

Frost's "Less Traveled" Road: A Poem Analysis

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Abstract:

This paper explores the interplay between self and nature in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken" through Lacanian theory and the concept of the egotistical sublime. While Frost's poem has often been misconstrued as a celebration of individualistic choice, this analysis reveals a deeper, more complex engagement with forming the self amidst environmental influences. This paper argues that Frost's work reflects larger philosophical problems concerning identity and self-awareness while exemplifying a personal dilemma through an analysis of the Lacanian mirror stage and the poet's use of the pronoun "I." To put the thematic consistency in Frost's poems in context, parallels with poems like "For Once, Then, Something" and "The Freedom of the Moon" are also made. The discussion considers historical receptions of the poem, Frost's correspondences, and critical perspectives, ultimately arguing that Frost navigates the space between vulnerability and perceived control, challenging the reader's understanding and interpretations of his works.

Keywords: Robert Frost; The Road Not Taken; Lacanian Theory; Egotistical Sublime

1. Introduction

Critics from the 1930s often argued that Robert Frost's poetry generally lacked in dissolving tension with easy humor, noting its tendency to veil and reveal hurt too abruptly and explicitly [1]. Nevertheless, this straightforward, unadorned aspect might not be without merit, as one can see from Frost's stormy life experiences, particularly during his formative years. Frost's psychological distress, specifically his alienation from his spouse, Elinor White, dates back to a near-suicidal excursion to North Carolina's Dismal Swamp when he was just twenty years old [2].

Though the journey occurred long before Frost's first published book, which dates back to 1913, difficulties still influenced his works. They showed signs that later critics would identify as a paradox of vulnerability and insincere warmth. Moreover, Frost's recollection of his ordeals in nature could be found to resemble the 18th-century discourse on the definition of "the egotistical sublime," emphasizing the strength of the self against the impact of environmental experiences.

Building on this foundation of the relationship between "I" and the environment, this essay will delve into the "I" of the Lacanian theory and the mirror stage as a framework to understand the poem "The Road Not Taken." Louis Untermeyer commented on his friend's emblematic work in commitment to form, meter, and rhyme, which showed unprecedented individualism in choosing the Lonely Road

[3]. This paper investigates the nexus between Lacanian theory and the egocentric sublime, or Frost's external interactions with nature, where Frost's internal sense of "I" was formed and shaped. This paper hopes to understand how Frost balances the two complex views by dissecting "The Road Not Taken" and contrasting it with several other poems.

2. The Subject

In "The Road Not Taken," Frost offers a playful dilemma of choosing between two paths in a wood, initially presented to his friend Edward Thomas. Despite Frost's humorous intent, Thomas did not perceive the poem as a joke; instead, it became the pivotal moment leading to his enlistment [4]. Yet, with readers unconsciously considering the poem to be self-revealing, whether Thomas was the poem's true subject becomes doubtful.

Larry Finger's inquiry into the poem, highlighted by Frost's letter to Crystine Yates, sheds light on the true subject. Yates had initially written to the poet, inquiring whether the final sign was intended to convey satisfaction or remorse. But Frost's answer clearly showed that he stressed the pronoun "I" almost ten times in three words, emphasizing the "I" as the ego in a Lacanian meaning. In reality, as Finger would put it, the poem marks the moment when, after a while, the poet truly changed his viewpoint on the poem's subject—from Thomas to himself.

The general public's reaction to the poem could also jus-

tify this subject change. In May 1915, Frost presented the poem publicly before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Tufts College [5]. Private schools in the Boston region quickly adopted the reading program. The poem's popularity at the time could not be attributed to its "intended audience"—Edward Thomas—because Thomas was not well-known to those who knew Frost.

However, Fleissner, in response to Finger's findings, argued otherwise. He proposed that Frost's omission of Thomas in his response to Yates was intentional: Frost wanted Yates to understand the poem without the biographical background, as it may shift her understanding [6]. But if Frost considered the biographical background to be an interference, why then did he describe the poem's purpose as a "private jest"? The term "private jest" in the letter, similar to the reference to Edward Thomas, serves the same function as alluding to the background. Thus, it is plausible to argue that "The Road Not Taken" features Frost himself as its subject, albeit with some influence from Thomas. Given the premise of the subject, the poem could be deemed a typical case of Frost's work, with personal difficulties shown in relief.

