UNIT 10: ROBERT FROST: "THE ROAD NOT TAKEN"

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the poem "The Road Not Taken"
- describe the context, the poetic devices and the language used by the poet
- value the poem in its totality

10.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we discussed the life and works of the poet Robert Frost. This unit makes an attempt to acquaint you with the poem "The Road Not Taken" composed by Robert Frost who is one of the most prominent American poets who wrote on the threshold of Modernism. You must have

read some of his poems. One important poem titled "Mending Wall" is particularly worth mentioning because in it the poet laughs at the attempt made by man to create artificial barriers. In the poem "The Road not Taken" Frost analyzes the problem of choice and its resultant impact on the individual who makes the choice. A critical explanation of the poem is also provided which will help you understand and appreciate the poem better.

After reading this unit you will be interested in reading this poem and also about the poet's eventful life.

10.3 TEXT OF THE POEM

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, 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.

10.4 CONTEXT OF THE POEM

"The Road Not Taken" is the opening poem in Robert Frost's third collection of poems titled *Mountain Interval*, published in 1916. The inspiration for writing the poem came to Frost in 1914 when he was with his friend Edward Thomas in Gloucestershire, England. During his stay, he used to go for long walks into the countryside accompanied by Thomas. The latter was seriously interested in acquainting his American friend with the rarities and specialities of the area and as such always took a route that could serve his purpose. However, before the end of that walk, he would regret the choice he had made and wished that they had chosen the other available routes. Such a thing happened regularly and Frost took it as an occasion to jest at the expense of his friend's 'wasted regrets'. Frost sought to romanticize this notion of ruminating over what might have been and on his return to America in 1915, he incorporated this notion into the composition of a poem for his new volume of poetry.

10.5 EXPLANATION OF THE POEM

When we read the poem we become aware of a person who has two roads before him and can take only one road at a time. It is a common experience for a stranger in an unfamiliar place to find a crossroad before him and to decide which one he should prefer that would take him to his destination. At its literal level the poem illustrates such a situation but on deeper reflection we discover a general truth regarding human situations where the problem of choice is one of the most difficult problems for man to solve.

Let us first read the poem to find its literal meaning. The poet takes up the metaphor of a road at the point of splitting into two separate routes. The poem opens with the traveller poet standing at the point of divergence. Since he is a lone traveller and cannot travel both ways, he has to make a conscious decision of choosing the right path. The poet has to make a choice whereby he can take one road but in the process would be required to forsake the other. This act of making the right choice is an ordinary experience in life. On an early morning the poet / speaker, while walking along a road reaches a point where the road goes in two directions. He is at a loss as to which direction he should take. One of the two roads seems to have been used more often by travellers

but the other appears grassy and neglected. The poet is undecided for a moment because both the roads present him with equal prospects. He has to make a choice between the two alternatives. Casting his glance at the roads for a while he finds that the wood is 'Yellow', that is, the leaves are all yellow and orange in colour, suggesting the autumn season. As he looks at one road he finds that it has taken a curve and is lost to sight because of thick growth of shrubs and other kinds of plants. He however decides to take the other road which is less frequented by travellers. To the poet / speaker, there is hardly any difference between the two roads. Both are lying unused on that particular morning and both are covered by yellow leaves. There is no sign of anyone trampling upon the roads so early. While deciding on the road he is to take now , the poet keeps the option open for using the other road another day. It appears to be a sudden decision taken impulsively without giving a serious thought. Besides, he has not seen any clear advantage or disadvantage in discarding one for the other.

Though the traveller poet expects to return to the spot some other day to go by the other road- the one he has rejected at the moment- there is an uncertainty about this happening in future because in life we take decisions which cannot be revised and taking one road means not turning back in order to start the journey anew. The following two lines make this point clear:

"Yet knowing how way leads on to way

I doubted if I should ever come back"

The poet / traveller would know about the results of his choice only in the future. He may even have to regret his decision. The choices in life may be either regretted or rejoiced later. There is always scope for doubt and uncertainty regarding our choice of action at a given moment. But this is a human predicament. We are incapable of foreseeing the consequences of our actions in a clear perspective. What really matters is the choice made at a particular moment. This choice will make all the difference in future.

It is thus a profound truth about human situations that has added to the poem's deeper meanings. The literal is merged into the symbolic. The traveller is not an individual but a representative of mankind. The two roads acquire a

deep symbolic significance as representations of choices in life about which human beings are so often confused, as the traveller in question.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: What is the season of the year suggested in the poem?

Q2: Where does the traveller find two roads laying equal claims on him?

Q3: How is one road different from the other?

Q4: Explain the implication of the phrase 'less travelled'.

