

# A Deconstructive Study in Robert Frost's Poem: The Road not Taken

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## Abstract

"The Road not Taken," is, no doubt, one of Robert Frost's major poems. Any critic of the poem can go so far as to say that the poem is one of the World's masterpieces. The text gives itself to reading and speculation by its power of generating new meanings, everlasting sweetness, and aesthetic value. Critics wrote controversial essays on the poem and its meanings, yet, no particular reading can be considered inclusive. All the readings lead one to the other, but no critic can say that this particular reading is better.

This study tries to come, as close as it can, to the text in order to *deconstruct* it and come up with a new reading of the poem by applying the principles of the theory of *Deconstruction*, for the first time, to the text and to the main differences upon which the aesthetic value of the poem rests.

## Introduction

Since antiquity the aim of the Literary Theory was to come to terms with literary texts and their meanings. Critics found it difficult to capture any particular meaning of the text. That was why criticism kept on enriching itself with new ideas from different disciplines so as to cope with literary productions and find a method by which a text can be analyzed systematically.

Texts like "The Road not Taken," resist casual analysis because they deal with the varying human nature and hence keep on suggesting new meanings at any time they are read. However, experience proved that each text can be approached through a certain critical theory, while other critical theories cannot be fit to deal with it.

This argument can best be applied to "The Road not Taken." Being a poem pregnant with rich thoughts and astonishing meanings which mainly cluster around oppositions and differences, the theory of *Deconstruction* can be applied to the text to show the best of it. Such a study can be established by introducing some of the main ideas of *Deconstruction*.

## The Main Ideas of Deconstruction

- 1- Texts produce meanings through the difference upon which the meaning inside them is generated. Literary works rest on many differences on the phonological, semantic, syntactic, and structural levels. According to *Deconstruction*, words themselves produce meanings as a result of their difference with other words:

We know one phoneme or one word because each is different from another, and we know that there is no innate relationship between a signifier and its signified...It is this freeplay or undecidability in any system of communication that Derrida calls writing.<sup>1</sup>

Writing can best represent these oppositions. By writing Derrida refers to the continuous process of freeplay of meanings. The concept of *difference* helps to generate meanings and analyze them at the same time. The text is constructed with the seeds of deconstruction inside it.

- 2- There is no one particular meaning for the text. Texts supply new meanings at different readings. This is the main issue of *Deconstruction* which makes of this theory a postmodern critical discipline. Modern theories, like Structuralism, insisted on locating a unique meaning for the text built on one specific structure. *Deconstruction* demolished all the structural thinking and insisted that there is no particular structure; simply because structures always deconstruct themselves, and that is the nature of reality which does not have any particular face:

According to Derrida for each center, an opposing center exists. . . We know truth, for instance, because we know deception; we know good because we know bad.<sup>2</sup>

- 3- Whenever a certain meaning is obtained from a text, it soon starts to *deconstruct* itself because it becomes a sort of (**presence**) which will not last long unless it invites its (**absence**). In other words, reality, according to *Deconstruction* is but a moment when it is reached, it is no more reality. This idea is clearly seen in "The Road not Taken." The speaker in the text himself is not

certain of anything, and likewise, he keeps readers hesitant as they move from one idea to another; not knowing which one is true or better:

The search, then, for the text's " correct " meaning  
or the writer's so called intentions becomes mean-  
-ingless. Since meaning is derived from differences  
In a dynamic, context – related, ongoing process,  
all texts have multiple meanings or interpretations. <sup>3</sup>

- 4- *Deconstruction* values (writing) over (speech). Derrida considered writing a sort of *deep structure*; speech is only one representation of it. Speech will be soon lost, and meaning will be also lost with it. Words soon die unless they are transferred into written symbols: "writing **is actually a precondition for and prior to speech. According to Derrida language becomes a special type of writing that he calls arche-writing.**" <sup>4</sup> Derrida considers writing to be the origin of language. It is a mental process that governs speech which is but a branch of writing. This philosophy of language is similar to De Saussure's linguistic ideas.

