

Analysis of the Style and Philosophy of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"

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Abstract:

Robert Frost is one of the most prominent poets of twentieth-century American poetry, and his poetic concept, which begins in delight and ends in wisdom, is the essence of his work and a high summary of Frost's poetic style. "The Road Not Taken", one of Frost's masterpieces, serves as a prime example of his poetic outlook. The creative style of this poem is primarily analyzed in this research from three perspectives: word choice, rhetorical devices, and rhyme patterns. The poem is crafted in a style that leans toward simplicity, rusticity, and sonic harmony. Concurrently, the poem encompasses a profound philosophy of life, achieving a paradoxical unity of simplicity and profundity, nature and society. By dissecting "The Road Not Taken", one can gain insight into the background and characteristics of Frost's poetry, as well as the poetic value of this poem. The most crucial aspect is to provoke the reader into contemplating life.

Keywords: Robert Frost; style; philosophy; "The Road Not Taken"

1. Introduction

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was one of the representative figures of American modern poetry in the 20th century, creating many popular and far-reaching works. Frost experienced the death of his father in youth, the death of his wife in middle age, and the death of his son in old age. Despite these losses, he maintained a love for poetry and persisted in his creation, beginning to write poetry at the age of 16 and emerging in the poetry world at the age of 39, bringing a fresh wind to the British and American poetry scene at that time.

"The Road Not Taken" was written in 1915 and included in a collection of poems published in 1916, "Mountain Interval", which is the first poem of this

collection, indicating its importance to the poet. The poem describes how the narrator arrived at a fork in the autumn woods. Faced with roads that looked almost identical, the narrator stood there for a long time and chose the grassy, little-traveled road, reflecting on the choice with a sigh many years later. The poet has mentioned that the inspiration for this poem came from his friend Edward Thomas. Thomas and Frost often walked in the suburbs of London, where Thomas always hesitated to make a choice when faced with a fork in the road, later regretting the wrong decisions. The creation of poetry has its realistic basis, often reflecting and refining real life and life experiences and serving as a beautiful carrier for understanding life's philosophy.

This paper selects “The Road Not Taken” as the research object, follows the logic from concrete to abstract, and analyzes the poet’s writing style from three aspects: word choice, image connotation, and phonological mode. It then rises to the analysis of the poetry’s philosophy based on the content and form of the poem, reaching the contradiction unity between simplicity and profundity and the contradiction unity between nature and society in the philosophical connotation. From this, one can understand the poetic value of the poem.

2. The Poetic Style of “The Road Not Taken”

In 1939, Frost mentioned in an article titled “The Figure a Poem Makes” that poetry “begins in delight and ends in wisdom” [1], a sentiment regarded by many scholars as encapsulating his poetic philosophy. This is a very important feature of Frost’s poetry. This paper analyzes the writing style of “The Road Not Taken” from three aspects: characteristics of word selection, rhetorical devices, and metrical forms.

2.1 Characteristics of Words-selecting

The diction in “The Road Not Taken” is straightforward. The poet opts for the language of everyday life and extensively employs monosyllabic words. Statistically, the most frequent words in the poem are verbs, followed by adverbs, nouns, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and adjectives are the least used [2].

Changes in verb tenses occur in each stanza. The author varies the tense to suit the narrative and philosophical expression. The first three stanzas use the past tense to describe what he was thinking when he made his choice in the yellow woods, indicating that this event has already occurred. In the fourth stanza, the poet shifts to the future tense in the initial lines, marking a departure from the earlier tense of the poem. The poet projects his thoughts into the future, foreshadowing potential outcomes. The third and fourth lines clarify what “this” refers to in the first line, and in the final line, the poet employs the present perfect tense to span from the past to the present and into the future, thereby reaching a philosophical conclusion to the poem [3].

