



SYMBOLISM AND THEME AS INTRINSIC ELEMENTS IN ROBERT FROST'S "THE ROAD NOT TAKEN": A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of symbolism in Robert Frost's poem The Road Not Taken and its function in constructing the poem's central theme. Employing a semiotic analysis grounded in Peirce's theory of signs, the research uses a library research method, and data collection involved close reading of the poem, identification of symbolic expressions, data selection, interpretation based on Peirce's triadic sign model (representamen, interpretant, and object). Fifteen symbolic elements distributed across the poem's four stanzas. These symbols such as "two roads," "yellow wood," "grassy path," and "sigh" convey the psychological and philosophical dimensions of decision-making, uncertainty, and the retrospective construction of meaning. The study is limited to a single poem of Robert Frost's The Road Not Taken and does not account for broader contextual or biographical factors. The findings demonstrate that Frost's poetic imagery serves not only as aesthetic expression but also as a medium for exploring existential concerns. The study highlights how literary symbols can effectively mediate complex human experiences and offers insight into the cognitive and emotional processes behind life choices. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of symbolic narrative in poetry and encourage further semiotic research within literary studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature refers to oral or written artistic work that convey ideas, emotions, and human experiences through language. Literary works, besides serving as entertainment, are commonly used to communicate the social situations that occur within society (Wulansari et al., 2022). This is in line with the statement from Simaremare et al. (2023), that literature plays a role similar to a narrative medium, assisting the author in reflecting their views on various concerns occurring in their surroundings. Furthermore, Santoso et al. (2023) believe that literature is closely connected to human existence, helping people get to know the meanings of life in broader perspectives. When literature changes human perspectives on life, people learn how to face problems and understand the moral aspects of contemporary life itself.

Several experts have emphasized the broader function of literature in their books. Firstly, Semi (2013) describes that literature as a form of art serves as a medium of self-expression, a tool for people to translate their thoughts and feelings into beautiful works enjoyed by others.

Ahyar (2019) states that literature is a means for people to express their ideas or thoughts about life and social situations using beautiful language. The beauty of language in literature is not only determined by the beauty of words or sentences but also by the beauty of the story's substance. Klarer (2004) defines literature as all written works containing artistic and aesthetic elements, making literature different from ordinary texts.

As an artistic work captivating diverse audience, literature is inseparable from its intrinsic elements as the foundation components of any literary works, embedded within the work itself that create meaning beyond explicit statements. Meanwhile, meanings that are not explicitly stated involves interpreting subtle hints and messages conveyed by the author through characters, settings, plot, symbols, and other elements in the story (Klarer, 2004). Poetry as a distinct genre in literature requires distinctive intrinsic elements to achieve its artistic impact. Poetry, like a building, needs a solid foundation structure to support its base (E. Septiani & Sari, 2021). In this context, intrinsic elements serve as the foundation that strengthens the content of the poem.

Poetry stands as one of the oldest genres in the history of literature (Klarer, 2004). Despite its age, poetry remains one of the most popular literary genres that withstands the passage of time until today. Data collected from Nielsen BookScan shows a surge in the demand for poetry books in the UK alone, reaching its highest sales record in 2018 with 1.3 million volumes sold (E. Septiani & Sari, 2021). One of the main reasons why poetry is so popular, especially among the youth, is because of its language. Poetry's appeal lies in the richness of poetic language that evoke emotional responses and touch the souls of those who read or hear it.

Language in poetry crafted uniquely according to each poet's preference, reflects the poet's own perspective and character (Lestari et al., 2023). This distinctive language creates poetry's appeal to attract readers. Poets frequently use symbols or comparisons in their poems. The symbols help poets to convey their ideas indirectly requiring readers to decode the hidden meanings within the symbols of a literary work. The diversity of meanings in the poem can be seen from the different symbols used in each line (Putri & Shomary, 2022). In understanding the theme of a poem, the role of the symbols cannot be separated from theme. It makes symbolism and theme as the two intrinsic elements of poetry that relate each other.

