

The Road Not Taken

BY ROBERT FROST



LITERATURE SERIES

BIOGRAPHY:

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Source: <http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/rfrost.htm>

Read the biography of the poet and **make a list of main themes** that he touched upon in his poems, according to the article. **Mark the important information** in the text.

ROBERT FROST

American poet, one of the finest of rural New England's 20th century pastoral poets. Frost published his first books in Great Britain in the 1910s, but he soon became in his own country the most read and constantly anthologized poet, whose work was made familiar in classrooms and lecture platforms. Frost was awarded the Pulitzer Prize four times. Nature and Frost's rural surroundings were for him a source for insights "from delight to wisdom," or as he also said: "Literature begins with geography."

FIRE AND ICE

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco, California. His father William Prescott Frost Jr., a journalist and an ardent Democrat, died of tuberculosis when Frost was about eleven years old. To support her family, Frost's Scottish mother, the former Isabelle Moody, resumed her career as a schoolteacher. They moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where Frost's paternal grandfather, William Prescott Frost, gave his grandson a good schooling. Belle, as Frost's mother was called, was a cultured, intelligent woman, but known as a poor teacher, who could not control the class.

After graduating from Lawrence High School in 1892, Frost attended Dartmouth College for a few months. Most probably he was expelled after participating in a sadistic prank. Over the next ten years Frost held a number of jobs, he worked in a textile mill and on a farm, and taught Latin at his mother's school in Methuen, Massachusetts. On November 8, 1894, the New York newspaper *Independent* published Frost's poem 'My Butterfly', earning him \$15. He had it privately printed with four other poems, in an edition of two copies. While working as a teacher Frost continued to write and publish his poems in magazines. In 1895 he married a former schoolmate from Lawrence, Elinor Miriam White; they had six children. A Swedenborgian minister conducted the wedding. In 1894, when Frost had tried to persuade Elinor to marry him, and gave her the other copy of the *Twilight*, she had

rejected him. Frost destroyed his own copy and half-heartedly tried to commit suicide in the Dismal Swamp.

Frost was admitted as a special student in 1897 to Harvard, where he studied Latin and Greek, and philosophy under George Santayana. In 1900 he moved to Derry, New Hampshire, working there as a cobbler, farmer, and teacher at Pinkerton Academy – he held the post for five years – and then at the state normal school in Plymouth. By that time Frost had already given up farming. When he sent his poems to *The Atlantic Monthly* they were returned with this note: "We regret that *The Atlantic* has no place for your vigorous verse."

At Derry, the children had lived an isolated life; Frost, who was a conscientious father, dominated the family, mentally and by his physical appearance. He was broad-shouldered and athletic, about five feet, nine inches tall, his hands were large and strong, eyes were bright blue, but color blind. "We had no playmates among neighbor children," recalled her daughter Lesley. "We were a little scared all the time." Remembering how his father had punished him, Frost never whipped the children.

Frost's grandfather died in 1901 and left him an estate, including the Derry farm, and a \$500 annuity, which allowed him sufficient leisure to reading and writing poetry in between farming. In 1912 Frost sold the Derry farm for \$1,900 and took his wife and four young children to England, settling first in Beaconsfield, twenty miles north of London, and moving then to Gloucestershire. At the age of 39, Frost published his first collection of poems, *A BOY'S WILL* (1913), which appeared in David Nutt's Series of Modern Poets. It was followed by *NORTH OF BOSTON* (1914), which gained international reputation and is considered Frost's greatest book. The collection contains some of Frost's best-known poems: 'Mending Wall,' 'The Death of the Hired Man,' 'Home Burial,' 'A Servant to Servants,' 'After Apple-Picking,' and 'The Wood-Pile.' The poems, written with blank verse or looser free verse of dialogue, were drawn from his own life, recurrent losses, everyday tasks, and his loneliness. "This is one of the most revolutionary books of modern times," wrote the British poet and essayist Edward Thomas (1878-1917), Frost's friend, in his review in the *Daily News*, "but one of the quietest and least aggressive. It speaks, and it is poetry."

