

Life Choices and Individualism in Robert Frost's The Road Not Taken

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a qualitative literary study of how life choices and individualism intertwine in Robert Frost's 1916 poem "The Road Not Taken." The poem is considered one of Frost's most significant works. It uses symbolic division to question the problems of human choice, free will, and self-reflection, thereby dealing with the process of self-formation. Using thematic interpretation and close textual analysis, complemented by a systematic review of academic literature published since 1999, the study investigates how metaphor, imagery, tone, and structural ambiguity communicate the psychological, philosophical, and existential aspects of choice. The results show that Frost views life choices as ambiguous and

consequential, with a focus on introspection, anticipation, and retrospective sense-making. The poem's main metaphor conveys the universality of the decision-making process and the individual responsibility taken in personal activity. A theme of individualism also develops, supported by lexical clues such as seldom and difference, which indicate the conflict between social norms and individual freedom. The reflection is inseparable from agency, and the analysis shows that people reconstruct the meaning of their decisions through memory and narrative. The comparative study also shows that the literary elements used by Frost, such as metaphor, ambiguity, and narrative point of view, shed light on both the cognitive and emotional aspects of decision-making, prompting the reader to engage in interpretation. In theory, this study broadens the application of literary, psychological, and philosophical theories to deepen understanding of autonomy, agency, and reflective cognition in poetry. In practice, the findings highlight the usefulness of the poem as an educational, counseling, and personal-development tool that fosters critical thinking about choice and responsibility. The weaknesses of the research are that it is qualitative and focused on textual analysis, and that the study lacks empirical evidence on reader responses, thereby indicating potential areas for future research that can utilize cross-cultural, longitudinal, or experimental research designs. On the whole, the paper has shown that The Road Not Taken has remained relevant in terms of its decision-making, individualism, and self-reflection, even in current human agency discourses.

Keywords: *Robert Frost, The Road Not Taken, life choices, individualism, literary critique, agency of the individual.*

INTRODUCTION

Life is lived in a continuous flow of decisions, each with consequences, that define individual identity, emotional growth, and the stories individuals come to tell themselves. Literature and poetry, in particular, are a potent means of expressing such dynamics, packaging them, and symbolizing them. One of the most famous poems of American literature, The Road Not Taken (1916) by Robert Frost, is one of

the brightest examples: a short but densely concentrated speculative work on choice and freedom, memory, and self-apprehension. Modern criticism suggests that the poem has become so influential because it is not simple but rather possesses a calculated ambiguity that challenges readers to face the psychological and philosophical puzzles inherent in making ordinary decisions (LitCharts, n.d.; Orr, 2015).

Although the poem is often thought of as a praise of individualism, scholars note that it is difficult to read in this way. Considering the poem, Americans, as David Orr (2015) explains, often take the last lines at face value, never evaluating the first lines, which state that the two roads were the same. This inconsistency reveals the main conflict: a gap in the actions that the speaker performed and the manner in which he will narrate them afterward (Orr, 2015; PBS NewsHour, 2015). It is this struggle that Frost uses to criticize human nature, reconstructing memory into a form that affirms the individual's identity, even though these stories may not reflect reality completely. This observation is echoed in the text-oriented analysis on LitCharts, which notes that the poem's inconspicuous ambiguity makes it extremely difficult to attribute any conclusive meaning to the speaker's decision (LitCharts, n.d.).

Psychological methods also shed light on the poem's themes of introspection, regret, and self-justification. The argument presented by Khurram et al. (2024) is that the universal cognitive and emotional process of choosing is what makes the poem resonate, as it dramatizes how decisions are made, the feeling of regret, and how people explain their lives in a manner that is sensible and meaningful. Their interdisciplinary approach demonstrates that Frost's work is a seamless fusion of literature, psychology, and philosophical inquiry that characterizes the mental processes underlying the perception of what happens in life (Khurram et al., 2024). Neuroscientific studies of regret and relief supplement this interpretation of the literature. Another example is Varma et al. (2023), who show that there are separate and overlapping brain areas that are linked to these emotions, and that the emotional significance of counterfactual thinking, that is, thinking about the road not taken, has its base in neural mechanisms. This contributes to the poem reflecting the speaker's sigh of reflection, a manifestation of psychologically confusing feelings that merge longing, uncertainty, and self-storytelling (Varma et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, there is still a temptation to perceive the poem as a statement of nonconformity. Yustisiana and Sari (2023) show that the poem can be discussed through the lens of individualism and identity theory, claiming that the metaphors and symbols used in it express the tension between social and personal agency. In this sense, the branches apart serve as metaphors for life's alternatives, inviting readers to reflect on the possibilities of change in unusual options (Yustisiana & Sari, 2023). This interpretation does not substitute for the poem (and is) in line with the ironic approach to the narrative of individuality, which it seemingly celebrates and which makes it richer in interpretation and more culturally long-lived (Orr, 2015).