The pronoun “I” appears nine times in the poem. Narrated in the first person, the recurring “I” continually underscores the individual’s presence, as if the poet is narrating his own experience and discussing his own life feelings. The “I” can also represent every reader, allowing the reader to immerse in the mood crafted by the poet and to awaken their inner feelings and thoughts.

The conjunction “and” appears nine times in the poem, six times at the beginning of a line. Particularly in the second, third, and fourth lines of the first stanza, three “and”s are used consecutively at the start of the lines, conveying the poet’s mind as he encounters a fork in the road, setting off layers of thoughts. “And Sorry I Could Not Travel Both” in the poem reflects the poet’s natural thoughts when faced with two roads [4]. Choices must be made when confronted with a fork in the road. As the poet states, “And Be One Traveller, Long I Stood--”[4], as a traveler standing still for a long time and unable to make a choice, the poet writes about the state of many people, including himself. “And Looked Down One As Far As I Could” [4], the poet can only gaze toward a distant road, and in his wandering, he has, in fact, already shown a preference. However, he is uncertain where the road leads. The poem contains many other uses of “and,” suggesting that life presents numerous forks in the road [5]. There are many moments when we must make choices, during which hesitation, wandering, and the confusion of decision-making are fully depicted.

The poet’s choice of words aligns with Frost’s fresh, natural, and simple poetic style, characterized by numerous monosyllabic words, typical of everyday speech. Undoubtedly, the poet’s repeated use of “I” and “and” highlights the role of the individual will in making choices, with feelings of frustration, hesitation, and regret being expressed.

2.2 Rhetorical devices

In literature, authors often use figurative language to create works, which is a form of literary language. It better describes the object, expresses the problem, and illustrates the emotion, and in poetry writing as well. The use of figurative language can increase the reader’s interest in reading, and it is also an important virtue for poets to express the connotation of the poem. Based on Perrine’s theory, there are 12 types of figurative languages [6], and in the poem “The Road Not Taken”, the poet mainly adopts three types.

Symbol is used only to denote a word or phrase that refers to a thing or event, where the thing or event referred to itself refers to something else or has a reference beyond itself [7]. Symbol is used in the first and fourth stanzas of the poem, in the first stanza, the poet describes the situation he has encountered, a fork in the road in the woods in the fall. In the fourth stanza the poet looks back on the decision he made many years ago and lets out a deep sigh, expressing a sense of remorse. In the fourth stanza, the word “yellow” is missing, but the poet’s state of mind has changed. In the beginning, he encounters a fork in the

road and does not know which path to choose. In the last stanza, the poet's life experience has increased, and he lets out a deep sigh for the choices he has made before, and has expectations and reluctance to look for a different path. However, the reality is that the poet chose the road less traveled, which made a huge difference in his life and gave it a profound meaning. The "roads" mentioned in the poem is a symbol of both the reality of the fork in the road in the woods and the path of life.

Metaphor refers to the use of words that literally mean one thing but are used to refer to another very different thing without forming a comparison [7]. The fourth stanza of the poem employs a metaphor. The first three stanzas recall the thoughts that crossed the mind when standing at a crossroads and making a choice, while the fourth stanza is a recollection of this event accompanied by a sigh. The „road“ mentioned in the first stanza is merely an objective entity, whereas the „road“ in the fourth stanza represents the roads of memory and imagination. This not only encapsulates the memory of the choice made at the crossroads but also reflects the poet's philosophical contemplation of life's choices.

Personification involves depicting inanimate objects or abstract concepts as if they possess life, human qualities, or emotions [7]. The second stanza of the poem uses personification when it describes the path overgrown with withered grass as a choice. The road is intriguing as it desires to be worn and aged, requiring someone to tread upon it to leave marks and wear. The roles of choosing and being chosen are relative; one is the active chooser and, in another sense, the passive recipient of the choice. The third stanza of the poem also employs personification. The verb „to lay“ means „to place something carefully upon another thing“ [8], and the adverb „equally“ modifies another adverb. The subject of the sentence is „roads“, which are inherently laid upon the ground. By personifying the roads, the poet anthropomorphizes the forks in the road, awaiting the pedestrian's decision. The poet's meticulous construction allows the reader to form a more vivid impression of the „roads“ in the poem, thereby intensifying the author's emotional connection to them.

