Introduction to Poetry

Introduction to Poetry

Poetry is a distinctive literary genre where the manipulation of language is key. Language tends to be used figuratively inviting emotional responses as well as intellectual engagement. Figurative language such as simile, metaphor, personification etc create a world that is removed from the common use of language. The figurative subverts day to day expectations of direct meanings and invites the reader to view the common anew through a disruption of the literal. In this course all these issues will be explored through the explanation of the terms and analysis of poems.

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Glossary of literary terms

anaphora the repetition of a word or phrase, usually at the beginning of a line.

alliteration the repetition of sounds in a sequence of words. (See also**consonance** and **assonance**.)

allegory narrative with two levels of meaning, one stated and one unstated.

apostrophe direct address to an absent or otherwise unresponsive entity (someone or something dead, imaginary, abstract, or inanimate).

assonance the repetition of vowel-sounds.

beat a stressed (or accented) syllable.

binary dual, twofold, characterized by two parts.

blank verse unrhymed iambic pentameter.

caesura an audible pause internal to a line, usually in the middle. (An audible pause at the end of a line is called an **end-stop**.) The French *alexandrine*, Anglo-Saxon alliterative meter, and Latin dactylic hexameter are all verse forms that call for a caesura.

chiasmus from the Greek letter Chi (X), a "crossed" rhetorical parallel. That is, the parallel form *a:b::a:b* changes to *a:b::b:a* to become a chiasmus.

climax the high point; the moment of greatest tension or intensity. The climax can occur at any point in a poem, and can register on different levels, e.g. narrative, rhetorical, or formal.

consonance the repetition of consonant-sounds.

couplet two lines of verse, usually rhymed. **Heroic couplet:** a rhymed iambic pentameter couplet.

diction word choice, specifically the "class" or "kind" of words chosen.

elegy since the 17th century, usually denotes a reflective poem that laments the loss of something or someone.

end-stopped line	a line that ends with a punctuation mark and whose meaning is complete.
enjambed line	a "run-on" line that carries over into the next to complete its meaning.
foot	the basic unit of accentual-syllabic and quantitative meter, usually combining a stress with one or more unstressed syllables.
free verse	poetry in which the rhythm does not repeat regularly.
imagery	the visual (or other sensory) pictures used to render a description more vivid and immediate.
meter	a regularly repeating rhythm, divided for convenience into**feet**.
metonomy	a figure of speech in which something is represented by another thing that is commonly and often physically associated with it, e.g. "White House" for "the President."
ode	a genre of lyric, an ode tends to be a long, serious meditation on an elevated subject.
prosody	the study of **versification**, i.e. the form—meter, rhyme, rhythm, stanzaic form, sound patterns—into which poets put language to make it verse rather than something else.
refrain	a phrase or line recurring at intervals. (N.b. the definition does not require that a refrain include the *entire* line, nor that it recur at *regular* intervals, though refrains often are and do.)
rhythm	the patterns of stresses, unstressed syllables, and pauses in language. Regularly repeating rhythm is called **meter**.
scansion	the identification and analysis of poetic rhythm and meter. To "scan" a line of poetry is to mark its stressed and unstressed syllables.
simile	a figure of speech that compares two distinct things by using a connective word such as "like" or "as."
speaker	the "I" of a poem, equivalent to the "narrator" of a prose text. In lyric poetry, the speaker is often an authorial persona.
speech act	the manner of expression (as opposed to the content). Examples of speech acts include: question, promise, plea, declaration, and command.

stanza	a "paragraph" of a poem: a group of lines separated by extra white space from other groups of lines.
symbol	an image that stands for something larger and more complex, often something abstract, such as an idea or a set of attitudes. (See **imagery**.)
symbolism	the serious and relatively sustained use of symbols to represent or suggest other things or ideas. (Distinct from allegory in that symbolism does not depend on narrative.)
synecdoche	a figure of speech in which a part of something is used to represent the whole, e.g. "wheels" for "car."
tone	the speaker's or author's attitude toward the reader, addressee, or subject matter. The tone of a poem immediately impresses itself upon the reader, yet it can be quite difficult to describe and analyze.
topos	a traditional theme or motif (e.g. the topos of modesty).
trope	a figure of speech, such as a metaphor (**trope** is often used, incorrectly, to mean **topos**)
valediction	an act or utterance of farewell.