If these principles of the deconstructive theory are applied to the text of Frost's poem, it will be obviously seen that the text is very close to the main issues of Derrida's theory.

### Meaning and Difference

"The Road not Taken," is a text which rises over multiple differences; some of them are:

- 1- The title itself supplies the major difference in the text. There are two roads: *the road not taken* and *the road taken*. This intended ambiguity suggests two meanings:
  - a- It can mean that the poem is about the road which the speaker did not take.
  - b- It can also mean that the poem is about the road which the speaker took which was not taken by others.

The speaker himself makes of the clause controversial:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,	1
And sorry I could not travel both	2
And be one traveler, long I stood	3
And looked down one as far as I could	4
To where it bent into the undergrowth;	5
Then took the other as just as fair,	6
And having perhaps the better claim,	7
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;	8
Though as for that the passing there,	9
Had warn them really about the same, <sup>5</sup>	10

The difference which controls stanza one, will soon germinate itself in stanza two to stress the ambiguity of meanings. By talking about one road, the poet will lead the readers to speculate on the other; so as to know, from the poet, or even by their own speculation, which one is better, or whether both of them are the same. The poet, of course, could not give the readers a better claim. He does not identify the exact road intended by the speaker. Two hints help readers reach this conclusion. The speaker took the new road because it was " grassy "and" wanted wear." However, the speaker soon hesitates again in lines 9-10 to make the two roads appear similar:

Though as for that the passing there,	9
Had warn them really about the same,	10

Differences are so clear in both readings of the title. Though the title suggests that the poem is about the road not taken but the poem is about both roads.

The Meaning of the text is blurred at this moment of reading. It is clearly hinted in the text that the speaker is taking a new road which was not previously taken by him. The symbolic reading of taking the new road will prepare the reader for another level of meaning which he / she will discover through the continuous process of reading.

### 2- Signs and difference

Different signs are used in the text in order to suggest rich meanings. The road itself is a main sign. Roads are used in life and culture to stand for lifeline, its crises and decisions. The road in the text suggests a shift in the way of life for the speaker and shows his decision to make a new turn in it. The moral indication in this sign is clear: man must keep on developing his manner of thinking: he / she must be creative and genuine in action and

thinking. One must discover truth by himself.

This idea can be generalized to stand for the American thinking and way of life. Americans are always eager to find out realities by themselves. They never imitate others. Frost is speaking the traditions of his country and summarizing the search for novelty which he finds in the people of his nation. This is the reason why this poem became one of the major landmarks of American literature for the Americans themselves and for all readers as the poet (the seer) urges them never to imitate the others but to be (themselves) all the time. In this respect: the road not taken becomes a symbol for the call of novelty in life and newness in thinking.

The poet also uses color signs of yellow and black in the poem:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both

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And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.

According to the theory of *deconstruction*, reality is known by opposition. Earlier, structuralists talked about "binary oppositions" to argue that opposition between two things regenerates *one* clear idea. *Deconstruction* critics, on the other hand, claimed that such oppositions open the door in front of continuously changing ideas which replace each other. The color yellow is known to the readers because it is different from black. Yellow (in the poem) stands for the newly fallen leaves from Autumn trees. While black, stands for the passing of time for these leaves. This idea suggests that realities change and replace as time passes. Being very sensitive, the poet uses every possible element of nature to recreate his ideas in the minds of the readers; this is why he uses this Autumnal setting to cover the rich ideas of the poem.

The speaker argues that he took the road of the yellow leaves because it is new and suggests a genuine experience. However, when the speaker took the new road, the road itself will be no more new. Its leaves themselves will turn black because the speaker has already trodden on them. The road not taken then will be the road taken and in such manner the ideas keep on replacing each other, and that is the spirit of *deconstruction*.

