

Closing the Hallmark Card: Teaching Frost's "The Road Not Taken" as a  
Modernist Expression of Isolation

Lynn Marie Houston, California State University, Chico

Teachers of Robert Frost often contextualize his poetry in terms of his regionalism, realism, and his debts to Romanticism, such as his attention to nature and his celebration of the working class. Many teachers, though, neglect a discussion of the context of modernism when teaching Robert Frost's poetry, a little noted vein of theoretical interest especially among more recent Frost scholars. Understanding the modernist context in Robert Frost's work, and teaching it successfully to students, allows for new insights into the meaning of such poems as "The Road Not Taken" and transforms Frost's image from Hallmark-card material to edgy criticism of American individualism and isolationism. These new insights are essential for including the work of Robert Frost in college courses on modern poetry where his work frequently appears juxtaposed to that of the high modernists. Teaching techniques that can push students to consider this perspective, especially in "The Road Not Taken," hinge on developing their attention to word definitions and connotations, on instructing students to avoid the common mistake of referring to this poem by an incorrect title, and on providing them with a visual map of the geography of Frost's text.

Traditionally, Frost has been viewed as a romanticist rather than a modernist. The Romantic elements of his work position him among a pantheon of poets like Wordsworth and the fireside poets (William Cullen Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Longfellow). However, he was a contemporary and friend to such modernist greats as Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens. While modernist poetry is sometimes associated with an elitist culture that takes poetry away from the general public through experimental forms and esoteric references, Frost's rural, working-class persona, his traditional, metered voice and use of colloquial phrases, as well as the mundane subjects of most of his poems, speak against this.

Recent critical conversations have resuscitated a little noted argument from the late seventies in favor of viewing Frost as modernist. Richard Poirier's 1977 work *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* defines Frost as having a relationship to the modernist movement through some of the subject matter of Frost's works.<sup>1</sup> While Frost does not place the whole course of Western history into doubt or experiment with innovative formal structure and with the position of the reader – characteristics of the work of other modernist poets -- he does tend toward a critique of the increasing alienation of modern life, as well as foster a sense of the visual that is so important to some groups of modernists like the imagists (who favorably reviewed Frost's work). One of the trends in Frost scholarship, exemplified in Robert Kern's article "Frost and Modernism," is to view him as a "different kind" of modernist instead of denying any ties he has to the movement. Before this re-investigation of Frost's work in a modernist context, Frost was considered too much of a "verbal poet" to partake in the modernist visual techniques. "The Road Not Taken," however, supports an alternative reading that is focused on its visual elements and that furthers the case for considering Frost alongside other modernist poets.

Complicating students' reading of this poem begins with asking them for the definition of a "sigh" as you get to that word in line sixteen. Usually, the first few respondents focus on positive emotional associations, such as pleasure and contentment. You should also ask students to consider whether a sigh can ever have negative meanings. If they hesitate, I sometimes demonstrate, pretending to be them, by saying, "[sigh] I really wish I could have gone to that concert" or "[sigh] I wanted to get my paper written on time but I couldn't." After my performance, students usually offer the idea that a sigh can also mean a feeling of

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<sup>1</sup> See also Warren French, "'The Death of the Hired Man': Modernism and Transcendence," *Frost: Centennial Essays III*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1978), pp. 382-401.

nostalgia or regret. Understanding this ambiguity suggests that the tone of the poem might not only be read as heroic triumph but as discontentment.

The next definition in question is the word "difference," another multivalent word. Draw students' attention to the context of the poem. Does the speaker give us any indication of what kind of "difference," whether it is a positive or a negative difference? When the speaker claims that taking the road less traveled by has "made all the difference" what difference specifically has it made? The only presence stated in the poem is the self of the speaker (and his/her memories). Usually the only suggestion about context for the stated difference is in the self-identity of the speaker, and in his telling the story of how he come into his identity. If we cannot know exactly what emotional tone the sigh has, and if we cannot know the nature of the "difference" discussed as the importance of having made the choice of roads in the beginning and middle of the poem, then we cannot know how the speaker feels, one way or the other, and the Hallmark-style reading of this poem as the speaker's celebration of his choice to be independent breaks down. At this point, though, we are still in the familiar waters of accepted critical interpretations of this poem. Scholars of Frost readily admit this ambiguity; in fact, they almost reduce the whole poem to language play because of it and because of the stated equality of the two choices that suggests there is really no meaningful choice. While this smacks of modernist reductionist and existentialist qualities, this is not the most sustained reading possible given knowledge of Frost's oeuvre and of the context of literary modernism.

