



UGC Approved Journal



IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065

Impact Factor : 5.7



Editor-in-Chief

**Volume 6, Issue 6
June 2018
www.ijellh.com**

Gurjit Singh

Department of English and Cultural Studies

Panjab University, Chandigarh

India

gurjeetkapoor72@gmail.com

Stylistic Analysis of “The Road Not Taken” and “Birches”

Abstract

Poetry is the heart of literature. It is perhaps the oldest genre in literature having its origin in ancient Greek and Vedic literature. Poetry heavily relies on poetic devices such as metaphors, simile, synecdoche, anaphora etc. The knowledge of literary devices is fundamental to the understanding of poetry. Stylistics is a medium which enables a student of literature to appreciate poetry in a better way.

Stylistics is a branch of linguistics which is primarily concerned with the application of the methodology of linguistics to the study of the style used in language in particular context. In *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature* (1975), H.G. Widdowson defines stylistics as the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation. He points out that etymologically the ‘style’ component of the word ‘stylistics’ comes from literary criticism and the ‘istics’ component comes from linguistics. Stylistics is intermediary between linguistics and literary criticism. He goes on to say that ‘stylistics’ can provide a way of mediating between, English language and literature. According to Merriam Webster dictionary, the first use of the term can be traced back to the year 1883. Style is a distinctive way of using language to convey the intended meaning in an appropriate manner.

My paper will analyze the stylistic features of two poems namely the road not taken and birches by American poet Robert Lee Frost. He was a 20th century poet who was famous for writing poems in simple language yet his poems are imbued with complexity and multiple meanings. A farmer by profession in his early 20s, the theme of his poetry usually revolves around the facets of agrarian life, nature and human relationships. He is the only poet to win 4 Pulitzer prizes. He avoided wordy sentences. He rather incorporated simple diction. His

language is natural and has a flowing quality. In his poetry, he has achieved what William Wordsworth instructs the poets to achieve. A poet is a man speaking to his fellow men. He uses "the language really used by men." The poetry of Robert Frost follows these two principles. He used simple diction in his poetry yet he did not let his poetry stoop to the level of banality and commonality. He decorated his poetry with the poetic meter. These poems were published in his third anthology called *Mountain Intervals* in 1916. The collection was republished in a new edition in 1921.

On the surface level, he is a poet whose themes center on the beauty of nature, mundane reality of daily life but when one delves deeper into it one can envision the whole array of interpretation opening up. His poems are, as Arnold used the phrase, the criticism of life. The remarkable stylistics feature of his poetry is the focus on simple yet rich language. Frost was the first poet who ever recited a poem in president's inauguration ceremony. He defines poetry in the following words: Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting

"The Road Not Taken" is an ironic commentary on the autonomy of choice in a world governed by instincts, unpredictable contingencies, and limited possibilities. It parodies and demurs from the biblical idea that God is the "way" that can and should be followed and the American idea that nature provides the path to spiritual enlightenment. The title refers doubly to bravado for choosing a road less traveled but also to regret for a road of lost possibility and the eliminations and changes produced by choice. "The Road Not Taken" reminds us of the consequences of the principle of selection in all aspects of life, namely that all choices in knowledge or in action exclude many others and lead to an ironic recognition of our achievements. At the heart of the poem is the romantic mythology of flight from a fixed world of limited possibility into a wilderness of many possibilities combined with trials and choices through which the pilgrim progresses to divine perfection. I agree with Frank Lentricchia's view that the poem draws on "the culturally ancient and pervasive idea of nature as an allegorical book, out of which to draw explicit lessons for the conduct of life (nature as self-help text)." I would argue that what it is subverting is something more profound than the sentimental expectations of genteel readers of fireside poetry. . . .

The first poem *The Road Not Taken* is a typical example of Frost's poetry. It is a deceptively simple poem. The poem, like a mature work of literature, allows two equally valid and often opposite interpretations. To fix one meaning for this poem would be doing injustice to the poet and poem. The speaker of the poem is troubled by a dilemma. Standing on a conjunction where making a choice is necessary. He ponders over the situation using his reasoning and makes a choice. The extended metaphors of two roads can be interpreted in multiple ways: materialism versus idealism, comfortable life versus adventurous life, conformity versus deviation so on. The image of yellow wood is also open to interpretations: the season of autumn, old age, old social structure etc.