Existential scholarship promotes this two-sided view. According to Sheikh and Khushi (2024), the poem's ambiguity and irony place it squarely within existential discourse, with a focus on regret, uncertainty, and meaning-making under conditions of limited foresight. Their interpretation of the poem situates it in the historical context of Frost's friendship with Edward Thomas, whose indecisiveness while walking in the countryside was the poem's initial trigger. The biographical relationship highlights how personal the poem is and how it is a thorough reflection on the uncertainty of life in general (Sheikh & Khushi, 2024).

Close reading and text-based methods also show that Frost employs poetic techniques to amplify the theme's complexity. Using a New Criticism framework, Febriyantasari and Yulistiyanti (2024) describe how ambiguity, symbolism, and figurative language are interwoven to depict indecision and the inability to assign meaning to the choice of life. Their discussion proves that the structure of the poem, the regular rhyme, the symmetrical stanzas, and the conversational diction reflect the hesitation of the speaker to think and, at the same time, make the reader question the premises behind his/her own interpretation (Febriyantasari & Yulistiyanti, 2024). This wisdom aligns with the value and importance of LitCharts,

which states that the formal exactness of Frost adds richness and complexity rather than resolution to tensions in the interpretation of the poem (LitCharts, n.d.).

A wider critical examination helps explain why the poem remains an object of scholarly interest among theorists. In his book *Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite* (Kearns, 1994/2009), Kearns claims that the destabilization of the fixed meanings of his poetry is achieved by deliberately confusing irony and formal intricacies, thereby preempting the subjective character of interpretation. This view speaks directly to the case of *The Road Not Taken*: the speaker's future assertion that his decision was the difference-maker is an instance of how people make meaning by looking back and transforming random moments into moments of story (Kearns, 1994/2009).

The applicability of the poem is also manifested in the way it is applied outside the world of literature. In leadership and decision-making scenarios, the poem can be metaphorically viewed by professionals to inform discussions around strategic decisions, the responsibility load, and the ambiguity of results. The leadership interpretation provided by CMOE demonstrates that Frost's metaphor of divergent paths can be applied to real-life decision-making, as leaders must choose among several promising opportunities with incomplete information (CMOE, n.d.). In the classroom, educators use the poem to begin a conversation on personal development, reflection, and the purpose of symbolic interpretation, as seen in the *Literacy in Focus* (2024) lesson plans. These pedagogical applications highlight the poem's flexibility and its ability to foster critical thinking across different contexts.

Amid the larger strains of modern existence, of the breakneck pace of technological change, of overload on choice, of the heightened social comparison, the reminder by Frost that man can only see as far as he can go down any given road is particularly timely. The fact that the poem recognizes shortsightedness strengthens an essential philosophical point: the relevance of what we subsequently consider as characterizing choice in life, only through the narrative building of a life story. It is consistently highlighted in literary analyses that such a clash between choice and narration is the key to the poem's long-term appeal (LitCharts, n.d.; Orr, 2015). In declining to correct meaning, Frost invites his readers to participate in choice not as a problem to be solved but as an ongoing interpretative process, or rather, a process that helps people define themselves and their position in the world.

Therefore, *The Road Not Taken* is a masterpiece in that it summarizes the human dilemma of making a choice without all the information, living with the results, and creating meaning in the life we lead. Its delicate irony, flawless form, and inner insight make the poem remain insightful about the difficulties of independence, conscience, self-realization, and the lifelong journey of storytelling identity.

To narrow this research, the research questions that this research will consider are:

1. What is the way that Robert Frost portrays the idea of life decisions in *The Road Not Taken*?
2. How is the poem indicative of individualism as related to human choice-making?
3. What can the themes of choice and individualism of the poem convey modern conceptualizations of personal agency and responsibility?