Another important sign in the text is the repeated use of the pronoun (I). The speaker in the poem repeated the pronoun (I) many times, while he mentioned (the other) only once. Such a repetition of the first person pronoun suggests the subjective experience of the speaker. The (I) is associated with the road not taken while (the other) symbolizes the road taken by other people.

Searching for novelty is not a new method of thinking or a recent way of life for the Americans. Such American philosophers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, who were considered to be the fathers of the American thought, insisted on the private and special American experience and way of life. Emerson once remarked: "*We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; and we will speak our new minds.*"<sup>6</sup> In one of his maxims Emerson also stressed the importance of the freshness of thought when he philosophized: "*Insist on yourself; never imitate.*"<sup>7</sup> By (yourself) Emerson called every American citizen to depend on his experience to create the pure genuine collective experience of the American Nation. In our poem, Frost repeats Emerson when he insists on novelty and the continuous updating of reality.

In a great many of Frost's poems we find ourselves in a diminished version of an Emersonian world. The familiar Emersonian emphases are here – the concentration on the individual searching for himself and for meaning, on nature as resource, on immediate experience as a way to some kind of truth.<sup>8</sup>

In "The Road not Taken," Frost concludes the poem with the following stanza:

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 newness of thought and the novelty of experience is the main idea in the above stanza and in the whole text. This is why Frost insisted on the repetition of the pronoun (I) to the point that he made of it a clear sign in the text. The individual search for reality is clear; the impact of nature is also interesting in the poem.

Of course, in the poems of Frost, we find ourselves in a *diminished Emersonian world* because Frost, unlike Emerson, is not a transcendentalist thinker. Emerson looked at things from the philosopher's point of view, while Frost looked at things with the vision of a poet. Both of the two visions are creative but the philosopher's vision is wider.

In "The Road not Taken," Frost has not gone so far as to say that the world presented in the poem is the

ideal one. On the contrary he does not even confirm the idea that the road which he took was the best. Simply because the aim of Frost is not to deal with abstract reality, but only to suggest a sort of reality perceived from the point of view of a poet.

### **No One Particular Meaning for the Text**

As the reader will finish reading the text he / she will soon discover that no one particular meaning is taken for granted in the poem: in general no road is preferred to the other:

Then took the other as just as fair 6

The matter is not related to roads; it is concerned with the philosophy of looking at life or making the proper decision and accepting the consequences of the new choice. In the poem, the result of choosing, the road not traveled by, is given in the last line when the speaker ends the poem by telling the readers about the difference resulted from taking the new road:

And that has made all the difference.

According to the context of the poem; the speaker in the text talks about a positive difference because of the following reasons:

- a- The speaker is happy with his private experience and he insists on it to the point that he repeats the pronoun (I) 9 times: two of them at the end of the poem: one at the end of line 19 and at the other at the beginning of line 20. He even appears ready to accept all the consequences which may result from his choice.
- b- The experience was very rich to the point that it affected the life of the speaker who remembers it and talks about it, though it took place long time ago: "ages and ages hence."
- c- Indirectly the speaker invited the readers to try his experience of choosing genuine and new methods in thinking and in living. Of course, it is very clear in the poem that the road in the text is used in a symbolic manner. It stands for lifeline.

At this point the reader feels that the speaker in the poem is very happy with his choice, but as this idea is about to install itself in the mind of the reader, it is soon deconstructed when the word (sigh) soon forces its impact on the previous understanding of the text:

I shall be telling this with a *sigh*

The word (sigh) casts negative vibrations on the positive results of the speaker's choice of the road not taken. Here once again meanings of the text keep on replacing each other and creating different appreciations of the text. Such a condition is the soul of the deconstructive thinking: whenever an idea starts to establish itself, a new one will turn over the case by taking the other idea's place. Thereby meanings will keep on generating new ideas forever whenever the text is read. However, the word (sigh) is used by the speaker to suggest another important idea. Taking a new road in life does not mean that everything man will face in his choice of the new road is perfect. The matter depends on the nature of choice. No human being can achieve all what he wants. The new experience suggested by the new road may result in negative experiences, yet the speaker tells the readers to be ready to accept the consequences of their choices. What is important is that you must be yourself and make a choice of your own, and this will make all the difference for man in life. Steven Schroeder contemplates on the theme and meaning of the poem saying:

