Self-reliance: The essence of making difference in Robert Frost’s *The Road Not Taken*

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Life is a choice, and determining what to choose shows self-reliance, the dignity of the doer as well as the essence of human right in running life. The character of the poem, “The Traveller” was encountering two choices of which he had to choose one to take for his continuing journey. The shape of the diverging roads could perhaps be in any forms; however, a Y shape took the reference since it had traditional root of binary meanings. Somehow, what the traveller was dealing with was not purely binary opposition but two identical roads. Here lies the inner conflict of the traveller in that he had to, consequently, rely on himself. He must believe in himself for a strong self-reliance. Hence, both self-confidence and self-reliance became the key in this matter. This resulted in a decision that showed the essence of the traveller making difference. This analysis applied phenomenological aesthetics of Roman Ingarden to break down Frost’s literary work. Through a detailed explication based on five interwoven layers, the poem did not only show its beauty and harmony, but it also conveyed philosophical meaning, which is self-reliance, the essence of making difference.

Key words: Confidence, self-reliance, choices, making difference.

INTRODUCTION

Life is a choice, and determining what to choose shows self-reliance, the dignity of the doer as well as the essence of human right in running life. The character in a famous poem entitled, ‘The Road Not Taken’, composed by Robert Frost depicts such a situation. A traveller in the poem is facing two roads of which he must take one, and not the other or both. He cannot ask other people; he has to rely on himself in deciding and carrying out his decision.

A story of one encountering difficult choices can be found in many other great literary works. In Sophocles’s *Antigonê*, the main character, Antigonê has to deal with two hard choices and she has to take one: her conscience or her king. In *The Scarlet Letter*, the main character also faces two options of whether to reveal the name of the man with whom she committed adultery for the sake of her freedom from the Puritan’s punishment or keep it a secret with a consequence of leading a suffering life in her mocking society. In *Romeo and Juliet*, a Shakespeare’s play, Romeo and Juliet deal with the same situation, giving in or struggling for their love. The same goes to Lasiyah in Tohari’s *Bekisar Merah* on whether to surrender to her conditions as she is taught “nrimo ing pandum; urip mung sakdermo nglampahi”, accept whatever is granted, life is just to live on, or to fight for her dignity. Hard choices also occur to Jake, the main character of a great motion picture, *Avatar*. He has to choose to either defend the traditional tribe he is entering or stay with his own race.

All the main characters in those works of literature finally make a decisive choice, a choice risking even their life; and that makes them different, people of high dignity because they are aware of their self-existence and have strong self-reliance.

The idea of diving deeper into the inner struggle of people who encounter choices before coming up with a solution and reaching dignity by determining the option to take based on self-reliance is both interesting and challenging. This paper discusses Frost’s poem *The Road Not Taken* as a mental evidence for such a course.
Problems statement

‘Self-reliance: the essence of making difference’ is the title of this work because uniqueness is an inherent feature of humans without neglecting the fact that commonness is also a part of life. Most people live in a common sharing way, but certain people of their level choose to live differently from other common people. Being different is believed to be the core for any progress in life; also, this is what makes them great or greater than others. The same thing happens to the character ‘I’ in the poem The Road Not Taken. Hence, there appears some questions or problems, leading to the discussion of the poem. One of the problems arising from the poem is: what type of road is to be chosen? A further curiosity emerges concerning the intention of choosing a particular one and not the other; there must be some reasons or causes backing up the will of the character in the poem in finally making a decision. Hence what are the backgrounds of the traveller in choosing the path becomes another problem. These two problematic situations are the core of the discussion. Roman Ingarden’s phenomenological approach is used to discuss these two problems for the sake of seeing the complete unity of the poetry elements or poetry anatomy as the essential background of the meaning, as suggested by the title conveyed by the poem.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Various ways or methods can be utilized to dig up or explicate poetry to understand either the meaning or the message contained within it. One of those many theories in literature intended to reveal what is within The Road Not Taken is a theory offered by Roman Ingarden named phenomenological aesthetics. Ingarden believes that a work is counted as a literary work when it has essential features, what parts it must have and how they are interrelated, and how such entities as literary works relate to other sorts of entities such as authors, copies of texts, readers and ideal meanings (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ingarden/).

