

Indecisiveness in “*The Road Not Taken*” by Robert Frost: An Expressive Critical Analysis

Kurt S. Candilas

Faculty, Arts and Sciences Program, Lourdes College,
Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines
mrkurtz21@gmail.com

**Asia Pacific Journal of
Education, Arts and Sciences**
Vol. 4 No.4, 82-85
October 2017
P-ISSN 2362-8022
E-ISSN 2362-8030
www.apjeas.apjmr.com

Date Received: August 8, 2017; Date Revised: October 19, 2017

Abstract – *This expressive critical study is an effort to bring in light new interpretation of Robert Frost poem “The Road Not Taken” as a reflection of his indecisiveness in life. Specifically, it aims at examining Frost’s inner being, emphasizing his own self and experiences in the poem or text. The study employs the qualitative research design which made use of discourse analysis using the critical theory of expressivism as the main guide. In acquiring the data of the study, the art of historiography is used such as autobiographical and/or biographical notes, sources documents, and web information. Specifically, life histories and biographical methods served as the basis of the analysis. In executing the methods involved in this study, it is observed that the poem shows a naturalist implicatures, expressing Frost’s strong feelings and emotions being devoid of free will and a narrow bit of confusions and ambiguities with his indecisions in life.*

Keywords – *The Road Not Taken, expressivism, indecisiveness, naturalist implicatures*

INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost, a philosophical American poet, is a well-known classicist of a very high order in the twentieth century. He is considered as one of the most prominent poets of the period as he typifies in his poems the autobiographical depictions of lost dreams of rural innocence, death, questions about life, political and social problems of his age, and man’s purpose in the world.

Frost’s, being subjective in its peculiar way of writing, unveils his life’s experiences in his poems thereby emphasizing his presence which ultimately adds metaphysical color to compose his poetry a bit abysmal in search of meaning. This ambiguity, thus, makes Frost’s works enigmatic which is far beyond in an ordinary works of literature.

Ideally, a critic speaking of Frost says: “*Frost’s poems are very popular for their simplicity and*

straightforwardness in meaning. In spite of this simplicity on surface level, it contains connotative meanings that a reader can interpret in many ways,” (Reddy 1). Even so, his poems are remarkable for its multifaceted metaphorical meanings and aphorisms. Hence, among these poems of Frost that are considered multidimensional in its meaning is the poem *The Road not Taken*.

To Frost critics, *The Road not Taken* antedates Frost’s comradeship with Edward Thomas in 1913 inspired by his indecisions about which route to take, (Pavani, 2; Suarez, 3; Glenn, 4).

Furthermore, Batool, Khan, Iqbal, Ali and Rafiq (5), Pramono (6), Su (7), Hidayberenov (8), Bjelland (9), and Warren (10) orchestrate that *The Road not Taken* is accounted for several themes such as (a) individualism; (b) caution; (c) commitment; (d) accepting a challenge; (e) dreams, hopes, and plans in life; (f) man and the natural world; (g) exploration; (h) ambiguity and the like, except in one by Judkins (11) and Basset (12) who espouse that Frost himself argues indecisiveness between two roads that are less and more traveled. Hence, this contention suggests that the poem should merit further analysis using the lens in historicism.

In light of the fact that there have been considerable analyses of the above mentioned poem, there have been only few analyses that center the poem subjective to the poet’s indecisiveness. This brought the pivotal reason why the study is theorized.

FRAMEWORK

This paper theorizes that Robert Frost’s “*The Road Not Taken,*” shows a naturalist signification of himself expressing his indecisiveness of life.

This critical proposition is supported by the theory of expressivism, which Classical theorist Plato asserts in the idea of the poem or the text itself as an expression of the poet’s inner being, emphasizing the sole presence of the writer in the poem or text, Adams (13). Expressivism considers text vis-à-vis the author’s voice

as means of stressing the presence of the writer in the text. This author-work relationship considers the creative process, therefore, delving deeper the psychology of the author emerging as a subject of the study, creative spontaneity, preference for feeling over rationality, and the inquiry into the merger between the nature of textuality and the nature of its writer.

Further, this approach seeks to understand a literary work concerning a poetic signifier investigating a context that essentially includes the poet's historical implicatures. Hence, the key goal of expressivism is to embrace the idea that the text and author are inseparable, and that biographical data should augment the meaning of the text.

Hence, expressivism sees a poem's textuality as a reflection of the writer's life and times on the character's life and ties in the work. The interpretative textual processing in expressivism emphasizes subjective criticism. This means that expressivism focuses on the author's race, moment, milieu, religion, family education, political, and the like.

