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# THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

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Robert Frost

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# THE JOURNEY

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- Life is often viewed as a metaphorical journey
  - There is no obvious road or path we must follow and we cannot know in advance where any road will lead
  - Some choices we make are more important than others
  - Once we have embarked on a journey down a particular road, we cannot go back
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# DECISION

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- The point is not what choice we make but what we make of that choice.
  - This poem is often mis-interpreted but once it is examined closely the true meaning can be seen
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- Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
  - And sorry I could not travel both
  - And be one traveler, long I stood
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- "Diverged" is just another word for split. There's a fork in the road.
  - The speaker wants to go down both roads at once, but since it's impossible to walk down two roads at once, he has to choose one road.
  - The speaker is "sorry" he can't travel both roads, suggesting regret.
  - Because of the impossibility of traveling both roads, the speaker stands there trying to choose which path he's going to take.
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AND LOOKED DOWN ONE AS FAR AS I COULD  
TO WHERE IT BENT IN THE UNDERGROWTH;

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- The speaker really wants to go down both paths – he's thinking hard about his choice. He's staring down one road, trying to see where it goes. But he can only see up to the first bend, where the undergrowth, the small plants and greenery of the woods, blocks his view.
  - This is where we start to think about the metaphorical meanings of this poem. If our speaker is, as we suspect, at a fork in the road of his life, and not at an actual road, he could be trying to peer into his future as far as he can. But, since he can't really predict the future, he can only see part of the path. Who knows what surprises it could hold?
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# THEN TOOK THE OTHER, AS JUST AS FAIR,

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- So after all this buildup about one road, which he's looked down for a long time, our speaker takes the other path.
  - Then we get a tricky little phrase to describe this road. It's "as just as fair." Read without the first "as," this phrase is clear, if you think of fair as meaning attractive, or pretty. But the first "as" makes the phrase a little more difficult. Combining the words "just" and "fair" in the same phrase is a play on words – both of these words have multiple meanings. The phrase could mean something like "as just as it is fair," as in proper, righteous, and equal. But this doesn't quite apply to a road.
  - Yet we trust that our speaker wouldn't let things get awkward without meaning it. We're guessing that he means the road is just as pretty, but that in the metaphorical world of this poem, he thinks he made the fair, or right, choice.
  - But it's not fairer – it's just as fair. So he was choosing between two roads, or futures, that were different but potentially equally good.
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AND HAVING PERHAPS THE BETTER CLAIM,  
BECAUSE IT WAS GRASSY AND WANTED WEAR;

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- The speaker still seems pretty uncertain when he explains that this second path is better. It is only "perhaps" better.
  - Then the speaker tells us why the path is better – it seems like it hasn't been walked on very much, because it's grassy and doesn't look worn.
  - Be careful not to think that the phrase "wanted wear" is personification (it is alliteration, though). "Wanted," in this instance, means something more like "lacked."
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THOUGH AS FOR THAT THE PASSING THERE  
HAD WORN THEM REALLY ABOUT THE SAME,

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- The speaker of this poem really can't seem to make up his mind. Just when we think we've got a declaration about which path is better, he changes his mind and admits that maybe they were equal after all.
  - The "as for that" refers to the path being less worn.
  - "The passing there" refers to traffic, probably on foot just like our speaker, that may have worn the paths down.
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AND BOTH THAT MORNING EQUALLY LAY  
IN LEAVES NO STEP HAD TRODDEN BLACK.

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- Here, again, we hear that the paths are equal, but we find out something new, that it's morning. It's possible that our speaker is the first to travel to this place on that day.
  - The paths are covered with leaves, which haven't been turned black by steps crushing them.
  - Initially we heard that one path was grassy...and now it's covered with leaves. Possibly, the leaves aren't very thick, or the grass sticks up in between them. Or maybe the speaker isn't being quite honest.
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# OH, I KEPT THE FIRST FOR ANOTHER DAY!

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- The speaker seems like he's already regretting his decision. He is rationalising his choice of path by saying he'll come back to the one he missed later.
  - This is a familiar way to deal with difficult choices; "you can always come back and try it again later," we think.
  - With an "Oh" at the beginning and an exclamation point at the end, this line is emphatic. The speaker feels strongly about what he's saying here.
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YET KNOWING HOW WAY LEADS ON TO WAY,  
I DOUBTED IF I SHOULD EVER COME BACK.