Roman Ingarden calls a work of art a schematic formation that has certain places of indeterminacy, many of which are filled in by individual interpretations upon the work. Such indeterminacies are generally partially filled in by the reader in reconstructing the work, as the reader’s background assumptions help flesh out the skeletal imaginary scene directly presented by the words of the text. The action of any reader attempting to fill in the indeterminacies to make the work, according to Ingarden, ‘concrete’, is thus named concretizations or aesthetic judgment. Since individuals are different from one another; thus concretizations of each work of art may vary from viewer to viewer, and Ingarden firmly denies that there is any better or worse in aesthetic judgment, each being a mere report of the pleasure experienced by the one judging (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ingarden/). Within this empty space or places of indeterminacy, this paper appears.

Phenomenology is regarded as a philosophical concept which places readers or perceivers as the central role in revealing the essential ideas of a literary work; thus the readers determine the meaning of the work (Selden, 1986). In this philosophy, consciousness plays a central role; a consciousness towards things showing up. According to Selden (1986), phenomenology claims to show the underlying nature both of human consciousness and of phenomena (in Greek, meaning ‘things appearing’). Consciousness is regarded as intentional, meaning that all states of consciousness must be understood as intending something or directed to an object (Newton, 1990). This is an attempt to revive the idea that the individual human mind is the centre and origin of all meaning. In literary theory this approach tries to enter into the world of the writer’s work and to arrive at an understanding of the underlying nature or essence of the writings as they appear to the critic’s consciousness.

‘The idea of literary competence focuses attention on the implicit knowledge that readers bring to their encounters with text’, says Culler (2000). In other words, meaning, according to Hans-Georg Gadamer (cited in Selden, 1986), depends on the historical situation of the interpreter; as also proposed by Riffaterre (cited in Culler, 1981) who treated meaning as a function of the perceptions and expectations of the readers. This indeed is in line with the idea of Fish (cited in Newton, 1990; Selden, 1986; Culler, 1981) that a reader must have a stock of experience, which he calls an informed reader, in either understanding, explicating or interpreting a literary work through interpretative strategies, in this case poetry; and this is what makes poem always interesting to peel for it provides abundance of possibilities of meaning depending on the interpreters’ level of literary capability. The education, the personality of every reader, the general cultural climate of a time, the religious or philosophical or purely technical preconceptions of every reader will add something instantaneous and extraneous to every reading of a poem (Wellek and Austin, 1977).

Furthermore, Poulet (in Newton, 1990) states that critical consciousness relies on the thinking of another; it finds its nourishment and its substance only therein... Each literary work implies an act of self-discovery.

Roman Ingarden views that a literary work is a “purely intentional formation,” derived from the sentence-forming activities of its author, and also depending for its existence and essence on a relation to certain ideal meanings attached to the words of the text. Most of the details of the text are dedicated to drawing out an “essential anatomy” of the literary work, determining its essential parts and their relations (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ingarden/). It is then the consciousness of the interpreter who struggles with the details and the anatomy of the work to defragment things that are fragmented. According to him, criticism should be concerned
with neither the literary work as object nor the reader as subject but with the fact that the work has no existence other than as an object presented to consciousness (in Newton, 1990).

Any parts of a work are integrated and interlocked to arrive at certain judgment upon the work's quality in literature. According to Ingarden, every literary work as a mode of existence comprises five heterogeneous strata or layers that must be completed by a reader since it is neither a pure object nor a pure subject. Some say that the last stratum, metaphysical qualities, is not considered a stratum, meaning that the fifth can be joined to the fourth or the fifth may be absent from a literary work:

1. Word sounds and phonetic formations of higher order: including the typical rhythms and melodies associated with phrases, sentences and paragraphs of various kinds
2. Meaning units: formed by conjoining the sounds employed in a language with ideal concepts; these also range from the individual meanings of words to the higher-order meanings of phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc.
3. Represented entities: the objects, events, states of affairs, etc. represented in the literary work and forming its characters, plot, etc.
4. Schematized aspects: these are the visual, auditory, or other aspects via which the characters and places represented in the work may be quasi-sensorially apprehended; aspect of reality which cannot be completely but only schematically depicted in a literary text. Wellek and Austin (1977) calls this stratum as the stratum of 'world', which is not necessarily stated but is implied.
5. Metaphysical qualities: things reached through a deep contemplation upon the interwoven meanings of the work. Wellek and Austin (1977) refers this layer to the philosophical meaning of works of art.