Symbols and themes serve as fundamental elements in literary analysis. Kenney (1966), defines symbols as images that transcend literal meaning, and represent abstract concepts requiring interpretation beyond surface appearance to uncover their deeper meanings and implications. It can be challenging for new readers to fully grasp. Furthermore, Kenney provide a description of theme as the essential meaning or main idea of a story. While it is similar to a moral, which gives advice, a theme can be much more complex and does not always offer direct guidance. Theme can be understood or interpreted from the story providing deeper insight into its message. Like any story itself, poetry utilize theme to convey central idea or message of the poet. Them reflects the meaning or subject matter of the poem, often expressed through its imagery, symbols, and language.

The object of this study is Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken", a chosen poem as the object of the study because it is one of the most intriguing poems in terms of symbolism and

themes. The poem tells the story of a traveler who must choose between two roads in a wood, exploring themes of personal choices and how these decisions shape one's future. In addition to its themes, the poem also contains rich symbolism that is full of meanings. Each line in the poem carries symbols that, when examined closely, reveal the poet's ideas and messages about the poem being written. The symbolism of the two diverging roads, for example, effectively illustrates the concept of life choices. The poem teaches us the importance of the choices we make in life through its contemplative writing style, as it invites readers to reflect on the meaning of life. There are various interesting symbols in this poem, especially those directly related to human life. Therefore, it is very interesting to analyze the content of this poem through the approach of symbolism and themes as two intrinsic elements found within the poem.

Prior researchers have conducted similar symbolic and theme dimension in poem. Alfriandi & Astuti, (2022) examined the symbolism of romanticism are portrayed in Heri Isnaini's poem titled I Bring the Wind. Romanticism here refers to a style of art that values emotions, intuitions, and imaginative expressions, especially when inspired by natural phenomena such as wind. The data source for the analysis is drawn from the book *Montage of The Sepilihan Sajak*. The study uses a descriptive method with qualitative analysis involving reading the poem to understand its meaning, identifying romantic elements, and interpreting these elements using a semiotic approach. It is revealed that the wind symbol in the poem represents a way to convey messages or feelings believed to be sent by God, carrying memories or emotions of those we think about. This reflects how romanticism values reconnecting with nature to express deep emotions and connections to the world around us.

Research carried by Septiani & Utami (2022) analyzed how Robert Frost uses symbols in his poems. Frost does not just see nature as part of the world, he uses it as symbols to express his feelings in his works. The study implements a descriptive and qualitative approach, focusing on gathering and analyzing information from library sources. Symbols can be images, words, gestures, or objects, and this research looks at objects in Frost's selected poems like *The Road Not Taken*, *Storm Fear*, and *Choose Something Like a Star* that symbolize aspects of nature. Using Peirce's Semiotic triangle, the analysis shows how Frost uses these symbols to deliver his emotions. The research shows how Frost sees nature not just as scenery, but as a way to express deeper thoughts and feelings in his poems.

The study conducted here shares similarities with previous relevant studies as mentioned above. The focus of this study is mainly on the same subject, which aims to examine the symbols and themes in poetry. However, the data source for this study is different. This study focuses on discussing the symbols and themes in the poem *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost, without paying attention to his other works. The main problem to be discussed in this study is the analysis and interpretation of the symbols and themes as intrinsic elements of the poem, and how these elements contribute to the poem's overall meaning and impact experienced by the readers. This research addresses common issues faced by beginner poetry readers. Based on the researchers' experiences, reading poetry is not as straightforward as reading other literary works because it often includes symbols conveyed through figurative language. Moreover, poems written in earlier times tend to have more complex language

structure that is harder to understand directly (Harbus, 2022). As a result, conveying the poet's message can be challenging to some readers. For instance, someone might attempt to grasp the meaning of a poem after just one or two readings. Instead of correctly understanding the meaning, they might misinterpret certain lines, leading to a misunderstanding. Such misinterpretations can distort the true meaning of the poem. Recognizing these challenges, the researchers argue that readers need to be more attentive when reading poetry. Regular practice is essential to enhance senses in understanding symbols and themes in poetry, such as conducting independent analyses of such poems. Based on these issues, the researchers then formulated the following questions to address the problem statement in this research: (1) how do the symbols in the poem *The Road Not Taken* indicate the message the poet intends to convey to readers? (2) how do the symbols in *The Road Not Taken* shape the overall theme of the poem?