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- The speaker realises that his hopes to come back and try the other path may be foolish.
  - He knows how "way leads on to way" – how one road can lead to another, and then another, until you end up very far from where you started. Because of this, he doesn't think he'll ever be able to come back and take that other path, as much as he wishes he could.
  - Here we return to the metaphorical meaning of this poem. In any life decision, we can hedge our bets by thinking we can always come back, try a different option later. But sometimes our decisions take us to other decisions, and yet still others, and it's impossible for us to retrace our steps and arrive back at that original decision.
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# I SHALL BE TELLING THIS WITH A SIGH SOMEWHERE AGES AND AGES HENCE:

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- Now we jump forward in time. We don't know exactly when, but we know that it's ages and ages "hence," or, from now. So we're probably talking years, not months.
  - We know that this story is important, because the speaker will still be telling it many years later.
  - He'll be telling it with a sigh, though, which is interesting because sighs can be happy, sad, or merely reflective – and we don't know what kind of sigh this is.
  - So, we know that this choice is probably going to be important for the speaker's future, but we don't know if he's going to be happy about it or not.
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# TWO ROADS DIVERGED IN A WOOD, AND I—

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- This line is a repetition of the first line of the poem, with the subtraction of the word "yellow" and the addition of the words "and I."
  - This repetition helps to bring the poem to a conclusion. It reminds us what's important in the poem – the concept of choosing between two different paths.
  - Then, we get the hesitation of "and I" and the dash. This lets us know that whatever the speaker is about to say next is important.
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# ITOOKTHE ONE LESS TRAVELED BY,

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- In this line, the speaker sums up his story and tells us that he took the road less traveled by. With the hesitation in the line before, this declaration could be triumphant – or regretful.
  - Also, remember it wasn't exactly clear that the road our speaker took was the one that was less traveled. He said at first that it looked less worn, but then that the two roads were actually about equal.
  - The speaker is telling his story far in the future, a long time from when it actually happened. He's predicting that his memory will tell him that he took the road less traveled by, or that he'll lie in the future, no matter what the reality of the situation was.
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# AND THAT HAS MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

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- At first glance it seems that this line is triumphant – the narrator took the path that no one else did, and that is what has made the difference in his life that made him successful.
  - But he doesn't say that it made him successful – an optimistic reader wants the line to read positively, but it could be read either way. A "difference" could mean success, or utter failure.
  - Remember, the speaker is telling us about what he's going to say in the future. From where he is now, just looking down the path as far as he can see, he can't tell if the future that it leads him to is going to be good or bad. He just knows that his choice is important – that it will make all the difference in his life.
  - The speaker of this poem could be saying that his choice made all the difference while he's surrounded by his grandchildren, by a fire in a cozy little house. Or he could be saying it to the wind, while walking alone on the streets. At this point, he doesn't know – and neither do we.
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# FORM AND METRE

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- Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, (A)
- And sorry I could not travel both (B)
- And be one traveler, long I stood (A)
- And looked down one as far as I could (A)
- To where it bent in the undergrowth; (B)



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# IAMBIC TETRAMETER

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- The rhythm of the poem is basically iambic, which means that there is one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da DUM). There are many variations in this poem, most of which are anapestic, which means that there are two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (da da DUM).
  - Two roads | diverged | in a yell|ow wood
  - An anapaest is a metrical foot used in formal poetry. In classical quantitative meters it consists of two short syllables followed by a long one; in accentual stress it consists of two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable.
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# DIVERGENCE

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- Although the poem has a rhythm and a rhyme scheme, they are a little different from the norm.
  - This may reflect the speaker in the poem, who chooses his own path.
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- The steady rhythm and rhyme mirror the steady footsteps of the speaker as he walks through the woods.
  - The lines are a little shorter than usual and the stanzas are a little longer than usual (quintains instead of quatrains) the poem is a little unusual, as is the speaker. He is keen to find his own path and the poem reflects this.
  - The hesitation in the last stanza makes it seem as if the speaker has stopped walking for long enough to consider which path he will take.
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# QUESTIONS FOR HOMEWORK

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- How does Frost show us that deciding what choice to make in life is not always easy?
  - Why do you think the speaker will sigh when he tells this story in the future?
  - Do you think the speaker will be completely honest when telling others of the choice he made? What evidence is there in the poem to support your viewpoint?
  - If both the roads are 'really about the same', what does this suggest to you about the decisions we have to make in life?
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