Analyzing a poem

To analyze a poem, you must break it down into all its important elements and explain how they work together to create an effect or reinforce a meaning. Read your assignment carefully to find out what you're being asked to do, since there are many ways to present an analysis. You may, for example, be required to do research in order to incorporate the opinion of literary critics into your own analysis. Or you may be asked to present only your own interpretation. In any case, before you write, you need a solid understanding of the poem or poems you'll be analyzing. This handout will help you break down a poem into its key elements and get you started on writing a thesis.

Summarize

Before you break the poem apart, identify its basic content. You should be able to *summarize* your poem. Creating a summary will focus your thoughts about the poem. However, you may not need to include it when you write your analysis, since you can usually assume your readers will know what the poem is about.

Ex. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" is about a man who is haunted by a raven and the memory of the woman he loved.

It's also sometimes helpful to *label the sections* of a poem. Can you find a pattern of organization? Stanzas may be a guide, but even poems not divided into obvious stanzas may have sections that function differently. A Shakespearian sonnet, for example, can be divided into four parts. It may help to write down what each section says.

Ex. Shakespeare's Sonnet XIV, "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?"
Section 1- She's more lovely than summer because she's warmer and gentler than summer.
Section 2 – She's fairer because the sun doesn't always shine and summer's beauty fades.
Section 3- Her beauty will never fade and she will never die.
Couplet – All of this is because the poet has made her and her loveliness immortal with his poetry.

You may not need to write about all these elements in your essay, but think about them all before you begin writing so you can decide which contribute most to the poem's effect or theme.

Narrators, Characters, and Setting

Consider the *narrator*. Remember, the person voicing the words is not necessarily the author. For example, in "The Forsaken Merman," the speaker is the merman rather than the poet, Matthew Arnold. Also consider to whom the poem is addressed. Gwendolyn Brooks' famous poem about abortion, "The Mother," first speaks to other mothers who have had an abortion, then switches to addressing the babies who were never born. These speakers and addressees are like *characters* in the poem. How do they affect the poem's words? Why did the poet choose them as vehicles for the words?

Setting can also be important as can the poet's personal history. In Claude's McKay's "Harlem Shadows" we see the image of prostitutes "wandering" and "prowling" the streets of New York City on a cold night in the 1920s. Harlem, the setting for the struggles of McKay's "fallen race," is also symbolic for the whole country, the larger site of struggle and oppression. If you also know that McKay was a communist as a young man and that he eventually

converted to Catholicism, it may shed some light on his attitude toward the women in the poem.

Structure

Look at the *structure* of the poem and consider the type of poem the author chose to write. There are a number of poetic forms, and poets will choose one carefully. Think also about the poem's rhythm. Is it fast and breathless or slow and halting? Did the author use a specific meter? Meter measures the number of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. For example, in iambic pentameter, the most commonly used meter in English, each line is ten syllables with a stress on every second syllable.

Ex. That **time** / of **year** / thou **mayst** / in **me** / be**hold *(*Sonnet 73, Shakespeare)**

Once you've looked at structure, ask why the poet made these choices. Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Sestina," for example, uses the traditional French sestina to tell about a grandmother and granddaughter in a kitchen. The sestina is a classic form of poetry that does not rhyme but has repeating end words according to a strict pattern. The style is somewhat artificial and not very popular. So why did Bishop choose not only to write in this form, but name the poem after the form? In the poem, Bishop is presenting the façade of happy home life and hinting at the sadness behind it. By using the sestina, Bishop brings more attention to the artificial structure, using the rigid sestina to control and conceal the poem's emotion just as the grandmother tries to conceal her heartbreak.