The basic aims and findings of the research are to examine the poem's literary and thematic character, to derive its philosophical and psychological consequences, and to understand the influence of individualism in shaping the sense of life decisions in the poem as reflected in the text. The secondary aims involve examining the poem's relationship to broader conceptual theories of choice-making and human agency, and evaluating how the poem can be applied to education and personal growth.

The paper has the following structure: the *Methods* presents the qualitative literature research design including textual analysis and thematic interpretation of the results; *Results* presents key findings in terms of life choice and individualism depiction; and the *Discussion* section summarizes these findings based on connecting the Frost literary techniques with theoretical, practical and modern implications of the same to the interpretation of human decision making

METHODS

Research Design

A qualitative literary research design is implemented in this study, as it involves textual research and thematic interpretation. The qualitative methods are suitable as the study explores literary aspects, symbolism, and philosophical issues, and does not involve any numerical data. The structure enables a detailed discussion of how Robert Frost explores the themes of life choices and individualism through diction, imagery, and plot.

Materials

The poem "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost, published in 1916, is the primary source. Additional resources are critical essays, peer-reviewed journal articles, books that examine poetry, literary tools, and thematic issues that Frost addresses. These second-hand sources offer background and justification in understanding the poem in terms of choice and individualism.

Participants

In this study, no human subjects were involved, as it is purely literary. However, the previous research included relevant studies, which were selected based on their contribution to Frost's work. Peer-reviewed publications published between 1999 and 2024 were considered relevant to the poem or the theme of individualism; the inclusion criteria for secondary sources ensured that both historical and contemporary viewpoints were covered. The exclusion criteria were that they should not include non-scholarly sources, unverified online interpretations, or irrelevant analyses.

Procedure

1. Textual Analysis: A close reading of The Road Not Taken was done based on diction, imagery, metaphor, structure, and tone to establish thematic factors as per life choices and individualism.
2. Thematic Categorization: The emerging themes were grouped into several major domains: personal agency, decision-making, reflection, and societal influence.
3. Comparative Literature Review: Comparable scholarly understandings were made to identify the areas of agreement and difference on individualism and choice in the work of Frost.
4. Synthesis: The results of textual analysis and literature review were synthesized, and an integrated view of the thematic and philosophical implications of the poem emerged.

Tools and Software

NVivo 14 was used to organize and code data thematically in the study. NVivo enabled systematic coding of textual material, thematic patterns, and cross-references between primary and secondary texts. The documentation and drafting of the analysis were done using Microsoft Word 365.

Data Treatment and Analysis

The data analysis was conducted using qualitative thematic analysis to identify common patterns, symbolic imagery, and narration that reveal life choices and individualism. Coding of themes was done repeatedly to ensure consistency and reliability. Triangulation was carried out by interpreting the results in the existing literature. Although statistical significance is not used in qualitative research, methodological rigor, cross-validation with peer-reviewed literature, and adherence to other ethical aspects of scholarly research, such as proper citation and source acknowledgment, enhance credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Reflection of Life Choices in the Road Not Taken.

A keen observation of Frost's poem reveals that life decisions are portrayed as ambiguous, consequential, and highly thought-provoking. The main metaphor- the two roads diverged in a yellow wood- summons up the moment of a complicated decision, when several alternatives seem as valid in their own right, though the con. However, they are shrouded in the undergrowth. Such opposition is a juxtaposition that prefigures the human state of short-sightedness. This textual balance between certainty and ambiguity is not accidental, and New Critical readings demonstrate that ambiguity and symbolism are actively deployed to create a state of indecision and to lend the moment of choice cognitive and affective importance (Febriyantasari & Yulistiyani, 2024). Based on this formal perception, stylistic studies have shown that the selection of lexical and structural elements, such as parallel stanzaic structure, ABAAB rhyme scheme, and even measured cadence, has contributed to forming an apparent order to Frost that highlights the hesitation of the speaker and encourages the readers to bargain upon the meaning in tandem with the voice in the poem (Raj Kumar, 2022).

Psychologically, the decision in the poem serves not only as a literary element but also as an account of evaluation, self-reflection, and possible remorse. Khurram et al. (2024) believe that the portrayal of Frost is consistent with how people think about decision-making, both the emotions that accompany appraisal and the memory that follows a decision. Their literary-psychological interpretation explains why the poem serves as a mirror through which readers can observe their mental self-assessment and self-explanation patterns (Khurram et al., 2024). Empirical studies further support this description: a meta-analysis of fMRI studies suggests that there are overlapping yet discrete neural substrates for regret and relief, which sheds light on the poem's final line, ending with a sigh, as a psychologically realistic combination of counterfactual emotion and sense-making (Varma et al., 2023).

