human voice in their writing.

For forty two years, from 1921 to 1963, Frost spent almost every summer and fall teaching at the Bread Loaf School of English of Middlebury College, at the mountain campus at Ripton, Vermont. He is credited as a major influence upon the development of the school and its writing programs; the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference gained renown during Frost's tenure there. The college now owns and maintains his former Ripton farmstead as a national historic site near the Bread Loaf campus. In 1921 Frost accepted a fellowship teaching post at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he resided until 1927; while there he was awarded a lifetime appointment at the University as a Fellow in Letters. The Robert Frost Ann Arbor home is now situated at The Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. Frost returned to Amherst in 1927. In 1940 he bought a 5-acre (2.0 ha) plot in South Miami, Florida, naming it *Pencil Pines*; he spent his winters there for the rest of his life.

Harvard's 1965 alumni directory indicates Frost received an honorary degree there. He also received honorary degrees from Bates College and from Oxford and Cambridge universities; and he was the first person to receive two honorary degrees from Dartmouth College. During his lifetime the Robert Frost Middle School in Fairfax, Virginia, and the main library of Amherst College were named after him.

Frost was 86 when he spoke and performed a reading of his poetry at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy on January 20, 1961. Some two years later, on January 29, 1963, he died, in Boston, of complications from prostate surgery. He was buried at the Old Bennington Cemetery in Bennington, Vermont. His epitaph reads, "I had a lover's quarrel with the world."

Frost's poems are critiqued in the "Anthology of Modern American Poetry", Oxford University Press, where it is mentioned that behind a sometimes charmingly familiar and rural façade, Frost's poetry frequently presents pessimistic and menacing undertones which often are not recognized nor analyzed.

Robert Frost's personal life was plagued with grief and loss. His father died of tuberculosis in 1885, when Frost was 11, leaving the family with just \$8. Frost's mother died of cancer in 1900. In 1920, Frost had to commit his younger sister, Jeanie, to a mental hospital, where she died nine years later. Mental illness apparently ran in Frost's family, as both he and his mother suffered from depression, and his daughter Irma was committed to a mental hospital in 1947. Frost's wife, Elinor, also experienced bouts of depression.

Elinor and Robert Frost had six children: son Elliot (1896-1904, died of cholera), daughter Lesley Frost Ballantine (1899-1983), son Carol (1902-1940, committed suicide), daughter Irma (1903-1967), daughter Marjorie (1905-1934, died as a result of puerperal fever after childbirth), and daughter Elinor Bettina (died three days after birth in 1907). Only Lesley and Irma outlived their father. Frost's wife, who had heart problems throughout her life, developed breast cancer in 1937, and died of heart failure in 1938.

VII. Robert Frost

Roads have long fascinated mankind, whether as metaphors for life, change, journeys, partings, adventure, etc., or simply as roads, with all their implications of 'here' and 'not here', and the fact that the two may not be as separate as one thought. This is probably why they, and all their attendant images, have permeated art, literature and song. They have also inspired some of my favourite poems, including Tolkien's "The Road Goes Ever On" and this one.

As for the poem itself, there are doubtless a multitude of meanings hidden below the surface - the main one, of course, refers to Frost's own life, and the decisions he made therein (see biography). Personally I feel that the however many layers of meaning and allusion a poem contains, it is the literal, surface reading that determines much of its merit (and nearly all of its popularity). This poem certainly passes the test - it is nicely lyrical, and the last verse is one of Frost's most quoted

Meanwhile, Robert continued to labour on the poetic career he had begun in a small way during high school; he first achieved professional publication in 1894 when *The Independent*, a weekly literary journal, printed his poem "My Butterfly: An Elegy." Impatient with academic routine, Frost left Dartmouth after less than a year. He and Elinor married in 1895 but found life difficult, and the young poet supported them by teaching school and farming, neither with notable success.