10.6 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

As was said earlier, Frost made use of the language of the common people in the composition of his poetry. In this case his position as an American poet stands out in contrast with the modern European and English counterparts. He incorporated the speech patterns of New England into the process of versification, using and transforming them to create simple yet meaningful verses. He was more successful than most other poets in writing in a truly natural speech. Most of the colloquial rhythms were acquired during those years of farming in his Hampshire Farm. It is interesting again to observe that even in his manner of writing, Frost did not stick to any particular style of language. In his first collection of poetry *A Boy's Will*, Frost wrote in consonance with the established lyric tradition of Walt Whitman. In the poem under discussion, we can clearly perceive instances wherein the poet has applied elements of ordinary speech into the metrical pattern. It seems as if the poet is captured precisely in the moment of retrospection. The poet verbally recreates the entire situation when he finds himself at the crossroads speculating over the question of choosing the right way. The style is simple and attracts our immediate attention. Yet there is an element of colloquialism, particularly in the line "Oh! I kept the first for another day". It is written in a conversational style. It talks about the sudden decision in favour of a particular road that offers no

advantages or disadvantages to influence his choice. It is an involuntary, impulsive decision, so well suggested by the line. Another characteristic of Frost's style is that when he sets out to describe an object or to convey the impression of a natural scenery he writes in a straight-forward manner. "The Road Not Taken'" has a simple style so characteristic of Frost and is marked by his use of simple and straight forward language. What is further seen here is an emotional restraint that makes his statement of the profound truth about the human problem of choices so simple and easy to understand.



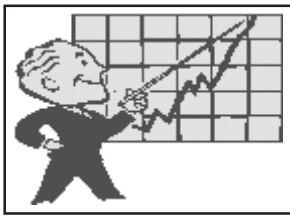
CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5: Explain the metaphor of the crossroads.

10.7 POETIC TECHNIQUES

The most significant poetic technique applied here is that of symbolism. Added to that, the poet has also made a clever use of natural imagery. The metaphor of two roads represents the two possibilities of which only one could be entertained at a time. The central metaphor clearly suggests the external human problem of choices. But Frost has not dealt with the problem philosophically. He allows the situation to speak for itself and allows the deeper meaning to emerge naturally. This makes the poem easy to read. One of Frost's favourite modes is the dramatic mode in which a situation is depicted. In this poem, we can easily realize the situation in which a traveller is faced with the dilemma about selecting either of the two roads lying before him in a yellow wood. Robert Frost is known as a poet of "simplicity". His poems are usually short, seldom running over from one page to another. The verses are composed usually of brief forms such as the quatrain (4-line stanza).

In this poem, however, he has used 5 line stanzas with the rhyme scheme abaab, cdccd, dedde, efeef. Infact, he has enlarged the quatrain to the 5 line stanzas to offer variety.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q6: What is the rhyme scheme of this poem?



10.8 LET US SUM UP

Robert Frost began writing poetry as a farmer-poet and his poetry retained the fragrance of the New England soil. Writing this poem in the lap of nature, the poet's mind did not fail to notice the importance of those elements which affect human life. From nature, the poet moves into a general human situation where it is difficult to make a well-thought-out choice. The two roads stand for two choices which are indistinguishable in matter of particular advantages and disadvantages. Yet we make choices in life, at times impulsively and with irretrievable consequences.



10.9 FURTHER READING

1. Boynton, Percy H.: *American Authors of Today: II. Robert Frost*. The English Journal, Vol. 11, No. 8, (Oct., 1922), pp 455-462.
2. Cox, James M. (ed.). (1962). *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice Hall, Inc.
3. Isaacs, Elizabeth. (1962). *An Introduction to Robert Frost*. Allan Swallow.
4. Mc Phillips, Robert T. *Diverging and Converging Paths: Horizontal and Vertical.*
5. *Movement in Robert Frost's Mountain Interval*. American Literature, Vol. 58 No. 1, (Mar., 1986), pp 82-98.
6. Poirier, Richard. (1977). *Robert Frost : The Work of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.
7. *The Poems of Robert Frost*. (1946) New York: Modern Library.



10.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: The season suggested is Autumn.

Ans to Q2: It is in the woods that the traveller finds the two roads ahead.

Ans to Q3: One road takes a curve and is lost to sight because of thick outgrowth of shrubs and plants and the other road is neglected

Ans to Q4: Less travelled means a path that has been hardly frequented or explored by travellers.

Ans to Q5: The metaphor of cross roads implies the two roads which represent the two possibilities of which only one could be entertained at a time.

Ans to Q6: The rhyme scheme of the poem is: abaab, dedde, efeef. He has enlarged the quatrain to the five line stanzas to offer variety.



10.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q 1: Where does the poet find two roads pointing to two directions? Which road does he select and why?

Q 2: Why has the poet titled the poem as "The Road Not Taken"? Would it have been more appropriate to use the title "Road Taken"? Explain the significance of the title.

Q 3: Explain the following with reference to the context:

(i) "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, And sorry I could not travel both…"

(ii) "And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black…"

(iii) "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –I took the one less traveled by/And that has made all the difference….."

Q4: What does the poet suggest in the poem about the problem of choice in human life?

Q5: Write a summary of the poem "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost.

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