The poem's use of the roads as a metaphor for the courses available in life is appropriate and effective. Like the poem's speaker, individuals arrive at many forks in the road during the course of their lives. This may take the form of following the well-traveled road of the American dream, with a steady job, family, and comfortable retirement. On the other hand, one may choose the road less traveled, the one that is grassy and wears, and become a wandering poet.

The title of the poem is very interesting in itself. It pushes the reader towards the sinister interpretation. One may infer that the poem is a statement on regret and reminiscence of something which is left out rather than about good or bad choices. The last stanza of the poem contains a word 'Sigh' that is also very ambiguous one. It suggests regret as well as a sense of joy.

Structurally, the poem consists of four quatrains (a group of four lines) which make it twenty line long; relatively a shorter poem. The poem has a fixed rhyme scheme. It is written in first person narrative. The first, third and fourth line rhyme with each other whereas the second line rhymes with the fifth line

Two	roads	diverged	in	a	yellow	wood,	(A)
And	sorry	I	could	not	travel	both	(B)
And	be	one	traveler,	long	I	stood	(A)
And	looked	down	one	as	far	as	I
						could	(A)
To where it bent in the undergrowth; (B)							

Frost was a classical poet in a sense that his poetry followed meter. Frost reportedly had said 'Writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down'. Meter is the

occurrence of the long and short syllable in a verse. The meter of this poem is iambic tetrameter. Iambic meter is comprised of two syllables the first one being unstressed and the second being stressed one. It is also called the rising meter.

In the first stanza the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th lines begin with the word 'And'. This is the use of anaphora a literary device in which words phrases and clauses are repeated. It is often employed in the poetry and political speeches and occasionally in prose. It adds a unique sonic sense to the poem. Out of the 20 lines, 9 lines employ the additive conjunction 'And'. The repeated use of the word 'And' heightens the sense of continuation.

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

There is the following lexical chain of the words which occur in the poem; diverged-difference –two, sorry –sigh, bent- stood, stood- travel- travel, less-far etc. The poet seems to be preoccupied with the numbers. He kept on referring to the cardinals and ordinals, for example, the word 'Two' appears twice, the word 'Both' also appears twice, the word 'One' appears thrice, ordinal 'First' appears once.

There is the recurrent use of D sound in the poem. The poet uses the following words: road (2), diverged, wood, and (9), could (2) stood, looked, down, wanted, trodden, day, lead, doubted, should, diverged, wood, travelled.

In the very first line, the poet used the word 'Wood' rather than using the word 'jungle'. This is an example of synecdoche. It is a literary device, which uses part to represent the whole.

And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could

In the second line the use the word 'Both' while missing out the word 'Road' along with it. In the fourth line, he used the word 'One' while referring to either of the two roads that he chose. This is an example of ellipsis, a literary device, in which the writer omits a

word as the case above. Throughout the poem poet refers to the word road with different words i.e. both, one it, the, other, it, there, them, both, the first one. Frost very skillfully employs his poetic license in the second line of the poem when he uses the expression long I stood. In a declarative sentence, the syntax should be: I (subject/pronoun) stood (verb) long (adverb). It is an inversion of regular sentence structure. This change in regular syntax is used by Frost to maintain rhyme scheme and metrical consistency of the poem.

In this poem, there is a shift in temporal scene. The whole poem is written in the past tense varying from the past indefinite to past perfect tense, with the only exception of the concluding stanza. This stanza contains a future tense. The poet makes a speculation about his decision. He imagines the consequence of his decision.

In the first stanza, the poet does not take any action. In other words, there is not any movement in the first stanza. There is merely the description of the scene. In the first stanza the following verbs are used; diverged, travel, stood, looked, bent etc. Although the verb travel signifies an action since it is a negative sentence where speaker refers to his inability to travel both roads at the same time. The action begins in the second stanza where the narrator mounts on one path.