Frost became an enthusiastic botanist and acquired his poetic persona of a New England rural sage during the years he and his family spent at Derry. All this while he was writing poems, but publishing outlets showed little interest in them. By 1911 he was fighting against discouragement. Poetry had always been considered a young person's game, but Frost, who was nearly 40 years old, had not published a single book of poems and had seen just a handful appear in magazines. In 1911 ownership of the Derry farm passed to Frost.

A momentous decision was made: to sell the farm and use the proceeds to make a radical new start in London, where publishers were perceived to be more receptive to new talent. Accordingly, in August 1912 the Frost family sailed across the Atlantic to England. Frost carried with him sheaves of verses he had written but not gotten into print. English publishers in London did indeed prove more receptive to innovative verse, and through his own vigorous efforts, and those of the expatriate American poet Ezra Pound, Frost within a year had published *A Boy's Will* (1913). From this first book, such poems as "Storm Fear," "Mowing," and "The Tuft of Flowers" have remained standard anthology pieces.

In London, Frost's name was frequently mentioned by those who followed the course of modern literature, and soon American visitors were returning home with news of this unknown poet who was causing a sensation abroad. The Boston poet Amy Lowell traveled to England in 1914, and in the bookstores there she encountered Frost's work. Taking his books home to America, Lowell then began a campaign to locate an American publisher for them, meanwhile writing her own laudatory review of *North of Boston*.

Without his being fully aware of it, Frost was on his way to fame. Frost soon found himself besieged by magazines seeking to publish his poems. Never before had an American poet achieved such rapid fame after such a disheartening delay. From this moment his career rose on an ascending curve. Frost was also the first, and only, person to win the Pulitzer four times.

Criticism: Frost was the most widely admired and highly honoured American poet of the 20th century. Amy Lowell thought he had overstressed the dark aspects of New England life, but Frost's later flood of more uniformly optimistic verses made that view seem antiquated. Louis Untermeyer's judgment that the dramatic poems in *North of Boston* were the most authentic and powerful of their kind ever produced by an American has only been confirmed by later opinions. Gradually, Frost's name ceased to be linked solely with New England, and he gained broad acceptance as a national poet.

It is true that certain criticisms of Frost have never been wholly refuted, one being that he was overly interested in the past, another that he was too little concerned with the present and future of American society. Those who criticize Frost's detachment from the "modern" emphasize the undeniable absence in his poems of meaningful references to the modern realities of industrialization, urbanization, and the concentration of wealth, or to such familiar items as radios, motion pictures, automobiles, factories, or skyscrapers. The poet has been viewed as a singer of sweet nostalgia and a social and political conservative who was content to sigh for the good things of the past.

Such views have failed to gain general acceptance, however, in the face of the universality of Frost's themes, the emotional authenticity of his voice, and the austere technical brilliance of his verse. Frost was often able to endow his rural imagery with a larger symbolic or metaphysical significance, and his best poems transcend the immediate realities of their subject matter to illuminate the unique blend of tragic endurance, stoicism, and tenacious affirmation that marked his outlook on life. Over his long career Frost succeeded in lodging more than a few poems where, as he put it, they would be "hard to get rid of," and he can be said to have lodged himself just as solidly in the affections of his fellow Americans. For thousands he remains the only recent poet worth reading and the only one who matters.

When he was (supposedly) twenty, Frost first realized that real artistic speech was only to be copied from life. He never claimed to be the first poet to arrive at this understanding, but found that "where English poetry was greatest it was by virtue of this same method in the poet" and "he illustrated it in Shakespeare, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Emerson" (Lathem and Thompson 259). Frost explained his method as follows:

What we do get in life and miss so often in literature is the sentence sounds that underlie the words. Words themselves do not convey meaning, and to [. . . prove] this, . . . let us take the example of two people who are talking on the other side of a closed door, whose voices can be heard but whose words cannot be distinguished. Even though the words do not carry, the sound of them does, and the listener can catch the meaning of the conversation. . . . [T]o me a sentence is not interesting merely in conveying a meaning of words. It must do something more; it must convey a meaning by sound. (Lathem and Thompson 261)

What Frost strove to achieve was what he called "sound posturing," or "getting the sound of sense" (Lathem and Thompson 259). As for his language, Marie Borroff argues in her essay, "Robert Frost's New Testament: The Uses of Simplicity," that Frost manages to use "simple" words in order to achieve "high style." Borroff analyzes certain of his early poems and discovers a statistically low content of both Romance and Latinate words, and a high content of words of

native derivation--not to mention a preponderance of one- and two-syllable words. The effect of this is to lend Frost's poetry an apparently "simple" and informal speech.