3. Philosophical Ideas

The sublime is a multifaceted concept that raises the question of its effect on the individual's sense of self. Does the sublime intensify self-presence, or does it overpower the self? Or, as Adam Philips asks without answering, "Does the sublime enlarge us or diminish us?" [7].

Interpretations of the sublime vary significantly. Burke suggests that the fundamental effect of the sublime is confined to the initial phase, with the mind sensing its limitations within a social and ethical context and feeling overpowered. On the other hand, Kant argues for a second stage's existence. He proposes that after the initial phase of frustration, the second stage of the sublime emphasizes the rational and intuitive findings of self-awareness [7].

Since Frost frequently emphasizes the "I" and its relationship to the surroundings, his reading of the sublime is consistent with Kantian thought. Nevertheless, his poetry's self-awareness oscillates between the overwhelmed and the self-awareness-discovering stages. Notably, Frost's application of the personal pronoun "I" often comes across as irrational, which resonates with certain elements of the Lacanian mirror stage.

According to Lacan, the mirror stage is a developmental stage in which babies, usually between the ages of six and eighteen months, look for an idealized version of themselves in a mirror or the shapes of other people. In both cases, the baby cannot comprehend the functional fullness of the real, only the specular self. The infant experiences

an initial split as a result of the dyadic relationship with the mirror image, with one element of the "self" now existing as an image—an imagined "rough-cast" of the ego [8]. This imaginary ego can be regarded as the incomplete "I" inside Frost's poetry.

4. Analysis

In the poem's final stanza, which starts with the fairy-tale-like expression "Somewhere ages and ages hence," Frost concludes the overwhelming presence of nature. Despite using a colon, the poem's egotistical aspect emerges through the punctuation, particularly using a comma and a dash in the subsequent lines, effectively isolating "and I." The pronoun "I" stands out as the subject that "has made all the difference" because of its isolation, repetition across the line break, and rhyme of "by" in the penultimate line.

The repetition of "I—I" in the final stanza echoes the earlier lines:

And sorry I could not travel to both

And be one traveler, long I stood

Where Frost grapples with the paradoxical yearning to experience every path and yet remain a singular traveler. The repeated "I—I" embodies Frost's resolution to this conflict, suggesting a melding of desire and reality that resonates with Lacanian concepts of identity. To further parse the connection between this duality and the Lacanian mirror stage, one must consider Frost's explanations in Sergeant's interviews, which explain the inspirations behind his works:

"Two lonely crossroads that cross each other I have walked several times this winter without meeting or overtaking so much as a single person on foot or on runners... Judge then how surprised I was the other evening as I came down one to see a man, who to my own unfamiliar eyes and in the dusk looked for all the world like myself, coming down the other... I felt as if I would meet my image in a slanting mirror. [9]"

To understand the relationship between the poem and the mirror stage within the interview context, we must first determine whether the man Frost saw in the narrative truly resembles Frost. The answer is no; the poet explicitly stated that he "looked for all the world like myself," thus considering the man similar. However, Frost's understanding of his behavior is quite similar to that of a six-month-old infant going through the mirror stage, who is in the frame of mind where they are looking for similarities in anything they can learn from the outside world. Similar to a child experiencing difficulties with their motor skills, Frost too has challenges related to his incapacity to "take the road that has made all the difference." Thus, he trusted

the man who passed by, allowing him to take on the role of the ego's fictitious "rough-cast."

Under the mirror stage theory, the relationship between the child (Frost) and the mirror (the man) was initially one of rivalry because of the eagerness for wholeness. Thus, the mirror stage creates an aggressive tension between the subject and the image. To resolve this tension, Frost identifies himself with the man as similar, as the man becomes the "ideal ego."