Tone

Tone is difficult to define concretely because it's essentially the mood, which can be personal to each reader. Consider the effect of these words from Robert Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening":

The woods are lovely, dark, and deep
but I have promises to keep
and miles to go before I sleep
and miles to go before I sleep

The first line creates a comforting haven of the woods, a slumberous peace. The next three lines are those of a weary traveler. The repetition of "miles to

go before I sleep" makes the reader feel the narrator's longing for rest along with his resigned determination to finish what he's started. Contrast Frost's words with these from "The Congo" by Vachel Lindsay:

barrel-house kings with feet unstable
sagged and reeled and pounded on the table
pounded on the table
beat an empty barrel with the handle of a broom
hard as they were able
BOOM, BOOM, BOOM

Lindsay writes about the way men in the African Congo murder over diamonds and gold. A heavy, deep, chanting rhythm creates a primal tone of force and foreboding to match his subject matter.

Diction, Imagery, Metaphor

Because a poem is generally compact, every word is important. Examine the words (diction) and how they're used to create an impression that evokes the senses of touch, taste, smell, sight, or sound (imagery). Comparisons (metaphor or simile) are also powerful ways poets create an impression or convey an idea. For example, Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Two Countries" is about loneliness and finding love again:

Skin remembers how long the years grow
when skin is not touched, a gray tunnel
of singleness, feather lost from the tail
of a bird, swirling onto a step,
swept away by someone who never saw it was a feather.

Nye uses *metaphor* by comparing loneliness to "a gray tunnel" and a "feather lost from the tail of a bird." The tunnel signifies a void with no end. The fact that the tunnel is gray renders it vague and ghostly. Consider the difference it would have made if she'd described the tunnel as black. The feather, a delicate, tiny thing that was once part of a greater whole, is now listless and lost. These metaphors portray loneliness as an empty and floating nothingness, without direction or end.

Nye also uses *imagery*. She talks of the feather "swirling onto a step" and "swept away by someone who never saw it was a feather." Here, the feather is

personified, looking for welcome but carelessly brushed aside by someone who just didn't see it. This imagery evokes the sense of touch, presenting the human as a delicate, hopeful thing easily brushed aside. Finally, Nye chose to refer to a person as "skin." This *diction* immediately creates an intimacy between the subject and the reader, something we can feel and touch.

Thesis

After you determine the key elements of the poem, you can begin to write your thesis. Start by making an observation about the poem; then explain how it is achieved. Usually in an analysis you can focus on one key element, such as imagery, and show how it works in the poem; or, you can focus on a theme or mood or some overarching aspect of the poem, and show how the parts contribute to that.

Ex. (Statement of meaning) T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is about a man imprisoned in the mediocre life he has chosen, dreaming of things he lacks the courage to do.
Ex. (How meaning is conveyed To convey the ordinary and oppressive world Prufrock lives in, Eliot talks about the smoke and smog, clinking coffee spoons, and trivial social aspirations of women chattering in a drawing room.

One way to write a thesis for your analysis is to link these two sentences. You may have to rephrase it or omit some words, but your basic ideas will be the same.

Thesis Ex. In the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Eliot writes about a man imprisoned in the mediocre life he has chosen, dreaming of things he lacks the courage to do; Eliot creates this portrait of a trapped man by alluding to the fantastical world Prufrock dreams of and contrasting it with the oppressive ordinariness of his real life.

Once your thesis is written, outline your paragraphs and choose your evidence. Include specific examples quoted from the poem. Don't forget to check your assignment for particulars about how you're supposed to write the essay.

Poems

1- Langston Hughes
1901 –1967

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

2- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
BY ROBERT FROST

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,

And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

3- The Raven

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"'Tis some visiter," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door—
Only this and nothing more."

hide

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore—
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
"'Tis some visiter entreating entrance at my chamber door—
Some late visiter entreating entrance at my chamber door;—
This it is and nothing more."