But Borroff maintains that writers and speakers adopt different modes of discourse for different purposes, and that diction and vocabulary are selected as appropriate for a particular occasion, from the "distinctly formal" to the "distinctly colloquial". Between the two extremes, however, lies "the 'common' level to which most words belong.. Such words are 'common' to literary and colloquial use alike. . . . They are chameleon-like, standing out neither as conspicuously folksy or talky in literary contexts nor as conspicuously pretentious in colloquial contexts". Such words take on a particular "air" of formality, or of informality, in a particular context. "[A] number of Frost's best-known early lyrics are made of a language from which distinctively formal words are largely excluded. But it is equally true and important . . . that the language of these poems is lacking in words and expressions of distinctively colloquial quality". In addition, Borroff notes that in its Biblical allusiveness, Frost's language acquires a "high formality" that can be attributed to the dignity of tone which is imputed to religious subject matter in our cultural tradition.

Frost's language, therefore, cannot be adequately described as "simple" or as merely "common." Rather, "it dips occasionally to the distinctively colloquial level of everyday talk, as in the remark 'Spring is the mischief in me' It is embellished with an occasional poetic or biblical archaism of native derivation (o'er night and henceforth in "The Tuft of Flowers"), or archaic construction ("knew not" in "Mowing") or inversion of word order ("something there is" in "Mending Wall").

The sign that he is at home is that his language is plain; it is the human vernacular, as simple on the surface as monosyllables can make it. Strangely enough this is what makes some readers say he is hard--he is always referring to things he does not name, at any rate in the long words they suppose proper. He seems to be saying less than he does; it is only when we read close and listen well, and think between the sentences, that we become aware of what his poems are about. What they are about is the important thing--more important, we are tempted to think, than the words themselves, though it was the words that brought the subject on. The subject is the world: a huge and ruthless place which men will never quite understand, any more than they will understand themselves; and yet it is the same old place that men have always been trying to understand, and to this extent it is as familiar as an old boot or an old back door, lovable for what it is in spite of the fact that it does not speak up and identify itself in the idiom of abstraction. Frost is a philosopher, but his ideas are behind his poems, not in them--buried well, for us to guess at if we please.

Audio Links and Discography

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San Fernando Valley Master Chorale and Symphony Orchestra

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Km9iaThaGq0>

Coro Musike de la Plata (Argentina)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRlqTYBFhHo&feature=related>

Poem read by Robert Frost:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXKuqyvsww8>

Poem read by Robert Frost – Virtual Movie:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yG24ohpacDk&feature=related>

Professor Kevin Murphy interprets the poem:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5140uJOUDE&feature=related>

A different musical setting for the poem, by Dale Victorine

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cj3_uToLLB8

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U.S. Army Field Band Soldiers’ Chorus

<http://www.amazon.com/The-Road-Not-Taken/dp/B000QMACBY/>

The Michael O’Neal Singers

<http://www.amazon.com/Frostiana-The-Road-Not-Taken/dp/B000QQBH8C/>

Roberts Wesleyan Chorale and Chamber Orchestra (Album includes entire Frostiana suite):

<http://www.amazon.com/Frostiana-The-Road-Not-Taken/dp/B000QWGUZQ/>

References:

The above article about the song “The Road Not Taken” was extracted from these websites. For more information, please read the articles:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Road_Not_Taken_\(poem\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Road_Not_Taken_(poem))

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/road.htm

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frostiana>

<http://www.oratoriosociety.org/performances/media/repertoireinfo/frostianaThompson.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Randall_Thompson <http://harvardmagazine.com/2001/07/randall-thompson.html>

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