Though it would be an act of committing intentional fallacy to consider what Frost originally intended to convey through his poem. Intentional fallacy a term introduced by Wimsatt and Beardsley in which the reader interprets a work of art by considering what the author intended to convey. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning the event which led to the creation of this poem.

Robert Frost wrote “The Road Not Taken” as a joke for a friend, the poet Edward Thomas. When they went walking together, Thomas was chronically indecisive about which road they ought to take and—in retrospect—often lamented that they should, in fact, have taken the other one. Soon after writing the poem in 1915, Frost griped to Thomas that he had read the poem to an audience of college students and that it had been “taken pretty seriously ... despite doing my best to make it obvious by my manner that I was fooling. ... Mea culpa.” However, Frost liked to quip, “I’m never more serious than when joking.” As his joke unfolds, Frost creates a multiplicity of meanings, never quite allowing one to supplant the other—even as “The Road Not Taken” describes how choice is inevitable.

The whole poem is written in a declarative sentence with the only exception of the 13th line which is written in exclamatory sentences. Most of the sentences in the poem begin with closed class words. These are words groups such as-pronoun, conjunction, and preposition. For example: and, because, to, though, I etc. Closed class words are such words which are finite in number. There is no possibility of expanding their number. On the other hand, the words like nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs etc are open ended words. These words form a large chunk of the English language. Open ended words keep on growing in numbers. However, he broke the monotony by starting sentences with adjectives and adverbs also.

The second poem is a pastoral which means it has its setting in a village or a similar place. The title of poem birches refers to a short lived pioneer species. Birches have significant cultural values as well. In Celtic culture, it symbolizes growth stability initiation adaptability. The species of plant has reported the ability to resurrect after the forest fire. Swinging the birches tree was common game for the children of the 19th century

In spite of his deprecatory view of explication, Frost revealed a good deal about his art. When he disclosed his feeling about certain words in "Birches," he gave a searching insight into what makes a poet's use of descriptive words stand up. And how cavalierly he did it! He offered "this little note on 'Birches' before I begin to read it. See. The kind of explication I forbid," he said self-consciously. Then with disarming slyness, he said: "I never go down the shoreline [from Boston] to New York without watching the birches to see if they live up to what I say about them in the poem." Invariably the listener laughed, but on the double take, he realized that Frost, the careful craftsman, was confirming his assertion that birches bend to left and right by verification. Getting details right was a telling responsibility. His birches, he insisted, were not the white mountain or paper birch of northern New England (*Betula papyrifera*); they were the gray birch (*Betula populifolia*)

This is comparatively a long poem. It consists of 59 lines. The poem is bereft of any stanza and runs continuously. It does not follow any rhyme scheme. The meter of this poem is iambic pentameter.

The first 20 lines of the poem are written in present tense lines. Then there is a change in the tense, line 21 to 41 are written in past tense. The rest of the poem is written in present tense. This is called temporal shift.

The poet has used kinetic imagery in the poem, importantly enough these words often have the strong implication of violence in them. The violent imagery runs continuously throughout the poem. There is something more than what meets the eye.