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
"Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you"—here I opened wide the door;—
Darkness there and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,

Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore?"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!"—
Merely this and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.
"Surely," said I, "surely that is something at my window lattice;
Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;—
'Tis the wind and nothing more!"

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore;
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door—
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
"Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou," I said, "art sure no craven,
Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore—
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—
Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
With such name as "Nevermore."

But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.

Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—
Till I scarcely more than muttered "Other friends have flown before—
On the morrow he will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before."
Then the bird said "Nevermore."

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
"Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
Of 'Never—nevermore'."

But the Raven still beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door;
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking "Nevermore."

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o'er,
But whose velvet-violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o'er,
She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
"Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee
Respite—respite and nepenthe, from thy memories of Lenore;
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,

Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

"Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!" I shrieked, upstarting—
"Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!

—Edgar Allan Poe

4- Margaret Atwood

1939 –
In the burned house I am eating breakfast.
You understand: there is no house, there is no breakfast,
yet here I am.

The spoon which was melted scrapes against
the bowl which was melted also.
No one else is around.

Where have they gone to, brother and sister,
mother and father? Off along the shore,
perhaps. Their clothes are still on the hangers,

their dishes piled beside the sink,
which is beside the woodstove
with its grate and sooty kettle,

every detail clear,
tin cup and rippled mirror.
The day is bright and songless,

the lake is blue, the forest watchful.
In the east a bank of cloud
rises up silently like dark bread.

I can see the swirls in the oilcloth,
I can see the flaws in the glass,
those flares where the sun hits them.

I can't see my own arms and legs
or know if this is a trap or blessing,
finding myself back here, where everything

in this house has long been over,
kettle and mirror, spoon and bowl,
including my own body,

including the body I had then,
including the body I have now
as I sit at this morning table, alone and happy,

bare child's feet on the scorched floorboards
(I can almost see)
in my burning clothes, the thin green shorts

and grubby yellow T-shirt
holding my cindery, non-existent,
radiant flesh. Incandescent.

5- *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*

Langston Hughes
1901 –
1967

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

6- Langston Hughes

1901 –
1967
The instructor said,

Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you—
Then, it will be true.

I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem,
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me—we two—you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York, too.) Me—who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.

I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.
I guess being colored doesn't make me *not* like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?

Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me—
although you're older—and white—
and somewhat more free.

This is my page for English B.

7- *Haunted Houses*

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
1807 –
1882

All houses wherein men have lived and died
Are haunted houses. Through the open doors
The harmless phantoms on their errands glide,
With feet that make no sound upon the floors.

We meet them at the door-way, on the stair,
Along the passages they come and go,
Impalpable impressions on the air,
A sense of something moving to and fro.

There are more guests at table than the hosts
Invited; the illuminated hall
Is thronged with quiet, inoffensive ghosts,
As silent as the pictures on the wall.

The stranger at my fireside cannot see
The forms I see, nor hear the sounds I hear;

He but perceives what is; while unto me
All that has been is visible and clear.

We have no title-deeds to house or lands;
Owners and occupants of earlier dates
From graves forgotten stretch their dusty hands,
And hold in mortmain still their old estates.

The spirit-world around this world of sense
Floats like an atmosphere, and everywhere
Wafts through these earthly mists and vapours dense
A vital breath of more ethereal air.

Our little lives are kept in equipoise
By opposite attractions and desires;
The struggle of the instinct that enjoys,
And the more noble instinct that aspires.

These perturbations, this perpetual jar
Of earthly wants and aspirations high,
Come from the influence of an unseen star
An undiscovered planet in our sky.

And as the moon from some dark gate of cloud
Throws o'er the sea a floating bridge of light,
Across whose trembling planks our fancies crowd
Into the realm of mystery and night,—

So from the world of spirits there descends
A bridge of light, connecting it with this,
O'er whose unsteady floor, that sways and bends,
Wander our thoughts above the dark abyss.