Each of these strata has room for its own typical sorts of aesthetic values. The values of the first stratum cover up the rhythm, alliteration, or mellifluousness at the level of word sounds, while the second stratum proposes the values of interesting or jarring juxtapositions of ideas and concepts at the level of meaning units. The third layer presents the quasi-visual splendor of the scene presented, the world of the author, the characters, and the settings. The fourth one offers the values of sympathetic or complex characters and intricate plots; the inner or outer characteristic traits of a character. The last one gives the sublime, the tragic, the terrible, and the holy qualities of the work. This stratum is not, according to Wellek and Austin (1997), indispensable and may be missing in some works of literature.

The values of a literary work, however, are not exhausted by the separate values of its several strata, for the strata do not exist separately but rather form an organic unity. Among the strata are various forms of mutual dependence and influence, and the harmonies or disharmonies among the strata may contribute other aesthetic merits or demerits to the work. Most importantly, in cooperation with the other strata, the stratum of represented objects may present metaphysical qualities such as the tragic, the dreadful, and the peaceful and so on, which characterize true works of art. The work of literature as a whole, thus, is a polyphonic harmony, much like a piece of polyphonic music in which each singer's voice may lend aesthetic qualities of its own to the value of the whole, while the greatest values of the work as a whole may lie in the intricate interrelations among the values of all of the individual elements.

**ANALYSIS**

Here is the poem: The Road Not Taken:

Two roads diverged in a yellow woods,
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.
And took the other, as just fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that passing there,
Had worn really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the one 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 woods, and I–
I took the less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

**THE FIVE LAYERS**

**Sound stratum**

Sound devices are resources used by poets to convey and reinforce the meaning or experience of poetry through the skillful use of sound. Poets are trying to use a concentrated blend of sound and imagery to create an emotional response. The words and the order evoke images, and, of course, the words have sounds, which can reinforce or otherwise clarify those images. Thus, it can be said that the poet is trying to get the reader to sense a particular thing through sound as the medium.

**Sounds**

This poem holds a lot of heavy voiced sounds offering a
hard burden atmosphere. The use of past tense, though grammatically it merely shows a history, an ended story, accentuates the heavy situation.

Two roads diverged in a yellow woods,  
And sorry I could not travel both

Let us see these first two lines. The voiced stop consonants garnished with a voiced friction consonant open a gloomy atmosphere, an atmosphere of confusion. Poetry is not only a subject of writing but also a subject of reading. A poem is supposed to be read, whether out loud or by heart, and thus reading deals with utterance that cannot be separated from tone, pause, and rhythmical tune. Sound and tune encompass important roles in giving beauty to a poem. The repeated consonant sounds in roads, diverged, woods, in the first line do not stop but are even continued by a similar sound in line two could, and two other voiceless sounds not and both. These words with such sounds when read repeatedly create a heavy atmosphere, seeming to propose sighs. As a result, the other sounds get a situational influence in that the reading of them may comprise a heavy ambiance.

And be one traveler, long I stood,  
And looked down one as far as I could,  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

The 3 lines show five impart parallel circumstances as initiated by the previous lines. The combination of sounds /u/ and /d/ in the words stood, could, looked, accompanied by the sounds /gl/ /au/ and /d/ in the words undergrowth strengthens the heavy sense coming out of the poem.