While in England Frost became acquainted with the great modernist from W.B. Yeats to Ford Madox Ford and Ezra Pound, and the Georgian Poets, such as Edward Thomas, Wilfred Gibson and Lascelles Abercrombie. Although Pound's reviews of *A Boy's Will* had been positive, Frost was irritated by his patronizing attitude, saying that "It pleased him to treat me always as if I might be some kind of poet but was not quite presentable – at least in London." In 1915 Frost returned to the US in 1915 with his family and bought a farm near Franconia, New Hampshire. When the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* asked for poems, he gave the very ones that had previously been rejected. Frost taught later at Amherst College (1916-38) and Michigan universities. In 1916 he was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. On the same year appeared his third collection of verse, *MOUNTAIN INTERVAL*, which contained such poems as 'The Road Not Taken,' 'The Oven Bird,' 'Birches,' and 'The Hill Wife.'

Frost's poems show deep appreciation of natural world and sensibility about the human aspirations. His images – woods, stars, houses, brooks – are usually taken

from everyday life. With his down-to-earth approach to his subjects, readers found it is easy to follow the poet into deeper truths, without being burdened with pedantry. Often Frost used the rhythms and vocabulary of ordinary speech or even the looser free verse of dialogue.

In 1920 Frost purchased a farm in South Shaftsbury, Vermont, near Middlebury College, and in 1939 he purchased as his summer residence the Homer Noble farm, in Ripton. Most of the year Frost spent in Cambridge. His last permanent home was at 35 Brewster Street. Frost taught at Amherst College, the University of Michigan, Harvard University, and Dartmouth College. For nearly fifty years, until two months before his death, Frost gave poetry readings. They exhausted him both physically and mentally, and were a source of marital conflicts, but he was a great performer who drew a large audience. In 1928, Frost traveled to England, having a warm reunion with his old friends, and meeting for the first time T.S. Eliot, "the best of the whole group of obscure poets," as he later stated.

Frost lost four of his children. Elinor Bettina, born in 1907, lived only a short time. Elliott, the first child, had died of cholera infantum in 1900. Crushed by the loss, Elinor's relations with her husband deteriorated. She died in 1938. Only in a few poems Frost referred to the personal tragedies of the family. One of them is 'Home Burial,' which he considered too sad to be read aloud. Two of Frost's daughters suffered mental breakdowns. Jeanie died in an asylum in 1929. Frost's son Carol, a frustrated poet and farmer, committed suicide in 1940 with a deer hunter rifle. Also Frost himself suffered from depression and the continual self-doubt led him to cling to the desire to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. He had been told in 1950, that he was among candidates nominated by the Swedish committee.

After the death of his wife, Frost became strongly attracted to Kathleen (Kay) Morrison, married to Theodore Morrison. Frost employed her from 1938 as his secretary and adviser, but she probably became also his lover. Frost also composed for her one of his finest love poems, 'A Witness Tree.' The only son of the Morrisons was killed in a car accident in 1955. During the WW II, Frost refused to help the Allied war effort by writing propaganda.

With his future biographer, Lawrance Thompson, Frost travelled in 1957 to England, and to Israel and Greece in 1961. However, he did not like being abroad, saying that the "only country I can have any interest in is the one I have lived in." He participated in the inauguration of President John Kennedy in 1961 by reciting two of his poems. When the sun and the wind prevented him from reading his new poem, 'The Preface', Frost recited his old poem, 'The Gift Outright,' from memory. In 1962 Frost travelled in the Soviet Union as a member of a goodwill group. He had a long talk with Premier Nikita Khrushchev, whom he described admiringly as "no fathead"; as smart, big and "not a coward." Frost also reported that Khrushchev had said the United States was "too liberal to fight," it caused a considerable stir in Washington. At the age of eighty Frost went to Brazil, meeting there Faulkner, who was drunk.

Among the honors and rewards Frost received were tributes from the U.S. Senate (1950), the American Academy of Poets (1953), New York University (1956), the Huntington Hartford Foundation (1958), the Congressional Gold Medal (1962), the Edward MacDowell Medal (1962). In 1930 he was elected to the American Academy

of Arts and Letters, Amherst College appointed him Sainpson Lecturer for Life (1949), and in 1958 he was made poetry consultant for the Library of Congress.