The purpose of this research is to discuss the symbols and themes in the poem *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost. As stated by Sobur, cited in Putri & Shomary (2022), symbolism in poetry refers to subtle signs that metaphorically refer to something else. Symbols, within the context of society, are typically agreed upon by a group of people within a specific community. For instance, the snake ornament on the Telaga Batu Inscription is interpreted as a symbol of evil by nearby villagers (Alnoza, 2020). However, snakes may hold different meanings in other communities. In Greek cosmology, for example, the snake is known as a healing symbol closely associated with the Greek God of medicine (Katsaras et al., 2020). In the context of poetry, meanwhile, the snake symbolizes danger or threat that must be avoided or overcome, as observed in D.H. Lawrence's poem *The Snake* (Ahmed, 2021). The symbolism of the snake as a threat can be linked to other symbols with similar meanings such as forests, darkness of night, and even humans themselves could be portrayed as the embodiments of evilness. Therefore, to interpret the symbols found in *The Road Not Taken* and how they relate to the themes explored, the researchers conducted this study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have explored the symbolic structure of poetry and the interpretive potential of semiotic analysis in literary texts. Kenney (1966) provides foundational insights into the use of symbols in literature, emphasizing their role in conveying abstract concepts beyond literal representation. His framework has informed modern semiotic approaches to literature, particularly in understanding how readers interpret layered meanings. Klarer (2004) outlines intrinsic elements in literature, identifying symbols and themes as central to narrative and poetic meaning-making. Building on this, Putri and Shomary (2022) analyze symbolism in Indonesian poetry, asserting that symbols allow poets to subtly express societal critiques and personal experiences. Their findings reinforce the relevance of symbolic language in understanding the communicative function of poetry.

More directly related to Frost's work, as analyzed by Lestari et al. (2023) that analyze several of Frost's poems using a figurative language framework, including **The Road Not Taken** helps identify how Frost uses metaphor and symbolism. Their study identifies metaphor and symbolism as primary tools used by Frost to reflect on nature, solitude, and

human psychology. Similarly, Septiani and Utami (2022) apply Peirce's semiotic model to Frost's nature imagery, revealing how ordinary elements such as roads and stars are transformed into philosophical symbols through poetic context. It explains how Frost turns ordinary natural elements into philosophical signs in which each sign is not just descriptive but symbolic revealing a deeper existential or moral meaning. Alfriandi and Astuti (2022) take a different angle by examining romantic symbolism in contemporary Indonesian poetry, employing a qualitative and semiotic approach. They show how emotional and natural symbols contribute to thematic construction, highlighting how symbolic interpretation can vary by cultural and poetic context. Their work supports the broader argument that symbolism in poetry offers a flexible, culturally embedded method of conveying deep emotional truths. Collectively, these studies affirm that symbolism and semiotics are critical methodologies in the analysis of poetry. This research builds upon their findings by focusing exclusively on *The Road Not Taken*, treating it as a self-contained symbolic narrative through which the complexity of choice and meaning construction can be better understood.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study also employs a library research method, in which data is collected through a close examination of primary and secondary sources, including books, scholarly articles, and critical essays relevant to the selected text. The primary data for this analysis is the poem *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost, which consists of four stanzas and twenty lines. This poem was selected due to its rich symbolic language and longstanding relevance in literary and philosophical discourse. To analyze the symbolic elements within the poem, the study applies a semiotic approach, drawing particularly from Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the sign. In this model, a sign consists of three interconnected components: the representamen (the form the sign takes), the interpretant (the meaning derived), and the object (the concept or reality the sign refers to). Within the literary context, these signs often appear in the form of symbols culturally or socially agreed-upon representations that convey meanings beyond the literal.

This study focuses specifically on symbolic signs, excluding other types such as icons and indexes. Symbols were identified based on their recurring use and metaphorical function in the poem. The analysis proceeded through five systematic stages:

1. Close reading and comprehension of the poem;
2. Identification and notation of potential symbolic expressions;
3. Selection and reduction of relevant data for focused analysis;
4. Interpretation of symbols based on semiotic theory;
5. Thematic synthesis connecting symbolic analysis to the poem's broader existential themes.