The last stanza is dominated with hissing friction sounds either /s/ or /∫/. These sounds as in the words shall, this, sigh, somewhere, ages, ages, hence, roads, woods, less, has, and finally difference exists in all of the lines of the stanza. This brings a fading atmosphere, something coming to an end, a period, a steady point of manner. With such a beginning, the first stanza, of reading the poem, and a closing, the last stanza, the poem offers a process of an inner conflict bearing a heavily burdened doubt coming into a light denouement. This is a reversal of the meter of the poem presented on almost all lines, except the last line, that is started with unstressed syllables but ended with stressed syllables, as discussed in the following part. Nevertheless, the last line is closed with an unstressed syllable ‘rence’ of the word ‘difference’.

Furthermore, this poem presents consistent end rhymes, giving abab cdcd cd efef ghghh. Such rhymes are called exact or perfect rhymes, that is, the rhyming words share corresponding sounds and stresses and a similar number of syllables (DiYanni, 1990). This creates more harmony of the poem for the reader to read, besides adding the atmosphere of behavior consistency in the lines with the mood of the poem content.

Alliteration, consonance, assonance

In analyzing words sounds, the first layer of the five, there exists some other different kinds of similar sounds named assonance, alliteration, and consonance. Alliteration, also called head rhyme or initial rhyme, is a repetition of initial consonant sounds of stressed syllables in neighboring words or at short intervals within a line. Assonance is a repetition of vowel sounds with different consonants forming the words, while consonance is a pleasing combination of sounds in agreement with tone; it is also the repetition of the same end consonants of words such as boat and night within or at the end of a line.

The consonant sequence sounds /ds/ in roads resonate with those in woods, and this, then supported by similar sound /d/ in line two and three for the words could, stood, accentuates an atmosphere of thinking, a harmonious heavy tune that is summed up with the words looked down and could. In the second stanza, line two gives consonance ha in the words having and perhaps, in that it must not be a coincidence that both sounds are the stressed syllables. Line three also has end sounds similarity, called consonance, in consonant with heavy hissing sound s in the words because, was, and ended with a light hissing sound s in grassy. An alliteration of the repetitive initial sound w occurs in line three for the words wanted and wear. The alliterative heavy sound /b/ through letters th in the words Though, that, there in line four gives further sense of enormity.

Assonance is seen in this poem. The first line of the first stanza is opened and closed by the repetitive vowel sound /u/ in the words two and woods. The second line supports this assonance through the word could and a slant assonance in the word both since the latter, though is regarded to have a diphthong /au/ rather than a single /u/, has a dominating sound /u/. The third line offers similar assonance through the words looked could, which strengthen both the aural and tactile atmospheres. The assonance of intertwining sounds of /e/ and /ə/, preceded by vowel sound /u/ in the word To as the supporter of the previous /u/ in line 4, in the words where it bent in gives a sense of smooth rhythmical tune. Then it might give an image of flowing roads stretching to somewhere deep.

Meter

Meter often plays an important role in English poetry related to aural sense of the readers. In English literature, especially poetry, meter refers to the accented/unaccented or stressed/unstressed syllables in a word. This relates to the auditory reception of the reader in that
it is supposed to give a more touching image upon the poem. The unit of meter is the foot or stressed syllable. Metrical lines are named for the constituent foot and for the number of feet in the line: monometer (1 stressed syllable), dimeter (2 stressed syllables), trimeter (3 stressed syllables), tetrameter (4 stressed syllables), pentameter (5 stressed syllables), hexameter (6 stressed syllables), heptameter (7 stressed syllables) and octameter (8 stressed syllables); meanwhile, the arrangement of placing the unstressed and stressed syllables has other names such as iamb (unstressed-stressed), trochee (stressed-unstressed), anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed), dactyl (stressed-unstressed-unstressed), spondee (stressed-stressed), and amphibrach (unstressed-stressed-unstressed). Thus, a line containing five iambic feet, for example, would be called iambic pentameter. This means that there are five stressed syllables in one line, and the stresses occur on the second syllables of one pair (iamb). Rarely does a metrical line exceed six feet.