After leading students through an initial reading of the poem and ending in the above discussion, remind them to look at the title of the poem. Students make a common mistake in referring to this poem by a popular misnomer, "The Road Less Traveled." The mistake taps into the Hallmark-style reading of the poem because it situates the poem as a heroic celebration of individualism, reading the poem's speaker as someone who has set off on his own and, when he looks back on his life,

realizes that he has become a success because of it. However, the actual title of the poem, "The Road Not Taken," draws attention to the other path, the one the speaker did not take, the road "more traveled."<sup>2</sup> The title actually commemorates, after the fact, the rejected choice. When students are made aware of this popular mistake and reminded of the actual title of the poem, they are often prompted to suggest that the poem is really about strategies of self-representation, and the necessity of regret if one has to make a choice of paths: that the "difference" spoken about by the speaker at the end means that any choice we make forms us as who we are and that we narrate these stories of identity by focusing on these moments of choice in our lives. This is also a common interpretation of this poem as representing the way in which humans construct myths about their lives by assigning intention after the fact. I would suggest that, especially within the context of a course on modern poetry, teachers should lead students to an even more complex and radical understanding of this poem.

To understand the more complex reading, students need a visual representation of the woods and the forked paths described as the setting of the poem. I usually draw on the board as we read through the poem line-by-line a second time (after having read it through once as a class to complete the discussion above about word definitions and connotations).<sup>3</sup> I begin by drawing one road that splits into two, and then our speaker in the middle (as a pair of glasses to symbolize eyes) looking at his choices. I show one path with just little dots or short slashes to indicate that it is a grassy path (maybe knee-high grass, as it "wanted wear"). Then, when we come to Frost's words that the other path bends in the undergrowth, I ask

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<sup>2</sup> Some critics argue that the title could imply that the road taken by our speaker was the road "not taken" by most other people, however syntactically this reading does not work. The only subject mentioned in the poem is "I," there is no reference to other people who did "not take" the road our speaker traveled on.

<sup>3</sup> You could also break students into small groups and assign them the task of drawing the paths and woods as Frost describes them. Then, you could compare what the groups produce and discuss why they chose to visually represent the geographical setting that way. This could produce the same discussion set-up above.

them what I should draw for the other road. They should respond with something that is the equivalent of overgrown brambles, bushes, and vines.

For the visual representation, I make sure that the road "bends" out of our speaker's line of vision (unlike the other road, which our speaker can supposedly see what it looks like ahead) and I usually make a series of overlapping circles to indicate shrubbery covering the trail and extending past its sides. Here, teachers should remind students that the road is so overgrown he loses sight of where it goes and cannot see past the growth there. Then, as the poem continues, I draw arrows to show our speaker choosing the grassy path and walking down it. I then label that path the "road less traveled." I ask the students if they hike, and, if so, which path they would rather hike on, a grassy one, or an overgrown one? Most answer that a grassy path would be easier to hike on. I usually say, "Yes, that's right because for the other path you would need a machete or something, right? To cut through the undergrowth?" I ask them again which path Frost's speaker takes. Instead of answering "the road less traveled on" they then answer "the grassy one" or, even better, "the easier one." In fact, at this point, we go back to the line about the road having "the better claim."

While most read this as the speaker commenting on the fact that he can leave a mark on the grass because "it wanted wear," I ask the class, "doesn't dense undergrowth represent a greater challenge if our speaker is truly interested in leaving his mark?" You can forge a trail through undergrowth, I remind them, but you just walk on grass. Only if the grass were young or damp would you even leave footprints, and our speaker doesn't describe the grass as either.