"The Road not Taken," introduces the theme  
brilliantly as it combines lyric with narrative:  
we are in the present of the speaker of the poem  
but in the present we share an imagined time:  
" somewhere ages and ages hence." Imagining  
that time in the poet's present , we may forget  
that we are reading the poem in our own age."

Schroeder talks about the poem in a classical critical approach. He thinks that literary products are tied down by historical influences. This is the soul of the Classical Critical Theory which Deconstruction resists. Texts produce meanings not according to their historical date, but as a result of their aesthetic value. Good texts can create history themselves; and they even can become signs themselves; like Chaucer's stories, or Emily Dickinson's poems. Frost makes of the poem itself a sign. It can be fit for all times. Both the theme and the meaning of the poem are mobile. Each reading starts a new experience. The reason behind this creativity is the melting point between dream and reality, or between one thing and the other; one idea and its negative picture; the descriptive and the imaginary: all produce different results and conclusions.

### **Deconstruction Values Writing over Speech**

It appears that the experience in the poem has already become part of the speaker's subconscious. Linguistically speaking it became part of the *deep structure* in his mind. In the memory of the speaker the experience reflected in the poem is a sort of *written* incident, while the poem itself is but the *surface structure* which comes in a

moment like a fluid that flows from the mind of the writer during the creative process.

The text was first arranged in the mind then written by the author, and as a result it keeps on producing everlasting meanings. Had it only been spoken, it would have been dead, a moment after it is spoken. This fact proves that writing is more sophisticated than speech. "The Road not Taken," as a result, achieves all this popularity because it is a beautifully written text. Writing "the road not taken" means that the writer also writes his personality. He writes his New England atmosphere, the human nature, and the beauty of external nature.

Describing the beauty of nature in the text of the poem clearly shows the romantic flavor in Frost's poetry. The poet envelops his deep ideas on the meaning of life and its experiences with a natural frame. Even the natural elements deconstruct each other. The first spot in the poem is pictured in Autumn; when the yellow leaves begin to fall. Then comes winter which makes black of them all. Spring will then follow, when green will replace both black and yellow. That is the nature of existence; things keep on replacing one another.

The speaker remembers his experience of taking the new road with a sigh. At the beginning he did not feel it, but ages and ages hence, he knew why the new road made all the difference to him. These rich sensations were conveyed to each reader because they were written. Had they were just been spoken they would have never seen life any more.

The speaker says that man himself must make difference a true need for him to develop. This idea soon surprises the reader when he reads the following two lines:

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.

These two lines turn over all the differences between the two roads which the poet talks about throughout the text. In these two lines the poet says that there is no difference between the two roads. He himself decided to make them different. He even expected two different experiences; one is practically felt by him, and the other the speaker imagined being its opposite.

If the two roads are really the same why did the poet write about two different roads? This question leads the reader to know about the creative poetic process itself. This poem, like any other poem, is but a sort of vision imagined by the poet. The idea of the importance of new experience in life came to his mind in a sudden moment. Then he decided to compose a poem out of it. First he chose the setting (two roads/ a wood – in Autumn,) to supply the reader with the time and place. A romantic frame is chosen to decorate the case which the poet deals with in the poem. Then came the ideas which open horizons in front of the reader's mind.

This is the moral lesson which the poet wants to teach. He presents it covered with sweetness. Reality, the speaker says, has two faces. It ends in different results, and as man lives, he must know that his choice can make all the difference. Even if there is no difference; man has to make differences out of the rigid nature of dull life.