O’Connor (1968; in Dale and Lillian, 2005) says that words of one syllable are generally not stressed if they are purely grammatical words such as pronouns (I, me, you, he, she, etc.), prepositional (to, for, at, from, by, etc., articles (the, a, an, some). Other words are stressed, for example, full verb (eat, love, take, try, etc.), nouns (head, chair, book, pen, etc.), adjectives (good, blue, long, cold, etc.), adverbs (well, just, quite, no) and the like. Nevertheless, he also mentions that for certain purposes, unstressed words consisting of only one syllable can be stressed and vice versa. Furthermore, Jahn also wrote:

As a general rule, any word in a sentence (including ‘function’ words like articles and prepositions such as the, in, to, etc.) can receive maximum stress e.g. This is the man — This is the man — This is the man (P1.6).

In the following poem, a low-case ‘0’ is used to represent unstressed syllables (zero stressed syllable) and ‘1’ to represent stressed syllables (Bonheim in Jahn, 2002). Most of the poem is composed in either iamb or anapest, the most used metrical line in English poetry. Even though The Road Not Taken is not presented in heroic couple, the very famous meter used for blank verse poetry. This poem still shows its beauty through the use of rhythmical meter with two iambics followed by an anapest and ended with an iamb as can be seen in the first stanza.

Two roads diverged in a yellow woods,
0 1 0 1 0 0 1 0 1
And sorry I could not travel both,
0 1 0 1 0 0 1 0 1
And be one traveler, long I stood,
0 1 0 1 0 0 1 0 1
And looked down one as far as I could,

This stanza is carefully composed in a consistently combined meter: iambic dimeter followed by an anapest and ended with an iamb. All the lines are begun with unstressed syllables and ended with stressed syllables, and this seems to show an allegory of dealing with something from light to heavy. Furthermore, the consistently rhythmical tune accentuates the beauty of the poem. There is a melody in the poem. Except in line two in which “I” is stressed meaning that there is a certain feeling of what cannot be done, the word “I” here is treated as not having a stress. This connotes the position of “I” as insignificant yet. In the beginning, the traveler is not yet convinced of what he must take. This is significantly different from the word “I” in the last stanza in which the word is stressed.

Meaning units

This layer deals with the meaning of the poem seen from the visual presentation covering up the words, phrases, clauses, and sentences along with typographical structure of the work. Every single word, according to Wellek, will have its meaning, will combine into units in the context, into syntagmas and sentence patterns (1977). The first stanza is in fact only a sentence with some subordinating clauses. To understand this stanza, the lines shall be paraphrased into some independent clauses or sentences so that it will be clearer to peel both the situation and the meaning. The sentences run as follows:

Two roads diverged in a yellow woods. As one traveler, I could not travel both. I am really sorry for that. I stood for quite a long time looking one of them down as far as I could. At the point my eyes could see, this road bent in the undergrowth.

The stanza that is now a paragraph gives a clearer situation. It can be imagined that someone, a traveler or the speaker of the poem, was encountering diverging roads of which he was examining one of the two. He felt very sorry for not being able to take both roads. Of course, he is just one person with one body that cannot be split into two. In fact, the diverging roads can be in any form for the traveler does not give a detail description. However, it is imagined that the roads before the speaker make a form of a letter ‘Y’ which Pythagoras called the emblem of human life; the foot being the innocence of the infant and the dividing arms- the choice of the ways of good and evil in adults’ life; ...... virtue and vice. Y refers to dividing ways, crossroads presided over by gods such as Ganesha and Janus. In Christianity, it appears on
vestments as the cross, and is also known as the Thieves of Clavary's cross. (Cooper, 1993). Instead of giving two different roads, as many people believe in differing vice and virtue, the poem presents two identical roads as seen in the second stanza. Thus, this must be something more than just about simple vice and virtue, black and white. This offers grey things. Therefore, it is not surprising that the speaker was in serious cerebration. This is not something trivial.

He could see that one road did not line straightly, but it bent somewhere in the undergrowth. The speaker was full of consideration as what most people usually do when encountering hard options. The atmosphere offered a moment of thought.