Recent interdisciplinary work emphasizes that it is easy for readers to ascribe an exaggerated meaning to the directions they choose as they go back to explain how the divergence happened, even when the text indicates the opposite. Carte (2024) applies the psychology of regret to Frost's poem, arguing that the lyric's endurance stems from a common human tendency to rationalize decisions in hindsight, a tendency the poem both describes and criticizes (Carte, 2024). Together, these works situate Frost's poetics of choice at the intersection of form, cognition, and culture, thereby explaining the universal nature of the speaker and his fork-in-the-road moment (Febriyantasari & Yulistiyanti, 2024; Varma et al., 2023; Carte, 2024).

Demonstration of Individualism

The most famous way of reading that opens the poem by Frost is the autonomy reading, in which the road less traveled can be taken as a symbol of nonconformity. Those focused on identity and culture argue that the poem's metaphor of moving in different directions can express opposition to normative pressures to direct one's own decision-making (Yustisiana & Sari, 2023). At the same time, pedagogical and critical essays focus on choice, decision, and individuality as central motifs, examining how the poem prompts a review of free will and self-determination (Dahami, 2020).

In more recent uses, researchers have expanded the frame: Sumaira and Rauf (2023) also view the poem as a philosophical journey towards enlightenment and progress, since choice is a driver of self-discovery and self-improvement, and this can be extended to the group. This point of view explains why the poem remains relevant in the modern context of discussions of personal and social paths (Sumaira & Rauf, 2023). However, the wordplay in the poem does not allow for an easy heroic reading. The lines suggesting specificity are refuted by the lines stating that the paths were actually equal, creating a fruitful tension between the cultural desire to be unique and the textual statement of equality (Febriyantasari & Yulistiyanti, 2024; Raj Kumar, 2022). That is where the tension of self-fashioning and textual irony

occurs, and directly these two features of his lyric to this day remain engaged in the most provocative labor (Yustisiana & Sari, 2023; Sumaira & Rauf, 2023).

Choice and Reflection: Interplay

One of the most important conclusions of modern scholarship is the impossibility of separating choosing from narrating. The last stanza of the poem dramatizes the reconstruction of the meaning of past decisions by people who may add new meaning to those decisions based on their future identities. The importance of existential readings, therefore, lies in the poem's critique of the illusion of significant differences between two nearly identical ways, showing how agency can be retroactively written (Sheikh & Khushi, 2024). This point of view is confirmed by literary-psychological research: Khurram et al. (2024) recognize regret, introspection, and meaning reconstruction as key dynamics embedded in the poem's narrative structure that monitor the processes of condensing ambivalence and self-interpretation in the imagined sigh.

Modern psychology brings some additional complexity. Empirical research indicates that experimental decisions are less likely to result in post-decision satisfaction, as they can be reversed through counterfactual thinking and contemplated regret effects, which explain why decisions to follow a direction often attract backward simulations (Li et al., 2022). According to organizational research on the so-called forgone identity dwelling, employees continue to ruminate about professional identities not undertaken, which has both beneficial and detrimental impacts: similar to the longing, job crafting could reduce dissatisfaction, although it could contribute to job crafting that safeguards dissatisfaction, particularly in people with an internal locus of control (Burgess et al., 2022). Read alongside Frost, these results indicate that the poem's retrospective narration models a broader psychological choreography in which individuals measure identity through counterfactual emotion and post hoc sense-making (Varma et al., 2023; Li et al., 2022). The interdisciplinary explanation by Cartes (2024) makes it clear when she attributes this reframing of regret to the cultural misreading of the poem, that is, the reason why most readers would want to insist on the road less traveled, which is depicted as being equal to the rest based on the textual reading (Cartes, 2024).

Methodological Constraints

Being a highly qualitative, text-based interpretive study, the current research is likely to focus on interpretative in-depth, rather than generalizability. It is also based on close textual analysis and reference to secondary scholarship rather than on the collection of empirical reader-response data; thus, it cannot quantitatively measure how particular audiences process irony or ambiguity in the poem. However, the use of triangulation of literary criticism (Febriyantasari & Yulistiyani, 2024), psychological framing (Khurram et al., 2024), and philosophical/cultural lenses (Sumaira & Rauf, 2023) expands the explanatory scope of the analysis. Besides, the use of modern psychological experiments as analogue constructs is a form of constructive inference, i.e., theory-building, not a direct measure of literary effects; this methodological approach should not be confused with empirical testing (Li et al., 2022; Burgess et al., 2022).