8- Lawrence Ferlinghetti

1919 –
2021

The world is a beautiful place
to be born into
if you don't mind happiness
not always being
so very much fun
if you don't mind a touch of hell
now and then
just when everything is fine
because even in heaven
they don't sing
all the time

The world is a beautiful place
to be born into
if you don't mind some people dying
all the time
or maybe only starving
some of the time
which isn't half so bad
if it isn't you

Oh the world is a beautiful place
to be born into
if you don't much mind
a few dead minds
in the higher places
or a bomb or two
now and then
in your upturned faces
or such other improprieties
as our Name Brand society
is prey to
with its men of distinction
and its men of extinction
and its priests
and other patrolmen
and its various segregations
and congressional investigations
and other constipations
that our fool flesh
is heir to

Yes the world is the best place of all
for a lot of such things as
making the fun scene
and making the love scene
and making the sad scene
and singing low songs of having
inspirations
and walking around
looking at everything
and smelling flowers
and goosing statues
and even thinking
and kissing people and
making babies and wearing pants
and waving hats and
dancing
and going swimming in rivers
on picnics
in the middle of the summer
and just generally
'living it up'

Yes
but then right in the middle of it
comes the smiling
mortician

Analysis

Robert Frost wrote "The Road Not Taken" as a joke for a friend, the poet Edward Thomas. When they went walking together, Thomas was chronically indecisive about which road they ought to take and—in retrospect—often lamented that they should, in fact, have taken the other one. Soon after writing the poem in 1915, Frost griped to Thomas that he had read the poem to an audience of college students and that it had been "taken pretty seriously … despite doing my best to make it obvious by my manner that I was fooling. … Mea culpa." However, Frost liked to quip, "I'm never more serious than when joking." As his joke unfolds, Frost creates a multiplicity of meanings, never quite allowing one to supplant the other—even as "The Road Not Taken" describes how choice is inevitable.

"The Road Not Taken" begins with a dilemma, as many fairytales do. Out walking, the speaker comes to a fork in the road and has to decide which path to follow:

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 …

In his description of the trees, Frost uses one detail—the yellow leaves—and makes it emblematic of the entire forest. Defining the wood with one feature prefigures one of the essential ideas of the poem: the insistence that a single decision can transform a life. The yellow leaves suggest that the poem is set in autumn, perhaps in a section of woods filled mostly with alder or birch trees. The leaves of both turn bright yellow in fall, distinguishing them from maple leaves, which flare red and orange. Both birches and alders are "pioneer species," the first trees to

come back after the land has been stripped bare by logging or forest fires. An inveterate New England farmer and woodsman, Robert Frost would have known these woods were "new"—full of trees that had grown after older ones had been decimated. One forest has replaced another, just as—in the poem—one choice will supplant another. The yellow leaves also evoke a sense of transience; one season will soon give way to another.

The speaker briefly imagines staving off choice, wishing he could "travel both / And be one traveler." (A fastidious editor might flag the repetition of ***travel/traveler*** here, but it underscores the fantasy of unity—traveling two paths at once without dividing or changing the self.) The syntax of the first stanza also mirrors this desire for simultaneity: three of the five lines begin with the word ***and***.
After peering down one road as far as he can see, the speaker chooses to take the other one, which he describes 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.

Later in the poem, the speaker calls the road he chose "less traveled," and it does initially strike him as slightly grassier, slightly less trafficked. As soon as he makes this claim, however, he doubles back, erasing the distinction even as he makes it: "Though as for that the passing there / Had worn them really about the same."