Dealing with choices is often a process of intensive inner struggle for some people, and here lies the essence of life. Everything can be a stake for coming to the final end, the decision. Thus, the process essentially matters, without of course ignoring the result. In such a situation one may experience a cognitive dissonance, a term and a theory proposed by Leon Festinger, in which there emerges a conflict in the belief toward something being dealt with, example choices. One will try hard to reduce the dissonance or discomfort he/she is encountering during the process of making decision. Alteration may be one of the ways to get it done so that comfort is achieved and the result is in accord with the expectation (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_dissonance). Therefore, it is well understood that the character “I” or the speaker in the poem takes a quite long time to delve the alternatives encountered.

In line three, the clause “long I stood” emphasizes this process of intensive inner struggle experienced by the speaker. Furthermore, the clause does not only mean that he was standing there still for quite sometime. The clause “long I stood” can also be considered a period of life to experience. Thus, it can mean hours, days, weeks, or so for him, the speaker, to think before he decided to make a decision. To make a right decision he could only count on himself.

Line four, “And looked down one as far as I could”, is not only understood as previously paraphrased in the earlier page, but is also taken as cerebration. The speaker was examining the road; hence he must have many things in his mind to peel one by one. The phrase, “as far as I could”, emphasizes the atmosphere of his cerebration. Not only does this phrase show the effort of the speaker in trying to reach the last point of the road with his eyes, but this may also show that the cogitation was conducted deeply and seriously.

The second stanza goes on with the situation of comparing the two roads. The other road examined is considered better than the first, as line two says: “And having perhaps the better claim”, although the difference seems not significant. Somehow the speaker then took the second road, as line one says “And took the other” because it was grassy and wanted wear. Freewill is a gift from nature to human beings, and this is what makes human different from animals. With this freewill, human beings may have choices, choose one among others, and even alter the chosen option when feeling uncertain or then wrong with the choice already taken. Kierkegaard believes that someone's personality is reflected through choices and the ones then chosen. It means that the chosen will represent what kind of personality and even belief that someone has (http://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/history/At_the_Crossroads_of_Existence.pdf).

Hence, the cerebration process within the heart of the speaker of the poem implicitly shows his inner belief until he comes to making a decision. A decision based on his freewill, a decision on delving his cognitive dissonance.

It may be infer that the speaker's cogitation has come to a decision that he then chose the road to walk on because for him it looked better or gave more pleasure. This is the nature of choice, of decision, of how to go in one direction rather than another and how to feel about the direction someone takes and does not take.

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

These two lines can be paraphrased, indeed with different words, as follows: though as I was passing the road there, it had worn really about the same as the other road. Therefore, these last two lines prove different from what he was expecting. As shown in the first stanza, he thought that the road he was taking had a better claim, but he then found out that, after walking on the road for quite sometime, the road was about the same in quality as the other not taken. Life does not always give what is expected.

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

The first two lines of the third stanza emphasize initially similar quality of the two roads. These lines can be paraphrased as: and that morning both roads equally lay, in leaves no step had trodden black. This gives an impression that the travel was not yet far enough. He still could see the other road, and thus he could make a comparison on both. They were really similar roads (equally lay). Leaves covered the two roads in that any pace would leave no trace. He was moreover covered with doubt of whether his choice was right or not. Similarly offered him a feeling of uncertainty in carrying out his decision. Such a feeling is shown through the third line,

Oh, I kept the one for another day!

Here lies the doubt of the speaker. He did not avoid thinking of stopping the journey somewhere and returned to the beginning and took another road. As implied
through the first line of this third stanza, he just made a one-day journey and there was still, as he was thinking, a chance for him to make a change. Again, an inner conflict arises of questioning the decision already made. In fact, such a feeling is common among people in that some may feel foolish of choosing one and not the other; and also in that some may feel more foolish of returning and choosing the other one and regret for changing decision. People are trapped by their own desires and perceptions. People with weak mentality and small heart will be drowned by this wave of confusion. What happens to Robert Frost’s friend, Thomas as written by Lawrence Thompson is an example.