By combining qualitative description with semiotic analysis, this methodology enables a rigorous interpretation of how symbolic language in Frost's poem reflects the complexities of decision-making, regret, and human meaning-making. This integrated approach aligns with recent scholarship in literary semiotics and underscores the poem's relevance as a case study in symbolic and thematic analysis.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researchers discuss Robert Frost's poem titled *The Road Not Taken* in terms of its intrinsic elements. This poem consists of 4 stanzas, each stanza comprising 5 lines. A semiotic approach will be applied to break down the symbols in each stanza, followed by determining the overall theme of the poem based on the symbols interpreted. This study applied a semiotic framework to analyze Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, identifying 15 symbolic elements across its four stanzas. These symbols were categorized, interpreted, and discussed to uncover their contribution to the poem's overarching theme: the complexity of human decision-making and the construction of meaning through retrospection.

Table 1: The analysis yielded a structured distribution of symbols

Stanza	Number of Symbols Identified
Stanza 1	5
Stanza 2	4
Stanza 3	3
Stanza 4	3
Total	15

The symbols analyzed include, but are not limited to: "two roads," symbolizing choices; "yellow wood," representing transitional phases in life; "grassy and wanted wear," reflecting nonconformity; and "sigh," denoting emotional ambiguity. Each symbol was examined not only for its literal function but also for its interpretant value, revealing layers of metaphor grounded in cultural and psychological contexts.

Symbols

Symbols are like tools that make poems more meaningful. These symbols add layers of meaning to the poem, allowing readers to interpret and relate to the poem in personal and meaningful ways. In the poem *The Road Not Taken*, early symbols are found in the first line, third line, and fifth line of the first stanza. In the first line, it says "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood," where 'two roads' here symbolize choices or paths in life. This situation, when the narrator confronts two roads, represents the decision-making process and the different options a person faces in many areas of life. Still in the first line, 'yellow wood' symbolizes a time of change and transition. It clearly implies that the trees in this wood have yellow leaves, which likely signify the seasonal change from summer to autumn, or autumn to winter, when the leaves are turning colors. It suggests that the narrator is at a point in life when changes are happening, and decisions and choices must be made. Moving on to the third line, it reads "And be one traveler, long I stood." The word 'traveler' here represents the narrator or any individual facing decisions. It points at the journey of life and the personal aspect of making choices, as the narrator is someone who is on a journey and in that journey, he is faced with

two diverging paths. Then in the fifth line, it reads "To where it bent in the undergrowth." The phrase 'bent in the undergrowth' symbolizes the uncertainty or mystery surrounding the road not taken. Readers can imagine that the ends of both roads disappear behind the undergrowth, hence not visible to the naked eye. It suggests that whatever the future outcomes, symbolized by the ends of the roads, are unclear and the choices of which road to take may lead to unexpected results.

The second stanza overall contains the narrator's description of both roads, which means that the narrator carefully observed those roads before finally choosing one. The first line reads, "Then took the other, as just as fair." Here, the narrator has decided which road to take, which is the second road. The phrase 'as just as fair' suggests that the second road is equally appealing or attractive compared to the first. The word 'fair' here symbolizes beauty, a feature that captivates the narrator to take that path. Hence, the narrator is saying that the second road is just as beautiful or appealing as the first one, not having many differences or perhaps not different at all. It leads the narrator to walk on this road. Then, in the second line which reads "And having perhaps the better claim," the phrase 'better claim' indicates that the narrator may have perceived the second path to have a stronger cause or reason for choosing it. It shows that the narrator considered various factors (such as the road being grassy and less worn) and perhaps found a reason that made the second road seem like a better choice, even though both roads seemed equally appealing ('just as fair'). In short, 'better claim' symbolizes the advantage that the narrator thinks are present in the second road, like a reward that is deserved to be found. Next, the descriptions of "grassy and wanted wear," as shown in the third line, symbolize the charm of the chosen road. The grassy road, which 'wanted wear,' suggests that it had not been traveled as frequently as the other road, indicating a sense of fresh adventure in taking the less common route. Then in the fifth line, which reads "Had worn them really about the same." This line indicates that even though the roads are initially different (one being grassy and less worn), both roads are equally traveled and worn over time. This could symbolize the realization that both choices in life often lead to similar outcomes or experiences, even though they seemed different at first glance.