The fallacy of replacement provides additional insight into the man and Frost's connection. In *The Elements of Logic*, Richard Whately compares this concept to the optical illusion produced by the Thaumatrope, a philosophical toy. In the Thaumatrope game, two pictures painted on opposing sides of a card can quickly spin together to form a single image. Simply visualize a youngster and its mirror image on opposing surfaces. Then, as spinning the toy more quickly, the subject and its imagery gradually blend to form one.; similarly, Frost and the man would merge into a single figure at the crossroad intersection [10]. Who is the figure? The figure is half of the real "I," half of the imaginary "I."

Here, this paper makes a cut from the mirror stage—back to the egotistical sublime. Through the progression of the stanza or through the awakening and reassurance of Frost himself, the poem conveys the message that our ability to shape events comes not from decisions made in the fantasy but from the mind's ability to mold the past into a particular story—a reflection of the egotistical sublime.

This egocentric magnificence is revealed somewhere except in the final line. If we go back to the moment before the final stanza, when the poet had not yet made up his mind, we can see that there was an abrupt shift in his attention from the roads to his thoughts:

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

It might not seem "egotistical" at first glance if to be confronted with the word "doubted." Let's first take a step back to look up the definition. The combining form of -cide is "the act of killing" or "a person or thing that kills," which means, to some extent, "deciding" with the root of "-code" is an act of killing—the killing of "The Road Not Taken."

After understanding the root, it's easier to comprehend the "egotistical" as the inherent nature of deciding meant no coming back, parallel to no resurrection of the dead. Therefore, Frost's use of the word "doubted" could be read as a question of whether or not to use this resurrection ability. He seemed to be his "godlike" self. According to Lacanian theory, being "godlike" arose as an illusory way to satisfy the child's mounting expectations, which

are unfulfilled and only become apparent in loss and lack. The idea of the "egotistical sublime" could also be understood by the ideas of Katherine Robinson's Robert Frost: *The Road Not Taken*, where she stated that the power of ourselves to assign meanings is more significant in defining our experience of the past.

5. Comparison

After discussing the egotistical sublime and the mirror stage, it is noticeable that the two theories also appear in Frost's other poems. In "For Once, Then, Something," Frost responds to the critics by kneeling and justifying his action with the reason that the water:

*Gives me back a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven godlike.*

Frost thought of himself as the "summer heaven godlike" when he peered down at his reflection in the lake. This sequence of actions undoubtedly demonstrated his similarity to the "ideal-ego" reflected in the water's image in the mirror. Frost is satisfied with using the identity of the fictitious "I" to exist in "The Most of It" as the "godlike" self at this time.

"The Freedom of the Moon" also exhibits a similar experience of the imaginary "I" when the new moon, as part of nature, was tilted by Frost. How he describes the moon as "shining anywhere I please" reveals Frost's internal desire to be the "ideal ego" to manipulate the environment, deluding himself into thinking he is more powerful than nature—that he becomes the image inside the mirror.

The poem's depiction of the "monster egotism" and the moon's "naughty play" has an air reminiscent of the final line of "The Road Not Taken," as both poems pose a reflective question by implying that our present circumstances are the product of our own choices and express a desire to rise above the constraints of nature.

6. Conclusion

"The Road Not Taken" symbolizes Frost's poetic engagement with the nuances of personal choice and the inherent tension between the individual and the environment. The application of Lacanian theory illuminates the poem's treatment of the self as a fluctuating entity shaped by the forces of nature and the psyche's response to them. The poem's analysis of the egocentric sublime represents a larger literary tradition that addresses the sublime's influence on judgment and self-perception. Frost's poetic persona highlights the poem's misreading as merely a celebration of autonomy by illuminating the interaction between the idealized and real selves through the reflective lens of the mirror stage. Frost's poetry transcends the personal by combining sarcasm, comedy, and philosophical

inquiry to ponder the intricate web of variables that shape people's choices. In light of this analysis, "The Road Not Taken" emerges not as a simple tribute to choose but as a layered exploration of the self about the sublime nature it encounters, where every path chosen is imbued with the weight of self-construction and the echoes of paths untraveled.

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