In the poem "The Road Not Taken", the poet mainly uses the rhetorical techniques of symbol, metaphor and personification, which adds to the ambiguity of the meaning of the poem and gives the readers a broader space for thinking. The poet's personal experience to rise to the philosophical thinking on the choice of life, so that the poem has a "begins with the delight, ends with wisdom" of the deep power and teachings.

2.3 Metrical Forms

According to Ollila and Jantas, Poetry is any kind of verbal or written language that is structured rhythmically and is meant to tell a story, or express any kind of emotion, idea, or state of being [9]. Poetry differs from novels, essays, and plays in the way it is created by using rhythmic and rhyming language to express its aesthetic experience. In poetry, harmony and rhythm are emphasized, and the combined use of which will make the poem read with a sense of rhythm, and the emotions will flow naturally with the rhythm, which is the unique beauty of poetry.

Metrical English and American poetry consists of a foot, a verse line, and a stanza. Rhythm is one of the factors that make a poem musical and rhythmic, and the rhythm of a poem is presented by metres and stanzas. Metres are made up of a combination of stressed and unstressed syllables, such as iambic pentameter. Among them, iambic meter is the most popular and common meter in English and American poetry. The unit used to measure rhythm is "meter"; there are monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, pentameter, hexameter, and more. „The Road Not Taken“ is an iambic pentameter poem.

The first line of the poem is a standard five-note iambic pentameter, with one weakly pronounced syllable and one heavily pronounced syllable, which is read in a staccato, rhythmic manner, keeping the same rhythm as the heartbeat. The second line consists of three iambic pentameter and two iambic pentameter, with the fifth step belonging to the heterogeneous iambic pentameter, omitting the final weakly pronounced syllable. The third line is composed of two iambic pentameter, one iambic pentameter and two iambic pentameter. The fourth line is composed of two iambic pentameter, one iambic pentameter, one iambic pentameter and one iambic pentameter. The fifth line is composed of two iambic pentameter, one iambic pentameter and two iambic pentameter. The other three stanzas maintain the same rhyme and meter pattern as the first stanza, and the whole poem is mainly in iambic pentameter, with iambic pentameter and iambic pentameter variations used across the lines, allowing the poem to maintain a sense of seriousness as in traditional poetry.

Poetry is also about harmony, which is presented through rhyme [10]. The last syllable of a line of poetry is called a "rhyme," and the vowels, or vowels together with consonants, that rhyme in a line are referred to as the "rhyme." If the vowels, or vowels and consonants, are the same in the last syllables of other lines in the same stanza, a rhyme scheme is established. In "The Road Not Taken," the rhyme scheme is very neat, with each stanza rhyming according to "abaab." This means that the first, third, and fourth lines of the poem rhyme with the same vowel

sound (i.e., “a”), and the second and fifth lines rhyme with a different vowel sound (i.e., “b”). In the fourth stanza, the “a” rhyme is [aI], and the shape of the mouth transitions from open to a more harmonious position, which makes it longer to pronounce, and the “sigh” conveys a sense of more pronounced sighing and sadness. There is a brief pause at the pronunciation of “I” and “by,” indicating hesitation and entanglement in the decision-making process. The “b” rhyme is [s], which is shorter and sharper, and “hence” is followed by a brief pause at the [s], where the poet laments the passage of time. The poet laments the passage of time, and the word “difference” conveys a sense of relief that the poet has chosen a path less traveled, leading to a different life experience. This choice seems to represent a form of reconciliation and release.