Repeatedly Thomas would choose a route which might enable him to show his American friend a rare plant or a special vista; but it often happened that before the end of such a walk Thomas would regret the choice he had made and would sigh over what he might have shown Frost if they had taken a “better” direction. More than once, on such occasions, the New Englander had teased his Welsh-English friend for those wasted regrets. . . . (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ingarden/).

That is why choosing one of the two choices is in fact not a trivial matter, for this need strong self-reliance and confidence, though some people may not agree with it. Thus as for the speaker, choosing one rather than the other is not a matter of impulse, impossible to speak about any more clearly than to say that the road taken has “perhaps the better claim.” It is more than that. He had to believe in himself for he could only rely on himself.

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

The last two lines show a growing awareness and confidence on the speaker’s feeling in that he had to be responsible to what he had chosen. As time goes by, as the journey goes on, as various experiences come along, and as awareness rises, one must be convinced with the chosen path of life. There shall be no point of return. Here the fourth line also shows that implicitly the road he was walking on must be different from the other one, and that he could not stop going. He was still on the way of walking down the road, still doing the journey as implied by the word “how” in line four. That is why the speaker thought that he would never return. He had to go on his journey as seen in the last line of this stanza:

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

The roads had been away behind, already passed by for ages, and the traveler was staying somewhere. Now, he felt that he had to tell his experience. There is a word “sigh” in line 1 that may bring some different interpretations. Based on Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, sigh as a noun means a slow noisy breath, and as a verb it means to breathe out slowly and noisly, expressing tiredness, sadness, pleasure, etc. From the previous stanzas and the rest of the lines, a positive atmosphere can be applied to this word “sigh”. He was tired as well as satisfied of what he had done previously. He was about to tell his story with a sense of relief:

Two roads diverged in a woods, and I—
I took the less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Now it is clear that the road he took was the one less traveled by. By saying the word “I”, as a subject, twice, with a dash between them, there must be something special behind the statement. There can be some different interpretations upon such a matter. On one hand, repeating a subject may refer to a feeling of doubt. On the other hand, such an action may connote an emphasis showing firmness in speech. In line with the theme of this discussion, the second meaning plays its role. Furthermore, it is also supported by the iambic meter of the third line. Similar to the first line of the poem, this line contains two iamb followed by an anapest and is ended with an iamb. Thus, it means that the word “I” gets a stress in an utterance. Let us see the figure of the meter:

Two roads diverged in a woods, and I—

The next line has a spondee in the beginning followed by an anapest and ended with an iamb as shown below:

I took the less traveled by,

Hence it is clear that the word “I”, which is stressed and repeated by the speaker, means an emphasis of confidence, self-reliance. Furthermore, the word “took” is also stressed, as it is spondee, to give a firm sense that the traveler felt convinced when taking the road. This then makes sense to say that there was really true cerebration before he made decision. This is then in line with the word “sigh” that has also a meaning of breathing slowly with pleasure, though a sense of tiredness is noted. This really makes sense when we see the reality in society. When one is encountering a hard problem and makes a big effort to settle it down, and then he successfully accomplishes the matter, a hard sound of relief is often uttered. This is a sigh.

The last line concludes all the process from the beginning to the end. He had strived to make a choice without any hand from other people, meaning that he relies on himself, and ran it consistently until he figured out that he took the one other people did not take. He was a rare person, an extraordinary person as shown by the line, “And that has made all the difference”. That has
represented entities

This third layer of Ingarden’s phenomenological aesthetics concerns with the objects, events, states of affairs is represented in the literary work and forming its characters, plot, etc. There can be found the traveler or “I” as the main character of the story. The objects refer to diverging roads, leaves, woods, grass. The events concern a situation in which someone with the feeling of doubt over two choices in the form of diverging roads, and a time ages after somewhere.

These entities make up a plot of a story along with the characteristics of the character or the traveler. A traveler was in coincidence encountering diverging roads in which he had to choose one of the roads to continue his journey. He cogitated for quite sometime and finally came to a decision. He took one of the roads that at the end the road was the one less traveled by. That made him different from other common people. The structure and configuration of the entities moreover construct a process of developing mentality: from the feeling of doubt, uncertain, into a confidence and relief; from green to ripeness, maturity. This process cannot be separated from the role of reliance.

