# Line by line analysis of “THE ROAD NOT TAKEN” (1916)

**If you were absent or get confused once you get home, this line by line / stanza by stanza analysis will help you with the other elements of the TP-CASTT strategy analysis of the poem. We discussed most of this in class, through group work and then all together.**

# P – Paraphrase: Restate the main ideas of the poem in your own words. (This is a classic poem and not in student friendly language. They can think of themselves as interpreters of putting this old “foreign” language into modern day language/ideas.)

# Overview - Summary

Our speaker has come to a fork in a path in the woods. It's fall, and the leaves are turning colors (“yellow wood”). He considers both paths. He's unsure which way to go, and wishes he could go both ways. He looks down one path as far as he can see, but then he decides to take the other. He thinks the path he decides to take is not quite as worn as the other one, but really, the paths are about the same, and the fallen leaves on both look pretty fresh. After choosing one of the roads, the narrator tells himself that he will come back to this fork one day in order to try the other road. However, he realizes that it is unlikely that he will ever have the opportunity to come back to this specific point in time because his choice of path will simply lead to other forks in the road (and other decisions). Instead, far off in the future, he'll be talking about how his decision was final and life changing. The narrator ends with a reflection, wondering how different things would have been had he chosen the other path.



Time to get out the microscope, because we’re going through this poem line-by-line.

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**Line by Line / Stanza by Stanza Analysis**

Stanza 1 Summary

## Line 1

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

* Our speaker is describing a fork in the road. This poem was first published in 1916, when cars were only just beginning to become prominent, so these roads in the wood are probably more like paths, not roads like we'd think of them today.
* The woods are yellow, which means that it's probably fall and the leaves are turning colors.
* "Diverged" is just another word for split. There's a fork in the road.

## Lines 2-3

And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood

* 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. Because he's standing, we know that he's on foot, and not in a carriage or a car.

## Lines 4-5

And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

* 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?

# Stanza 2 Summary

## Line 6

*Then took the other, as just as fair,*

* 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.

## Lines 7-8

*And having perhaps the better claim,*  
*Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*

* 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."

## Lines 9-10

*Though as for that the passing there*  
*Had worn them really about the same,*

* 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.

# Stanza 3 Summary

## Lines 11-12

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

* 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.
* Wait, we thought 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.

## Line 13

*Oh, I kept the first for another day!*

* The speaker seems like he's already regretting his decision. He is rationalizing 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.

## Lines 14-15

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

* The speaker realizes 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.
* It's like deciding which college to go to – "I can always transfer" a high school senior might think. But then, once the decision is made and freshman year has passed, the reality hits that switching schools is a lot more complicated than it seems, and it's hard to start completely over somewhere else.

# Stanza 4 Summary

## Lines 16-17

*I shall be telling this with a sigh*  
*Somewhere ages and ages hence:*

* 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.

## Line 18

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*

* 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.

## Line 19

*I took the one less traveled by,*

* 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.
* Before you start getting mad at our speaker for stretching the truth, remember that he's 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.

## Line 20

*And that has made all the difference.*

* 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.