Frost then reiterates that the two roads are comparable, observing—this time—that the roads are equally ***untraveled***, carpeted in newly fallen yellow leaves:

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

The poem masquerades as a meditation about choice, but the critic William Pritchard suggests that the speaker is admitting that "choosing one rather than the other was a matter of impulse, impossible to speak

about any more clearly than to say that the road taken had 'perhaps the better claim.'" In many ways, the poem becomes about how—through retroactive narrative—the poet turns something as irrational as an "impulse" into a triumphant, intentional decision. Decisions are nobler than whims, and this reframing is comforting, too, for the way it suggests that a life unfolds through conscious design. However, as the poem reveals, that design arises out of constructed narratives, not dramatic actions.

Having made his choice, the speaker declares, "Oh, I kept the first for another day!" The diction up until now has been matter-of-fact, focusing on straightforward descriptions and avoiding figurative language. This line initiates a change: as the speaker shifts from depiction to contemplation, the language becomes more stilted, dramatic, and old-fashioned. This tonal shift subtly illustrates the idea that the concept of choice is, itself, a kind of artifice.

Thus far, the entire poem has been one sentence. The meandering syntax of this long sentence—which sprawls across stanzas, doubling back on itself, revising its meaning, and delaying the finality of decisiveness—mirrors the speaker's thought process as he deliberates. The neatness of how the sentence structure suddenly converges with the line structure (this sentence is exactly one line) echoes the sudden, clean division that choice creates.

As the tone becomes increasingly dramatic, it also turns playful and whimsical. "Oh, I kept the first for another day!" sounds like something sighed in a parlor drama, comic partly because it is more dramatic than the occasion merits: after all, the choice at hand is not terribly important. Whichever road he chooses, the speaker, will, presumably, enjoy a walk filled with pleasant fall foliage.

The poem's tone also turns increasingly eerie, elusive, and difficult to grasp. As he does throughout the poem, the speaker makes a confident

statement ("I saved the first for another day!") only to turn back and revise it:

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

Already, the speaker doubts he'll ever return. Writing, as he was, for his friend Edward Thomas, Frost was perhaps thinking of one of Thomas's most famous poems, "Roads." Thomas, who was Welsh, lived in a country where roads built by the Romans two millennia previously were (and are) still in use. Some, now paved over, are used as highways, remnants of a culture that has long since vanished and been supplanted by another. In "Roads," Thomas writes,

Roads go on
While we forget, and are
Forgotten like a star
That shoots and is gone.

Later he imagines roads when people are absent:

They are lonely
While we sleep, lonelier
For lack of the traveller
Who is now a dream only.

"The Road Not Taken" appears as a preface to Frost's *Mountain Interval*, which was published in 1916 when Europe was engulfed in World War I; the United States would enter the war a year later. Thomas's "Roads" evokes the legions of men who will return to the roads they left only as imagined ghosts:

Now all roads lead to France
And heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead
Returning lightly dance.

Frost wrote this poem at a time when many men doubted they would ever go back to what they had left. Indeed, shortly after receiving this poem in a letter, Edward Thomas's Army regiment was sent to Arras, France, where he was killed two months later.

When Frost sent the poem to Thomas, Thomas initially failed to realize that the poem was (mockingly) about him. Instead, he believed it was a

serious reflection on the need for decisive action. (He would not be alone in that assessment.)

Frost was disappointed that the joke fell flat and wrote back, insisting that the sigh at the end of the poem was "a mock sigh, hypo-critical for the fun of the thing." The joke rankled; Thomas was hurt by this characterization of what he saw as a personal weakness—his indecisiveness, which partly sprang from his paralyzing depression. Thomas presciently warned Frost that most readers would not understand the poem's playfulness and wrote, "I doubt if you can get anybody to see the fun of the thing without showing them & advising them which kind of laugh they are to turn on." Edward Thomas was right, and the critic David Orr has hailed "The Road Not Taken" as a poem that "at least in its first few decades … came close to being reader-proof."