The third stanza is about the narrator's awareness that once a choice is made, it is unlikely he will have the chance to go back and choose differently. In the second line which reads, "In leaves no step had trodden black," the word 'leaves' and 'untrodden black' both symbolize the condition of the roads (in the context of this poem, means choice in life) that are fresh and new. The fact that the leaves are "equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black" (first and second stanza respectively), suggests that both roads were covered in leaves that had not been darkened by footsteps. This symbolizes the opportunities and choices that seem equal or unexplored at first glance. Moving on to the third line, it reads "Oh, I kept the first for another day!" It simply means that while the second road is being taken, the first one is saved for another day. This symbolizes the narrator (and human, in general) tendency to delay taking other decisions, hoping to explore every opportunity he has. It reflects the doubt and the desire to keep options open, instead of getting stuck to a single option only. Finally, in the fourth line that reads, "Yet knowing how way leads on to way." Here, the phrase "way leads on the way" symbolizes the idea that one choice leads to another, making it unlikely to return and choose

the initial choice again. It emphasizes how our decisions could long last and how life keeps moving forward, with no way of getting back because life must go on. By interpreting the symbols from this line, we are advised to be cautious whenever making choices, ensuring that they do not lead us to unwanted regret later on.

The fourth stanza of the poem reflects on a choice made to take the less traveled road and points on how that decision has shaped the narrator's future. Such as the first line which reads, "I shall be telling this with a sigh." This line symbolizes reflection and contemplation. The word 'sigh' suggests a sense of reflection or nostalgia about the choice made by the narrator. It indicates that the narrator will likely look back on this decision in the future, contemplating its significance and perhaps even a hint of regret or lament. Next, the third line that reads, "Two roads diverged in a wood." This line symbolizes a moment of decision or choice in life. A 'wood' most likely stands as the symbol of life itself. There is something not visible in the wood, just like what life offers to us. Life is full of secrets, much like the wood itself. "Two roads in a wood" represents the paths or options available to the narrator, showing the metaphorical crossroads where a single out of two decisions must be made. Moving on the fourth and five lines respectively that reads, "I took the one less traveled by / And that has made all the difference." These lines symbolize choosing a path that's uncommon or unpopular, which might be harder but leads to a different result in the end. It shows that all choices ahead of us have the potential for the best or the worst outcome, where each choice leads to a certain ending. The narrator, like us as humans, can only choose. As a matter of fact, the outcome of the choices we make is always in God's hands.

Theme

The overall theme of the poem *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost is exploring how decisions we make affect our lives. It aligns well with the symbols used by the poet to convey his message. The poem uses the image of two paths diverging in a wood to represent moments when we have to make our choice. Each path represents a different choice, and the narrator thinks about choosing the less traveled path, which symbolizes taking a less common or more challenging route. The poem gives message that our decisions shape our future and determine where we end up, so consider taking a thoughtful step rather than the reckless ones. It talks about themes like being unique, making choices independently, and the natural hesitation and contemplation that come with decision-making. Overall, it suggests that the paths we pick have a big impact on our lives, influencing the directions we go and the results we get. When the road "bend in the undergrowth" and we cannot see any further of what comes in front of us, it is better to stay sharp and decide which road should we take. Do not be like the narrator himself, in which the title *The Road Not Taken* implies on his regret after taking the second road, as the emphasize of the title falls on the phrase 'not taken'. Even though the narrator has chosen his path, he continues to dwell on the first road he didn't take. It seems that he is disturbed by this wrong decision. Therefore, we can conclude that Frost titled the poem *The Road Not Taken* because the narrator is reflecting on the road he didn't choose and will forever wonder about what he missed out.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken* presents a rich tapestry of symbolic imagery that encapsulates the human experience of decision-making. By employing a semiotic framework to interpret fifteen symbols distributed across the poem's four stanzas, this study has shown how the poet articulates existential themes of choice, consequence, and reflection. Rather than offering definitive answers, Frost's symbols invite interpretive engagement, encouraging readers to reflect on their own life paths and the constructed meanings of their choices. The poem remains a compelling subject for literary analysis and a powerful example of how language can mediate the complexities of human psychology.

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