At the time of his death on January 29, 1963, Frost was considered a kind of unofficial poet laureate of the US. "I would have written of me on my stone: I had a lover's quarrel with the world," Frost once said. Frost depicted the fields and farms of his surroundings, observing the details of rural life, which hide universal meaning. *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947), which used the Old Testament characters of Job and Jonah, examined the complex relationship between man and God. However, Frost developed a suspicion for religious mysticism. His half humorous view of the world produced such remarks as "I never take my side in a quarrel", or "I'm never serious except when I'm fooling."

Frost's works were generally praised, but the lack of seriousness concerning social and economic problems of the 1930s, and his hostility toward the policies of the New Deal, annoyed some more socially orientated critics. "Political freedom is nothing to me. I bestow it right and left," Frost stated in 'The Figure a Poem Makes,' first published in 1939 as the preface to an edition of his *Collected Poems*. Later biographers have created a complex and contradictory portrait of the poet. In Lawrance Thompson's three-volume official biography (1966-1976) Frost was presented as a misanthrope, anti-intellectual, cruel, and angry man, but in Jeffrey Meyers's (1996) and Jay Parini's work (1999) he was again portrayed in a more sympathetic light: "He was a loner who liked company; a poet of isolation who sought a mass audience; a rebel who sought to fit in. Although a family man to the core, he frequently felt alienated from his wife and children and withdrew into reveries. While preferring to stay at home, he traveled more than any poet of his generation to give lectures and readings, even though he remained terrified of public speaking to the end..." Frost's personal notebooks, characterized as his "intellectual autobiography," were published in 2007. Because the handwriting of the poet was difficult to read – the notebooks were written for his own personal use – a dispute soon arose over the exact wording.

VOCABULARY WORK

Work with the glossary:

☑ mark the words that you don't know;

☑ write what part of speech is each word (for the names of the parts of speech review our dictionary lesson).

To diverge	
To bend	
Undergrowth	
To look down	
One	
Fair	
Claim	
Perhaps	
Grassy	
To wear	
About the same	
Equally	
To lay	
Trodden	
To lead on	
To doubt	
Sigh	
Hence	
To diverge	
To make difference	
Stanza	

READ THE POEM:

**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.**

Robert Frost

Your translation:

1st stanza:

2nd stanza:

3rd stanza:

4th stanza:

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

READING CRITICISM:

- Read the following analysis of the poem written by Linda Sue Grimes :
<http://suite101.com/article/robert-frosts-tricky-poem-a8712>

EXPRESSIONS

Continue the sentences:

1. A wide-spread interpretation claims that...

2. But a close reading of the poem proves otherwise...

3. The poem consists of...

4. He reports that..

5. But then he goes on to say that...

6. He realizes that...

7. The fourth stanza holds the key to...

8. The poem does not identify the nature of that sigh...

- 1) According to the article, which stanza contains the “trickiness”?
- 2) Why is the poem “tricky”? Give the explanation in your own words.

Go through the article and mark the tenses used in it. Which tenses are used most often?

- Read the following opinion article about the poem:
<http://suite101.com/article/robert-frosts-the-road-not-taken-a33717>

WRITING A CRITICAL ESSAY:

1. Choose a THEME from a list that you made while reading the BIOGRAPHY article. Is it demonstrated somehow in the poem? How? Quote the poem to prove your point. Don't forget to use : and " signs when you quote!

2. Both criticism articles presented above discuss the nature of the "sigh" mentioned in the poem. What is your opinion about it? Write a short essay (about 250-350 words) stating the problem, giving various interpretations (supported by quotes from the articles), analyzing the text and giving your opinion in conclusion.

In your composition use all the expressions given above. Use Passive Voice, Conditional, Present Perfect, Gerund and Reported Speech.

CHECK LIST:

- 1) Check the use of Present Simple, Past Simple, and TO BE + sequence of tenses.
- 2) Check dots, capital letters and commas.
- 3) Check the spelling of the new words.
- 4) Make sure you have used the following:

Passive	
Present Perfect	
Gerund	
Reported Speech	
Conditional	
Expression 1	
Expression 2	
Expression 3	
Expression 4	
Expression 5	
Expression 6	
Expression 7	
Expression 8	