The last stanza—stripped of the poem's earlier insistence that the roads are "really about the same"—has been hailed as a clarion call to venture off the beaten path and blaze a new trail. Frost's lines have often been read as a celebration of individualism, an illustration of Emerson's claim that "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist." In the film *Dead Poets Society*, the iconoclastic teacher Mr. Keating, played by Robin Williams, takes his students into a courtyard, instructs them to stroll around, and then observes how their individual gaits quickly subside into conformity. He passionately tells them, "Robert Frost said, 'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—/ I took the one less traveled by / And that has made all the difference.'"

Far from being an ode to the glories of individualism, however, the last stanza is a riddling, ironic meditation on how we turn bewilderment and impulsiveness into a narrative:

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.

Again, the language is stylized, archaic, and reminiscent of fairytales. Frost claims he will be telling the story "somewhere ages and ages hence," a reversal of the fairytale beginning, "Long, long ago in a faraway land." Through its progression, the poem suggests that our power to shape events comes ***not*** from choices made in the material world—in an autumn stand of birches—but from the mind's ability to mold the past into a particular story. The roads were about the same, and the speaker's decision was based on a vague impulse. The act of assigning meanings—more than the inherent significance of events themselves—defines our experience of the past.

The fairytale-like language also accentuates the way the poem slowly launches into a conjuring trick. Frost liked to warn listeners (and readers) that "you have to be careful of that one; it's a tricky poem—very tricky." Part of its trick is that it enacts what it has previously claimed is impossible: the traveling of two roads at once.

The poem's ending refuses to convey a particular emotional meaning; it playfully evades categorizations even as it describes divisions created by choices. Its triumph is that it ***does*** travel two emotional trajectories while cohering as a single statement. We cannot tell, ultimately, whether the speaker is pleased with his choice; a sigh can be either contented or regretful. The speaker claims that his decision has made "all the difference," but the word ***difference*** itself conveys no sense of whether this choice made the speaker's life better or worse—he could, perhaps, be envisioning an alternate version of life, one full of the imagined pleasures the ***other*** road would have offered.

Indeed, when Frost and Thomas went walking together, Thomas would often choose one fork in the road because he was convinced it would lead them to something, perhaps a patch of rare wild flowers or a particular bird's nest. When the road failed to yield the hoped-for rarities, Thomas would rue his choice, convinced the other road would have doubtless led to something better. In a letter, Frost goaded Thomas, saying, "No matter which road you take, you'll always sigh, and wish you'd taken another."

And, indeed, the title of the poem hovers over it like a ghost: "The Road Not Taken." According to the title, this poem is about absence. It is about what the poem never mentions: the choice the speaker did ***not*** make, which still haunts him. Again, however, Frost refuses to allow the title to have a single meaning: "The Road Not Taken" also evokes "the road less traveled," the road most people did not take.

The poem moves from a fantasy of staving off choice to a statement of division. The reader cannot discern whether the "difference" evoked in the last line is glorious or disappointing—or neither. What is clear is that the act of choosing creates division and thwarts dreams of simultaneity. All the "difference" that has arisen—the loss of unity—has come from the simple fact that choice is always and inescapably inevitable. The repetition of *I*—as well as heightening the rhetorical drama—mirrors this idea of division. The self has been split. At the same time, the repetition of *I* recalls the idea of traveling two roads as one traveler: one I stands on each side of the line break—on each side of the verse's turn—just as earlier when the speaker imagined being a single traveler walking down both roads at once.

The poem also wryly undercuts the idea that division is inevitable: the language of the last stanza evokes two simultaneous emotional stances. The poem suggests that—through language and artifice—we can "trick" our way out of abiding by the law that all decisions create differences. We can be one linguistic traveler traveling two roads at once, experiencing two meanings. In a letter, Frost claimed, "My poems … are all set to trip the reader head foremost into the boundless." The meaning of this poem has certainly tripped up many readers—from Edward Thomas to the iconic English teacher in ***Dead Poets Society***. But the poem does not trip readers simply to tease them—instead it aims to launch them into the boundless, to launch them past spurious distinctions and into a vision of unbounded simultaneity.