This poem itself is different from Frost's other poems. It is different in form and in meaning. The poem is written in five line stanza form. In most of Frost's other poems he prefers a four line stanza type. In the manner of idea presentation; this poem is also different. In other poems Frost repeats the same ideas now and then; but in this text no ideas are repeated again. It appears as if Frost had inaugurated Deconstruction even before Derrida himself.

But according to Derrida's deconstruction nothing is valid or taken for granted. The same happens in our poem; nothing is concrete. As it is argued before, the poet was very happy with his choice of the new road. However, such happiness will soon collapse when a reader comes across the following line in the text:

I doubted if I should ever come back

The matter here becomes clear. The speaker has already decided from the beginning that he will not come once again to try the road not taken. This indicates a sort of opposition with all the previously discussed ideas. Here ideas no more replace each other. The speaker declares that he is not going to try new roads. He creates a sort of presence to one idea, but once this idea is present it cannot achieve its existence unless it calls its absence. Presence cannot be felt without absence. Like death and life or day and night. The absence of the speaker makes each reader create his copy of the text.

## Conclusion

"The Road not Taken," is a poem which is read with its greatness inside it. It is a great poem because the poet himself is outstanding. Some critics believe that Frost's poetry: "transcends the greatness of American poetry and the greatness of Western Civilization in general."<sup>10</sup> This greatness is clearly revealed in the poem.

The richness of the poem enables it to keep on producing new meanings. Any new reading of the poem will come up with new suggestions. Previous criticism insisted on the cultural side of the poem. It examined the traditional meanings of roads as used symbolically to stand for man's choices in life and his future. The Deconstructive critical approach; however, proves that such rich poems, as our text, will come up with new meanings with each reading. Hence, this study is but a new reading of the poem which reflects one side of its richness.

The study proves that texts give multiple meanings. The reading deconstructs the text to prove that there is no one particular meaning of the poem. It reveals Frost's deep interest in the American heritage and traditions. The poem reflects Frost's interest in Emerson. Both of them stress the authenticity of the American thought and experience.

The poem proves the Deconstructive principles which try to show how meanings, structures, and ideas keep on replacing each other. This reading of the poem thus replaces other previous readings of the same text. Here it seems that Widdoson's ideas are true when he states:

Certain textual facts can alert us to possible intentions and interpretations which we might otherwise not aware of, and so provide a basis, and a stimulus, for further empirical enquiry into the pragmatics of discourse and the nature of human communication.<sup>11</sup>

This reading may remain valid until it is replaced by another one which will deconstruct it and take its place. In such a case Derrida's ideas will prove that they are valid, though he himself argued that he could not suggest a fixed critical approach to literature. Yet his ideas on modern philosophy are used by many critics to criticize literary texts and they proved to be successful. The reading of the poem proves that Derrida's critical ideas can be fruitful. The text is a sort of discourse, and discourses keep producing new meanings. Nothing, then, is better than deconstruction in analyzing literary texts. The deconstructive theory encourages critics to take roads not taken before!

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*(London: Longman,2012),P.113.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid. PP 110 - 111.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid. P 115.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid. p 112.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Frost, "The Road not Taken," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost* , edited by: Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston,1975 ), P 105. Subsequent references to the poem will be to this edition.
- <sup>6</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, as quoted by James E. Miller, Jr. In *United States in Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982), P.220.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid: P. 224.
- <sup>8</sup> Hyatt H. Waggoner, *American Poets from the Puritans to the Present*, revised edition (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), P. 300.
- <sup>9</sup> Steven Schroeder, (ed.) *Early Frost*(New York: Barnes and Noble, 2009), P.17.
- <sup>10</sup> Vrest Orton, *Vermont Afternoons with Robert Frost* (Pennsylvania: Allan C. Hood & Company, Inc., 1979), P. 18.
- <sup>11</sup> H. G, Widdowson, *Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: O U P, 2011), P. 83.

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## Appendix

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.