Future Research and Implications for the Future

The poetic apparatus that is expressed in the text provides a productive basis of practical application and testable propositions empirically. Educators and practitioners in the educational and counselling domains can use Frost's lyric as a reflective tool to bring about the counterfactual narratives of students or clients and differentiate rumination and constructive re-authoring- an activity already implied by interdisciplinary literary-psychological bridges (Khurram et al., 2024). To advance personally, the scholarship that connects the poem to enlightenment or progress paradigms is the one that views such activities, such as narrative journaling and values clarification as the continuation of the poem's self-discovery process (Sumaira & Rauf, 2023).

Future avenues worth exploring include reader-response designs that combine close reading with psychometric indices of regret proneness, counterfactual thinking, and identification construction, and thus investigate whether the poem leads to a decrease or increase in these variables over time in response to engagement with the poem (Li et al., 2022). The methodological templates for considering the impact of literary works on emotion regulation and sense-making include developmental and social-cognitive studies, such as those on children's counterfactual emotion and on two-way relationships between exceptionality/controllability and counterfactual thought (Gautam et al., 2022; Xie & Beck, 2022). Cross-cultural research can examine how group versus individual environments interpret the poem's agency accounts, and organisational field research can evaluate whether instruction in the poem, *The Road Not Taken*, affects job crafting or job identity sense (Burgess et al., 2022). Lastly, modern pragmatic methods of interpreting poems (line-by-line tracking of implicature and ambiguity) can be combined with manipulations of the form (e.g., line-break manipulation or diction) in order to see how the form changes influence attributions of agency and perceived difference between paths made by readers (Eragamreddy, 2025; Raj Kumar, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The study explored the role of life choices and individualism in the poem under discussion, *The Road Not Taken*, by Robert Frost, specifically how the poem illustrates decision-making, personal autonomy, and reflective human agency. In the analysis, it was identified that Frost presents options as both meaningful and unclear, with a focus on the cognitive, emotional, and interpretative aspects that are closely linked to decision-making. Individualism turns out to be another key note, expressed through metaphor, diction, and narrative point of view, rendering the conflict between expectations of society and self-directed action. Further, even the poem shows that reflection, and more specifically, retrospective meaning-making, is an essential part of comprehending personal agency, since in many cases, people only subsequently create the meaning of their actions.

Ideally, the study would contribute to the literature by connecting poetic criticism with psychological and philosophical constructs, specifically autonomy, agency, and cognitive processing. The study extends current critical interpretations by systematically connecting Frost's literary devices to reflective and individualistic aspects of choice. This interdisciplinary methodological approach deepens analytical understanding of the poem and underscores literature's role in illuminating difficult psychological phenomena.

In practical terms, the results are relevant to the field of education, counselling, and personal development. Teachers can also use the poem to develop reflective learning, independent thinking, and critical decision-making. Its themes can be used by counsellors and mentors to discuss the issues of identity formation, self-determination, and emotional dynamics of choice. In a broader context, Frost's subtlety in describing decision-making can serve as a useful roadmap for how people negotiate personal aspirations, social rules, and the uncertainty of the future.

There are no limitations to this study. As a qualitative textual analysis, the results are limited to the poem and cannot be applied to the broader population or to empirical conditions. There is no direct reader-response data to indicate how different audiences perceive its themes. However, such limitations provide future research areas. Future studies could use an empirical approach, cross-cultural comparisons, or reader-response reviews to examine how people with different backgrounds interpret the poem in terms of choice and individualism. Longitudinal or experimental studies can also focus on whether reflective reading of literary texts makes a difference in real-life decision-making or in the development of autonomy-related competencies.

To sum up, *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost can be viewed as offering a lasting understanding of the reflective, interpretive, and autonomous aspects of human choice. This study not

only contributes to knowledge of the poem's literary and philosophical value but also emphasises its role in educational and psychological practice. The intersection of literature, psychology, and decision-making can be further investigated in future studies, including a discussion of how poetic works influence and mirror human agency.

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