We then get into a discussion of what could be easy about taking the road less traveled, and what could be difficult about taking the other road, the road more traveled? I try to further complicate this discussion by suggesting that the road he chose was one he could "see" more fully (that

is was easier in the sense of being predictable); the condition of the road he didn't take was impossible to judge because of the heavy undergrowth. Robert Frost would know the nature of grass versus undergrowth as he was an avid outdoorsman, despite having grown up in urban areas, and his poetry often reveals close attention to the natural landscape.

At this point, the conversation is focused on the contradiction between the stated "equality" between the two paths and what are described as differences: that one is bent and one is not, and that one is grassy and the other is not. You might mention the biographical reading of this poem: apparently, based on a study of Frost's personal letters, this poem was written in order to poke fun at a friend of his who would regularly take Frost for walks in the woods during which he apologized the entire way for not having taken them on a better path. Whether or not the poem pokes fun at Frost's British friend Edward Thomas, what appears in this valid reading is a conflict between the individual self in its solitude and its company with other people. Perhaps the biographical anecdote ultimately confirms this alternative reading in suggesting Frost's frustration with an annoying travel companion: after all, according to Frost's speaker the road less traveled is indeed the easier one because it is grassy and predictable.

The classroom discussion detailed above brings us to a discussion of how modernist poets view society versus how Romantic poets like the Transcendentalists viewed society. For the most part in Frost's poetry, his individualism is kin to that of the Transcendentalists who embrace the idea of the individual seeking solitude in nature where, alone from the maddening crowd, the soul could commune with its creator. Even within the works of Emerson and Thoreau there is tension between the lone self and the desire the self has to walk with and shape the rest of humanity; there is tension between the solitary development of the heroic, artistic self of Romanticism (who steps out of society) and the kinds of social

reform advocated by the Transcendentalists that are only possible in being connected to a community of people and to local economies.

In reading "The Road Not Taken" based on the tension between individual and society, we see that Frost's speaker suggests that it may be easier to choose solitude over working with others. Ultimately, this reading implies that there is a meaningful choice of paths and that the choice does make some kind of a difference. Frost's speaker chooses to walk the more solitary path and later regrets it. Here, you can go to T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to talk about the modernist sense of decision-making when faced with a sense of alienation from the rest of humanity and the increasing isolation characteristic of modernity. Basically, the two poems share similar subject matter where Frost reasserts the humanity and self-identity of the speaker at the end through the act of storytelling but where Eliot effaces the remaining sense of humanity and self-identity of his speaker.

You can also have the class look at other poems by Frost for evidence of this interpretation. For example, in "Mending Wall," Frost states his dislike of the alienating nature of walls between neighbors, and talk about this strategy of isolation as pre-Modern (from a time when each landowner would have had cattle on his property). Given the message of "Mending Wall," it would seem that Frost, more than once in his poetry, writes about his desire to travel the path "more traveled" rather than living a life of isolation or independence. His poem "Desert Places" also speaks of a kind of existential emptiness that connects him with modernist thoughts on the subject.

In conclusion, the two roads represent a favorite dichotomy of the Modernists between isolation and community. The ability to read the word "sigh" as a negative expression suggests that our speaker regrets his choice of the "road less traveled" because it has made him feel lonely and isolated. This reading offers a criticism of American society and its values at the time Frost was writing, especially given that it is frequently misread

as a celebration of those values. The Hallmark-style reading of the poem is so popular because American culture has a penchant to celebrate the lone individual who goes off on his own path. Our culture rewards and envies those who distinguish themselves from the crowd; the pursuit of the American dream often means separating oneself from one's class of birth and implies a work ethic that denies us a meaningful connection to other humans. Written in 1916, the poem falls in the middle of the four years of World War I, a significant touchstone for modernist poetry in terms of the breakdown of society and social fragmentation. Ultimately, the subject matter of "The Road Not Taken" is modernist because of its contempt for the pre-Modern American faith in the linear development and accomplishments of solitary individuals and its subtle expression of the alienation and loneliness characteristic of modern life.

Works Cited

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- Poirier, Richard. *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.