‘THE ROAD NOT TAKEN’

- Four stanzas, each of five lines
- Regular abaab rhyme scheme
- Lexis simple and accessible
- American spelling of “traveler” and “traveled”
- Simplicity sometimes sounds like a moral tale or parable
- Inverted syntax contributes to this effect – “long I stood”
- Lexis like “diverged”, “fair” and “hence” add to formality and slightly archaic feel
- Formal though simple tone: no contractions, slang or colloquialisms
- Past tense throughout until last stanza
- Future tense in final stanza, correctness of prescriptive grammar again influencing formal tone – “I shall be telling this”
- First person speaker
- Story-telling mood e.g. number of lines beginning with “and”
- Nothing figurative – no similes or metaphors, except, perhaps, the whole poem
- Paths, roads, forks = ancient metaphor for life’s crises and decisions
- Ambiguity of whole poem – difficult to identify attitudes and values
- Frost described it as a “very tricky” poem
- Ambiguity of title: which is the “road not taken”? Is “the road not taken” “the road less traveled”? = not taken by most people?
- Or “the road not taken” “the first” one, the one that the speaker did not take?
- Careful reading needed to detect deliberate inconsistency and irony
- Has been called the most misunderstood poem in American literature!
Certainly about the nature of choice, of decision, and of regret, perhaps

Choice or fate?

Freedom to choose, but do not know what we are choosing, its consequences, or what the other choice would have brought

Surveying the choices, cannot see very far, do not know outcome –

“And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth”

Superficial reading suggests it is about individualism, encouraging the taking of the “road less traveled”, choosing to go one’s own way, not following the pack, being unconventional

But makes clear three times that the two roads were indistinguishable, that one was not “less traveled” than the other!

“just as fair”; “worn ... about the same”; “equally ... no step had trodden”

But, in old age, he will claim that he did it his way and took “the one less traveled by”

He will brag fraudulently of his youthful sense of adventure, swaggering of being his own man, a nonconformist, a free thinker

He will hold up his own life as an example

Last line sententious and moralising – “And that made all the difference”

But not true! Ironic – he did not choose “the road less traveled”: they were both the same. He will merely claim that he did!