Schematized aspects

This layer concerns the aspects of visual, auditory, or other aspects via which the characters and places represented in the literary work may be quasi-sensorially apprehended; aspect of reality which cannot be completely but only schematically depicted in a literary text. Pradopo (1997) calls this layer as a world seen from a certain point of view, and Wellek and Austin (1977) calls it world stratum.

The explication of the poem through the first three layers or strata presents a process of inner struggle from confusion of dealing with choices to a state of making decision and carrying out the decision. The process of cerebration that takes quite a long time reflects a situation in which the character (traveler) did not make it simple. This makes sense due to the fact that the two roads were in fact identical to certain extent. This implies a doubtful feeling, confusion, an inner conflict, even when he was carrying out his decision by walking down one of the roads he had chosen. The traveler was still overwhelmed by uncertainty and engaging a crisis of confidence so that a thought of returning to the beginning, the zero place, came across his mind.

In time, he recovered his confidence for there was nothing to trust except himself. Self-confidence as the basis of self-reliance becomes a crucial thing in the traveler’s inner conflict. He, as everyone may experience such a process when bringing about a hard matter, wrestled with and indeed relies on himself until he finally concluded that his choice was right. Therefore, despite his hesitation, the traveler is a strong person. He is an extraordinary person since only extraordinary people can go the way common people do not go.

Metaphysical quality

This last stratum implies a deep and contemplative search to reveal the highest level of meaning from the interwoven meanings of a literary work. Based on the discussion presented previously the poem The Road Not Taken conveys an awareness towards the importance of faith and confidence as the bases of self-reliance. The traveler believed in himself, he had faith in himself; thus he relies on himself. He proudly said at the end that he was a different person, an extraordinary one. Life is about choices, and life shall also be unique for it gives people a chance to be unique. There is no significantly special point in running life on most people’s track. To be different means to be special and extraordinary, and that means to be unique. Thus, life is then worth living; this is the essence of making a difference.

Conclusion

Ingarden’s phenomenological aesthetics as the framework for the analysis has revealed both the beauty and philosophy of Frost’s The Road Not Taken. The layers interact with one another darning the meaning. Each layer supports the intentional meaning as the consciousness of the reader perceives the poem.

The first layer, sound stratum, shows a process of developing mentality in reaching and strengthening the character’s self-reliance through the play of sounds from the first line to the end. The use of light and heavy sounds, the arrangement ofmetrical lines and repetition of certain sounds accentuates the atmosphere of the mental growth in which self-reliance plays a very central role. The road he was dealing with is not merely a matter of vice and virtue or black and white. It is life with its complexity. The identical road reflects that choices in life are sometimes often confusing. However, one must make a choice for it is an inescapable point in life. The process of choosing shows how self-reliance results in making difference. The matter thus lies on the belief of running the choice made.

The second layer, through the meaning unit breakdown, expands the first layer by running down the character’s inner conflict in more details, part by part. The situation, plot, and the world of the poem as shown in layer three and four interweave with the first layer
constructing a general image of someone wrestling with his inner conflict concerning life choices. The last layer reveals the essence of what the previous layers have already disclosed. Thus, all of these layers have constituted as well as completed a schematic structure.

It is clear that the traveler did not make a choice incidentally; it was not an impulse feeling. He chose it on purpose after conducting a long and serious cerebration upon two identical choices. There was no simple black and white, no obvious vice and virtue, and no simple ordinariness and specialty. Things were grey and in between, but he had to choose. This is a central human problem: the inescapable necessity to make choices. His faith on self-reliance proved that he was right. He chose one and not the other because he believed it would make him special as a man.

Moreover, it is obviously seen that the poem The Road Not Taken is arranged and composed in a beautiful way that it brings a sense of beauty to anyone reading it by heart or utterly. This poem is both sublime and philosophical. Paraphrasing the statement of Horace, this poem fulfills the criteria of being *dulce et utile*, pleasant and useful; even more than that, this is a sublimely beautiful poem offering a basic universal lesson on life choices.

REFERENCE


Websites: