

Individualism and Nonconformity in Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken"

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ABSTRACT

The research entitled Individualism and Nonconformity in Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" is cultural study about literature. Written in 1915 in England, "The Road Not Taken" is one of Robert Frost's—and the world's most well-known poems. The poem implicitly delved individualism and nonconformity. The poem can be interpreted as a critique of people's propensity to second-guess their decisions and think that they would have turned out better. It poses doubts regarding the influence of personal decisions on a person's life journey and casts doubt on the idea that one path is fundamentally superior than another. Therefore, it became the topic to discuss. It was revealed using poetic devices, that is, metaphor and symbols. Metaphor and symbol are included in sense devices, therefore the theory of figure of speech was used. In order to verbalize individualism and nonconformity in the poem, theory of identity from Stryker (1980) was useful. It was descriptive research and there were two literary approaches used in the research, structural and formalistic approach. It was found that the speaker in the poem, faced with a choice between two roads, takes the road "less travelled," a decision which he or she supposes "made all the difference." The poem beautifully explores the idea of individualism and nonconformity by presenting the choice of a diverging road as a metaphor for life's decisions. The poem encourages readers to embrace their unique identities and make choices that align with their values, even if it means going against societal norms. It celebrates the importance of personal agency and the transformative power of unconventional choices.

Keywords: identity, individualism, metaphor, nonconformity, symbol

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading a poem needs a particular emotion to understand its deep meaning because it is concerned with ideas and insights. Everyone has their own understanding in order to interpret the meaning of a poem. The readers may have found from their reading of poetry in their own language that they can often enjoy a poem without fully understanding its meaning. Before the readers can say why they like a poem, it is first necessary to understand its meaning well. Morris (2002) states "three factors that should be taken into account in reading a poem: firstly, the readers must learn the person who wrote the poem; secondly, they must understand the thing that is written in the poem; the last but not least, it depends on the readers themselves who are the interpreters (p. 3)."

Robert Frost is one of famous poets. He is an American poet who is highly regarded for his realistic depictions of rural life. Frost was honoured frequently during his life time. He becomes one of America's rare public literary figures. His literary works stand at the crossroads of the 19th century American poetry and modernism. He is a realist and his works abound in metaphors of life using nature.

His works make use of colloquial American language, and many of his poems can be interpreted on many levels. Much of his poetry holds undertones of sadness and tragedy. One of his famous poems is "The Road Not Taken". Written in 1915 in England, "The Road Not Taken" is one of Robert

Frost's—and the world's—most well-known poems. Although commonly interpreted as a celebration of rugged individualism, the poem actually contains multiple different meanings. The speaker in the poem, faced with a choice between two roads, takes the road "less traveled," a decision which he or she supposes "made all the difference." However, Frost creates enough subtle ambiguity in the poem that it is unclear whether the speaker's judgment should be taken at face value, and therefore, whether the poem is about the speaker making a simple but impactful choice, or about how the speaker *interprets* a choice whose impact is unclear. Frost acknowledged, nonetheless, that the poem was intended to be a lighthearted and satirical remark on people's propensity to reflect on their life decisions and believe that they might have turned out differently. In the poem, the speaker questions whether the decisions had a big enough impact. By delving individualism and nonconformity in the poem, it tells a story that, at first glance, seems to honor the speaker's decision to take the less-traveled route. But a closer look at the poem exposes subtleties that make a simple reading more difficult.

The interpretation of the poem "The Road Not Taken" is a common topic of debate and discussion. While some emphasize the irony and contend that Frost is criticizing people's propensity to romanticize the past, others contend that the poem is a celebration of individualism and the bravery to follow unorthodox paths. The research focuses on "Individualism and Nonconformity" that will be analyzed by using two specific poetic sense devices, metaphor and symbols. Those two poetic devices are used to describe the portrait of individualism and nonconformity and the identity theory is considered relevant with the discussion. Additionally, the research needs a fundamental theory. The following theories are relevant to meet the aims; the first is the theory of metaphor and symbol as the basic theories dealing with poetic devices. The second is identity theory. Both terms are learned because they are related to the topic of the research, that is, individualism and nonconformity that are described by metaphor and symbols in the poem, entitled "The Road Not Taken".

Metaphor is a key component of all forms of literature, including poetry, prose, and drama. This is not only because metaphor is highly used as literary device but also because it is such a vital part of language and communication. Kjårgaard (as cited in Telaumbanua, 2020) explained that metaphor in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else. Many cognitive theorists have researched and written the importance of metaphor in the way to understand the world around. Steen (1994) asserts "metaphor has become intelligible as a highly revealing instance of the human capacity for making sense" (p. 3). It means that metaphor is used by people to interpret such a literary work. Furthermore, Mooij (1976) states "Metaphors may help to cover new situations or to elucidate new aspects of already familiar ones" (p. 9). It can be said that metaphor is something to describe something else. Metaphor is used to create new combinations of ideas and it is impossible to write poems without metaphor. Metaphor is used in poems to make the readers use their imagination to interpret the poem.

Furthermore, A symbol is something that is literally itself (a shiny, patent leather shoe, for example) at the same time that it represents or suggests something else (childish innocence or purity). In other words, a symbol is a literal object or thing that suggests another level of meaning; a symbol may suggest a person, an abstraction, or an idea. A symbol is basically a kind of image, differing from other images in the use to which it is put (Kenney, 2005, p. 75). A symbol in a story may, in fact, harbor multiple levels of meaning. In addition, Kenney (2005) also claims 'it is this attempt that the symbol, while evoking a concrete, objective reality, also suggests an additional 'level of meaning' beyond that reality (p. 75). Additionally, Sandra (as cited in Kurmalasari, 2022) clarifies that a symbol is a sign made by humans to be a differentiator for certain communities.

In line with the topic of the research, the theory of identity is useful. An identity is the set of meanings that defines who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person. Identity theory seeks to explain the specific meanings that individuals have for the multiple identities they claim; how these identities relate to one another for any one person; how their identities influence their behavior, thoughts, and feelings or emotions; and how their identities tie them in to society at large. Stryker (as cited in Kira, 2019) states that Identity theory, in the present context, has its referent in a specific and delimited literature that seeks to develop and empirically examine a theoretical explanation, derived from what has been called a structural symbolic interactionist perspective of role choice behavior (p. 34). A defining assumption of the symbolic interactionist theoretical framework is that human beings are actors, not merely reactors. Identity theory shares this assumption, which recognizes the possibility of choice as a ubiquitous feature of human existence. At the same time, however, identity theory recognizes the sociological truth that social structure and social interaction are equally ubiquitous in constraining—not in a strict sense "determining"—human action (Blumer, 1969, p. 67). The Self and identity are closely related concepts (Tap & Sordes-Ader, 2012, p. 135).

The self originates in the mind of persons and is that which characterizes an individual's consciousness of his or her own being or identity. The self has the ability to take itself as an object, to regard and evaluate itself, to take account of itself and plan accordingly, and to manipulate itself as an object in order to bring about future states. In 1978, McCall pointed out "the individual achieves selfhood at that point at which he first begins to act toward himself in more or less the same fashion in which he acts toward other people (p. 256)."

There were some researches that had been conducted by using Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" as the source of the data. The first research was conducted by Reny Heryanti (2012) that discussed the meaning and irony in the poem. The researcher focused on intrinsic elements in the poem in order to reveal the detailed meaning of the poem by using irony. The second one was written by I Wayan Indrayana (2016) who discussed the symbolic meaning in the poem. It also explained the detailed meaning of the poem. The third one was the research conducted by Intan Sori (2017). It was similar to the first research that used figure of speech. The difference was that the latter used personification to reveal the detailed meaning of the poem. The fourth research dealt with the cultural studies of the poem. It was written by Jumino (2019) who discussed "Human Existence as Individual Creature" through stylistic view. The research was different from the early three ones that analyzed the poem through literary views, while Jumino's analysis of the poem through linguistic perspective. Moreover, another discussion dealing with intrinsic element, that is, "Revealing Theme of The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost" written by Mulyati (2021) focused on theme of the poem. The research taken is different from the previous ones. The novelty that makes it different is that the research combines the literary study and cultural one. The research focuses on individualism and nonconformity as the cultural study of the poem. Essentially, by offering a situation that, while appearing to celebrate autonomous choice, also encourages contemplation on the complexity, uncertainties, and potential perils connected with such decisions, "The Road Not Taken" adds to conversations about individualism and nonconformity. Moreover, the cultural study is analyzed using poetic devices, that is, metaphor and symbol.

2. METHOD

The most suitable method of research used is descriptive method. Punch (2000) explains that descriptive method is setting out to collect, organize and summarize information about the matter being studied (p. 38). Hence, this method is aimed to describe "Individualism and Nonconformity in Robert Frost's The Road Not Taken". Document analysis is used for data collecting technique. There

are several documents which are analyzed. Firstly, some articles that are related to theory of Identity. Secondly, the documents are in the form of words and phrases in lines of the poem.

Two approaches are used to support the analysis. The approaches intended include structural approach and formalist criticism. Structural approach is applied in this research because this kind of approach is very effective for analyzing a poem which has some poetic meaning of the words.

Structural approach concentrates on each constituent of the construction. By understanding the meaning of the words, the truth can be discovered. D'haen (2014) states that structural approach is producing relevant results by looking in places where one would not look without being urged by sturdy model (p. 143). In other words, the structural approach is used to get the mastery over the structures. It concentrates on each word to get the detailed meaning.

Formalist criticism regards literature as a unique form of human's knowledge that needs to be examined in its own terms. The natural, sensible starting point is the interpretation and analysis of the works of literature themselves. To explore the intense relationship within a poem is done by close reading, a careful step-by-step analysis and explication of a text. The formalist criticism which is now called as the new criticism or formalistic approach is defined as the assumption that a given literary experience takes a shape proper to itself, or at the least that the shape and the experience are functions of each other (Guerin et al., 2005).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

"The Road Not Taken" that was first published in 1961 is a famous poem written by Robert Frost, an American poet. Literally, when the poem is read, some will say that it talks about two different roads in the woods, and the speaker is feeling confused which road he has to take. He describes each road that one road seems like full of grass and no one has passed by, while the other one is the opposite. Figuratively, the poem presents a speaker coming across a fork in the road while walking in the woods. The speaker acknowledges that both paths are equally appealing and that he cannot take both. After some contemplation, he decides to take the less-traveled path, stating that it has made all the difference in his life.

Moreover, not only does the poem present individualism, but also non-conformity implicitly. Both hidden meanings are described figuratively by two poetic devices, that is, through metaphor and symbols. Those are experienced by the speaker in the poem that in finding his life identity, he has chosen his own unique ways in living the life. The following is the poem entitled "The Road Not Taken":

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
To where it bent in the undergrowth; (5)

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Has worn them really about the same, (10)

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

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 I doubted if I should ever come back. (15)

I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference. (20)

3.1 Metaphor and Symbols Describing Individualism and Nonconformity in "The Road Not Taken"

The idea of the "road" in "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood" (the 1st line of the 1st stanza) is one metaphor that can be connected to the concept of individualism. "The two roads" that are described in the poem can be interpreted as metaphorical representations of choices the speaker makes in life and the directions he goes. The two different paths in the poem visualize a fork in the road. It is encountered by the speaker and each path connotes a distinct decision or course of action. The journey through life and the choices made along the path can be symbolized by the metaphorical road. "Yellow wood" as written in the first line suggests an autumn stroll when the speaker is confronted with his decision to choose which path he passes.

"Then took the other, as just as fair,
 And having perhaps the better claim,
 Because it was grassy and wanted wear;"

Those lines are parts of the second stanza showing that the speaker embraces nonconformity and expresses a desire to create his own unique journey. The metaphor suggests a sense of individuality, merely independent, and the willingness to challenge established norms and expectations. Moreover, it encourages the speaker to break away from conformity and explore alternative possibility. The phrase "grassy and wanted wear" symbolizes the path the speaker chose has not been traveled before and covered in grass. He desires to encounter difficulties in life and the joy for reaching his goal after he is able to overcome his hardships.

"Oh, I kept the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 I doubted if I should ever come back."

Three lines of the third stanza imply the unpredictable and uncertain nature of life. Just as the speaker on a road cannot foresee what lies ahead, he cannot predict the outcomes of the choices he has made. This notion reinforces the idea that individualism involves taking risks and being willing to face the unknown.

Consider the following lines of the poem successively:
 "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference."

The road "less traveled" can also metaphorically represent the path of self-discovery and personal growth. By taking the less conventional route, the speaker has the opportunity to define his own values, beliefs, and identity. It signifies the importance of individuality and the rewards that can come from charting one's own course.

Furthermore, the metaphor of the road "less traveled" can imply the courage and resilience required to follow an unconventional path. Nonconformity often involves facing opposition or skepticism from others, and the metaphor highlights the strength needed to withstand such challenges. Overall, the metaphor of the road "less traveled" in the poem is a powerful

representation of nonconformity. It inspires the speaker to value his individuality, defy social norms, and follow his own unique paths. It serves as a reminder of the value of individualism and the potential rewards that come from breaking away from conformity.

Additionally, there are several symbols in “The Road Not Taken” that can be associated with individualism and nonconformity. Those highlight the importance of personal choices and independent decision-making. “Two roads” is repeated twice in the poem, the former is in the 1st line of the 1st stanza and the latter is in the 3rd line of the 4th stanza. The paths which the speaker encounters symbolize the speaker’s choices to face in life. Each road represents a different direction, opportunity or decision. The symbol of the “two roads” emphasizes the idea that the speaker has the freedom to make his own choices and take his own unique paths. Besides, the “two roads” also represents the decision to deviate from the common or conventional path that symbolizes the willingness to embrace nonconformity and choose a distinct course.

Moreover, the speaker utters “I took the one less traveled by” in the last stanza of the poem. “The one less traveled” symbolizes the choice to go against the crowd and follow an unconventional route. It represents the path of nonconformity and individualism because the speaker wants to find his identity by opting for the road less traveled and suggesting a desire to break away from social expectations and make distinctive choice.

Furthermore, the pronoun “I” is the speaker who can be seen as a symbol of individualism. Some lines in the poem that represent the speaker are *Oh, I kept the first for another day! / I doubted if I should ever come back / I shall be telling this with a sigh / I took the one less traveled by*. Those lines show the speaker’s contemplation of the paths and his ultimate decision to take the less traveled road. It reflects a sense of personal autonomy and the courage to go against the way some people have done. The speaker embodies the notion of individual agency and the willingness to embrace the consequences of his choice.

In addition, the regretful tone of the speaker is inferred in the 1st line of the last stanza “I shall be telling this with a **sigh**” and the last line of the last stanza “And that has made all the difference”. Not only does it symbolize the inherent risk and uncertainty associated with individualism, but also the challenges and potential consequences of nonconformity. The tone highlights the complexity of individualism and the recognition that making independent choices can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Under those circumstances, it reflects the recognition that choosing the less conventional path can be difficult and may lead to uncertainty and regret.

In conclusion, the symbols collectively reinforce individualism and nonconformity in “The Road Not Taken” by underlying the significance of making independent and different choices, deviating from the norm, and the potential rewards and challenges that come with the following his own path. Finally, the speaker’s decision reflects the courage to go against societal expectations and embrace individualism.

4. CONCLUSION

The research takes a topic entitled “Individualism and Nonconformity in Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”. The poem that consists of four stanzas talks about someone’s choice in life. The poet, Robert Frost, visualizes the situation of the woods in which there are two different roads. The intrinsic elements of poems, that is, metaphor and symbol are used to reveal the cultural study in the poem. The poem deeply describes individualism and nonconformity conducted by the speaker when he experience to choose how to live his life. Besides the theory of identity, the theory of poetic devices about metaphor and symbol is used to support the analysis. The research is descriptive and document

analysis as the techniques of data collection.

In the poem, the speaker embraces nonconformity and displays a desire to design his special life journey by taking the less traveled path. The analogy implies a sense of independence and a readiness to question conventional wisdom and expectations. The speaker is encouraged to abandon conformity and consider alternative options. The route of self-discovery and personal development can also be metaphorically represented by the less traveled road. Furthermore, the main symbols that represent individualism and nonconformity in the poem are "the two roads, the less traveled road, the speaker and the regretful tone of the speaker" which collectively reinforce the theme of the poem by emphasizing the significance of personal choices and the courage to deviate from the norm.

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