“The Road Not Taken” is a poem based on iambic pentameter, a traditional rhyme scheme that gives the reader an ease of speech, musicality, and rhythmic lightness. In addition to this, each stanza of the poem follows the “abaab” rhyme pattern, which is Frost’s inheritance of the strict requirements of rhyme in traditional poetry.

3. The Poetic Philosophy of “The Road Not Taken”

3.1 The paradoxical unity of simplicity and depth

The charm of Frost’s poetry lies in its apparent simplicity and movement, yet it is not. According to Lawrence Thompson, “The vast majority of Frost’s admirers are so captivated by the apparent simplicity of his poetic art that they are unable to penetrate the subtle masquerade worn by the poet” [11]. His poem “The Road Not Taken” appears to depict a mountain landscape, inviting the reader to enter the woods with paths, strewn with undergrowth. Then, in the second stanza, each traveler becomes entangled with the poem, attempting to find reasons to justify their choice. The two paths do not appear significantly different; it is merely that the chosen path is less traveled. The third stanza of the poem once again recalls the two paths encountered that early morning; they were so similar that neither left any footprints. Having chosen one path, one can only console oneself by leaving the other to be visited at another time, but in reality, the poet also knows that having made the choice, it is difficult to return.

Towards the end of the poem, the poet envisions remembering this event years later and lamenting the two very different lives that were created in making the choice. Thus, on the slow road of life, choices are sometimes more important than efforts, and life is about moving for-

ward with constant choices. Since the future is unknown, that is what makes people confused and hesitant and in a dilemma.

3.2 The paradoxical unity of nature and society

Critic Judith Oster suggests that Frost helped establish a modern approach to reading through the uncertainty of his evaluations and open-ended endings, as well as his broad interpretations of the text [12]. Frost’s poems often conclude in an open-ended manner, typically incomplete in meaning and significance, leaving room for the reader’s imagination and reflection. In the final stanza of “The Road Not Taken,” he writes about looking back on the life he chose after many years and how he seems to have seen it through, but is still resigned to the fact that if he had chosen a different path, his life would have been different again. The poet’s open-ended ending provides the reader with a broad space for reflection, encouraging subjective initiative without jumping to conclusions about the road ahead.

The title of the poem tells of the path not taken, while the poem narrates the path chosen by the poet, which might seem contradictory. In fact, it is the poet’s capture of the phenomenon of paradox. Contradiction is the root of all movement and vitality. It is only because things contain contradictions within themselves that they can generate thinking and choices. Many people in life are dissatisfied with their own choices, thus becoming attached to the unchosen ones. Therefore, the poet in this poem does not forget the unchosen road rather than the chosen one, which is a true depiction of life, and it also increases the melancholy mood. In Frost’s “The Road Not Taken,” the “road” is an image that appears in the poem, and through this simple image, the author leads the contradiction between nature and society to unity.

4. Conclusion

Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” is both literary and philosophical. The literary quality of the poem is reflected in the choice of words, rhetorical analysis, and phonological patterns. In terms of word choice, Frost selects simple monosyllabic words commonly used in daily communication. The rhetorical devices employed are primarily symbolism, allusion, and personification. The rhyme scheme of the poem adheres to the traditional iambic pentameter, with each stanza following the “abaab” rhyme pattern. Concurrently, the poem’s content and form together suggest a philosophical interpretation, where the friend’s indecision serves as Frost’s inspiration for writing the poem and as an opportunity to articulate thoughts on life’s journey, and the notion that a determined walk will

lead to a fulfilling life.

This study has several limitations; it focuses on the three aspects of word choice, rhetorical devices, and phonological patterns. While Frost's creative style in "The Road Not Taken" can be explored from additional perspectives, such as dualism, the philosophical aspects of the poem warrant further exploration. Placing the study within the economic and political context or the social and cultural backdrop of the era could yield a more profound understanding. In subsequent research, the formal beauty of the poem will be examined from various angles, along with the social and cultural significance of the poem from multiple viewpoints.

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