Avalanching-To descend in an avalanche

Bend-Something that is bent

Bowed-Bent downward and forward

Break-To separate into parts with suddenness or violence

Broke- Past tense of break

Burns-To produce or undergo discomfort or pain

Click-To strike, move or produce with a click

Crack-To break, split or snap apart

Dragged-To draw or pull slowly or heavily

Fallen-To come or go as if by falling

Flung-To throw forcefully, impetuously, or casually

Kicking- To strike out with the foot or feet

Lashed-to move violently or suddenly

Launching-To throw forward

Riding them down-to tread under one's horse's feet

Shattering-To cause to drop or be dispersed

Subdued-To conquer and bring into subjection

Snatch Away- To attempt to seize something suddenly

Throw-To cause to fall

The discursive blank-verse meditation "Birches" builds a mosaic of thoughts from fragments of memory and fantasy. Its vividness and genial, bittersweet speculation help make it one of Frost's most popular poems, and because its shifts of metaphor and tone invite varying interpretation it has also received much critical discussion, not always admiring. The poem moves back and forth between two visual perspectives: birch trees as bent by boys' playful swinging and by ice storms, the thematic interweaving being somewhat puzzling. The birches bent "across the lines of straighter darker trees" subtly introduce the theme of imagination and will opposing darker realities. Then, almost a third of the poem describes how ice storms bend these trees permanently, unlike the action of boys; this scene combines images of beauty and of distortion. Ice shells suggest radiating light and color, and the trees bowed to the level of the bracken, suggest suffering, which is immediately lightened by the strange image of girls leaning their hair toward the sun as if in happy submission. The fallen "inner dome of heaven" alludes to Shelley's "dome of many colored glass" (also alluded to in "The Trial by Existence") to suggest the shattering of the ideal into everyday reality. Frost's speaker then self-consciously breaks from his realistic but metaphorically fantasied digression to say he would prefer to have some boy bend the birches, which action becomes a symbol for controlled experience, as contrasted with the genial fatality of ice storms. The boy's fancied playfulness substitutes for unavailable companionship, making for a thoughtful communion with nature, which rather than teach him wisdom allows him to learn it. Despite the insistence on the difference between ice storms' permanent damage to birches and a boy's temporary effects, the boy subdues and conquers the trees. His swinging is practice for maintaining life's difficult and precarious balances. The third part of the poem begins with a more personal and philosophical tone. The speaker claims to have been such a youthful swinger of birches, an activity he can go back to only by dreaming. The birch trees, probably both ice-bent and boy-swung, stand for the order and control missing from ordinary experience. The "considerations" he is weary of are conflicting claims that leave him disoriented and stung. The desire to "get away from earth,"

importantly qualified by "awhile," shows a yearning for the ideal or perhaps for the imaginative isolation of the birch swinger. His "I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree ... / Toward heaven" suggests leaving earth, but he reveals by his quick apologetic claim that he doesn't mean that. He wants to be dipped down again toward earth, but the pursuit of the ideal by going sounds like death, as his quick apology acknowledges. Frost does less in this poem than in "After Apple-Picking" to suggest a renewed pursuit of the ideal in life rather than a yielding to death. His main pursuit is continual balance between reality and ideality, but as John F. Sears and Radcliffe Squires point out, his vehicle for transcendence and his desire for nature to reinforce human intuition do not quite work.

The poetry of Frost leaves a profound effect on the reader. The value of his poetry does not lie in poetic and stylistic devices only but also in the insight into which it provides about the complexities of life. The form and the content of his poetry is simple yet rich. This is the prime reason why his poetry continues to delight its readers even after reading over and over again.

Works Cited

“Avalanching”, “bend”, “bowed”, “break”, “broke”, “burn”, “click”, “crack”, “dragged”, “fallen”, “flung”, “kicking”, “lashed”, “launching”, “riding”, “them”, “shattering”, “subdued”, “snatched away”, “throw”. *Merriam-Webster*. Merriam-Webster.com.

"Birch." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*,
[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birches_\(poem\)](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birches_(poem)).

"Mountain Interval." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*,
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mountain_Interval.

“Literary Criticism of ‘The Road Not Taken’”. *Paper Masters*.
www.papermasters.com/literary-criticism-road-not-taken.

“Lyrical Ballads”. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. www.britannica.com/topic/Lyrical-Ballads.

Marcus Mordecai. Mordecai Marcus: “On "Birches"”.
www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/george-monteiro-birches

Monteiro, George. “George Monteiro: On "Birches".
www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/george-monteiro-birches

Richardson, Mark. “On “The Road Not Taken””. *Modern American Poetry*,
www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/frost/road.

Robinson, Kathrine. “Our choices are made clear in hindsight”. *Poetry Foundation*.
www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/89511/robert-frost-the-road-not-taken

Sarthi, Partha Mishra. *Stylistics Theory and Practice*. Orient BlackSwan, 2009.