In addition, this kind of theory can also be gleaned upon in a literary historicist lens as this is considered as a form of historical understanding.

Most scholars promote historical and biographical analysis in identifying and interpreting the meaning of the poem. According to Cerda (cited in Baldonado et. al 14) literary critical historicism carries the past into the present, thus, in order to make sense of the text, readers must look into the author's history to draw conclusion on what compelled the author from writing the text.

Tyson (15) further declared that "the literary text and the historical situation from which it emerged are equally important because text (the literary work) and context (the historical conditions that produced it) are mutually constitutive: they create each other."

Thus, the analysis of the milieu when Robert Frost wrote the poem is of great value to enrich the researcher's quest on the signification of the poem.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper, primarily, aims at examining Frost's inner being, emphasizing his own self and experiences in the poem or text -- "*The Road not Taken*".

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, expressive critical analysis and/or literary historicism analysis of the poem "*The Road Not Taken*" of Robert Frost was used to critically examine the poem or text touching on the life of the poet relevant to the evaluation of the work of art. Specifically, life

histories and biographical methods served as the basis of the analysis.

Since this study is qualitative research which made use of discourse analysis, the art of historiography was used in acquiring the data from autobiographical and/or biographical notes, sources documents and information from the web.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The poem "*The Road Not Taken*" by Robert Frost was written in early 1916. In this poem, Frost himself reflects on the many choices and decisions he made in life, thus, introspecting how unlikely his life be if he would have made other decisions. The naturalist voice of the textual "I" in the first quatrain rants an expository narrative to start a brief plot sequence in this narrative poem addressing the reader the sole message of indecision that goes along with Frost's age from the moment that he wrote it:

1 *Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,*
 2 *And sorry I could not travel both*
 3 *And be one traveler, long I stood*
 4 *And looked down one as far as I could*

The poem opens with the words "*two roads*" which symbolized Frost's first indecision in life. Frost's personal life is deeply filled with angst. At a very young age, he lost his parents. So, he decided that he will take the role of being a parent to his younger sister, Jeanie. However, Frost was frightened that he cannot objectify his role; though as if this were any less, Frost admitted Jeanie to mental hospital. Unfortunately, after nine years, she died. Frost regretted this for his lifetime. Hence, this started all the indecisions that he has gone through in his life.

Frost, being the poet and the persona himself in the poem, continues to introspect with his life along with his indecisive thinking which slowly unfolds *the rising action* that Frost's may be able to regret some of his choices in life:

5 *To where it bent in the undergrowth;*
 6 *Then took the other, as just as fair,*
 7 *And having perhaps the better claim,*
 8 *Because it was grassy and wanted wear;*

Accordingly, Frost's education turned to be on and off until such time that he does not obtain a degree. Despite the lack of degree, Frost still managed to work in sustaining the needs of his family. Here, we can see Frost drifted into an oozing choices in life as he was once venturing into being a teacher, farmer, cobbler, and editor of a newspaper to mention a few. With all

these jobs, he was still confronted in a point where decisions bifurcated into two, thus, letting go and welcoming of something as a byproduct of his decisions. Then again, Frost can't help but to really make a decision despite the dilemma of being unable to think critically.

More so, the same choice in life that he also felt regretful was when he was confronted into a decision-making as to where he would be living. He has been transferring vice-versa from England to America. Figuratively speaking, Frost uses metaphor as a representation of his life in both countries. He compared these countries into roads which primarily determine his fate of living. Though he is transferring from one country to another, his fate is still the same. To him, he has been such a constant failure of his life and career as encountering the same and several problems is likely to be its cycle:

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

Moreover, the gloomy indecisiveness of Frost tries to escape the odd realities of the earth accommodating itself with imaginary thoughts about the human tendency to look back and attribute blame to minor or even major events in one's life, or to attribute more meaning to things than they may deserve which can be reflected in line 11, 12, and 13 – the climax:

11 *And both that morning equally lay*
12 *In leaves no step had trodden black.*
13 *Oh, I kept the first for another day!*

Frost, as he has been into a lot of struggles in life, has always been reflective to his past and remains optimistic with what future would be like despite being unsettled and being able to see his pattern in life. In fact, the careers whom he is able to gamble upon were all no way successful. His numerous attempts to establish his name in his chosen career from the past did not reify not until he ventures into writing poems. Notably, Frost's career in poetry flowers at the later part of his life which then made him as one of the most celebrated and critically respected American poets of the modern era.

The poem's lines 14 and 15 from the third quatrain show the *falling action* describing further Frost's indecisiveness:

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

Here, Frost is inconclusive as his works reflect the receptiveness of the American publishers. His lack of success in the American poetry world in 1912 made him skeptical to write more as he was a constant failure in his life. This is why he was likely to be indecisive in undertaking a dramatic change in his form and/or style of writing as he was a kind of poet that is naturalistic, realistic and rationalistic in his literary movements.

The last stanza of the poem clearly shows the continuum of the falling action toward the *resolution*, as Frost admittedly reconciles with his indecisiveness thinking that there is no detriment to seize a powerful surge of creativity in writing. Although brooding of different literary movements in the modern period among the American poets have been onrushing, Frost still chose the one that is unique with a subtle taste of his wit of the language with his autobiographical depiction of himself in his poem's textuality:

16 *I shall be telling this with a sigh*
17 *Somewhere ages and ages hence:*
18 *Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*
19 *I took the one less traveled by,*
20 *And that has made all the difference*

Thus, to Frost, this type of writing does not make any difference at all. In fact, at the later years of his life, he was not only successful but was able to join in the arena of American poetry circles thereby he received several awards like that of a Pulitzer Prize award for poetry, Bollingen Prize, United State Poet Laureate, and the like.

CONCLUSION

This poetic narrativism reveals how Frost himself could rise above on his indecisive choices of life. Essentially, the narrator describes the poem using the first person point of view "I" which helps the readers know the interpretative textual processing in expressivism by delving into the poet's race, moment, and milieu. Hence, "The Road Not Taken" is a narrative poem showing a naturalist implicatures in which Frost predominantly expresses his strong feelings and an emotion being devoid by free will, yet soul is determined with the presence of environment portraying a narrow bit of confusions and ambiguities with his indecisions. Thus, Robert Frost's "*The Road Not Taken*," shows a naturalist signification of himself expressing his indecisiveness of life. Future studies may look into the other signification of the poem using other literary theory.

REFERENCES

- [1] Reddy, S. V. (2014) *Portrayal of realism and rationalism in the selected poems of Robert Frost*. International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies. 2(2), 111-119 Retrieved from <http://www.eltjournal.org>
- [2] Pavani, A. (2015). *"Impact of decision making in Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken'"*. Veda's journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL 2.3
- [3] Suarez, M. and Andrade, H. () *"Nature and philosophy of Robert Frost's poetry."* Retrieved from <<https://goo.gl/S8Ap47>> June 24, 2017
- [4] Glenn, J. (2001) Robert Frost's *"The Road Not Taken": Childhood, psychoanalytic symbolism, and creativity*. The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, Volume 56, - Issue 1
- [5] Batool, S., Khan, A., Iqbal, A., Ali, K., Rafiq, R., (2014). *Stylistic analysis of Robert Frost's poem: "The Road Not Taken"*. Journal of ELT and Applied Linguistics (JELTAL) Volume 2, Issue—4, December
- [6] Pramono, E. (2013) *Self-reliance: The essence of making difference in Robert Frost's The Road Not Taken*. International Journal of English and Literature, Vol. 4(2)
- [7] Su, Y. (2016) *Dark Energy in Robert Frost's Poems*. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, Vol. 6, No. 7
- [8] Hudayberenov, M. (2016) *Uncertainty and significance of choice in "The Road Not Taken"*. Retrieved from <<https://goo.gl/kM5nsn>> July 26, 2017
- [9] Bjelland, A. (2016). *"The Road Not Taken": Poetry and personal insight in the EFL classroom and beyond*. University of Agder, 2016
- [10] Warren, R. P. (1947). *"The themes of Robert Frost"*. Michigan Allumnus Quarterly Review 54 (10): 1-10. JSTOR.
- [11] Judkins, L. (2014). *Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken": Regret in the human psyche: A Critical Essay*. Middle Tennessee State University; Scientia et Humanitas: A Journal of Student Research
- [12] Basset, P. (1981). *"Frost's The Road Not Taken."* Explicator 39, no.3
- [13] Adams, H. (1971). *Critical theory since Plato*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishing
- [14] Cerda, R. D. (2013) *Critical approaches in studying literature*. Great Books Publishing. West Avenue; Quezon City
- [15] Tyson, L. (2015). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide: Third Edition*. Third Avenue, New York, New York, Routledge Publishing