The Meaning and Irony in Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*

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Abstrak

Kajian ini ditujukan untuk mencari makna dan irony yang terdapat dalam puisi Robert Frost yang berjudul *The Road Not taken*. Sebagai salah seorang penyair Amerika paling ternama dan paling dicintai, Robert Frost sudah menghasilkan banyak sekali puisi yang menggunakan Figurative Language terutama metafora, simbol, dan juga irony. Irony sering sekali dipakai untuk menyindir atau mengungkapkan sesuatu hal yang berlawanan dari yang dimaksudkannya. Sehingga akan menjadi sangat menarik dan penting untuk dikaji.

INTRODUCTION

People may have found from their reading of poetry in their own language that they can often enjoy a poem without fully understanding its meaning. It is possible to pay more attention to the way a poet says something rather than to what he actually has to say. Enjoyment, however, must not be confused with appreciation. It is one thing to gain pleasure from a poem and quite another to be able to say why people like it. Before saying why people like a poem, it is necessary for them to understand its meaning well.

Many people share a belief in the incorrect notion that analyzing poetry is somehow vague or even far out. Nothing could be further from the truth. For there is a great deal of concrete information to be presented when discussing a poem. Granted, one should be imaginative in explaining a poem's possible but less obvious meanings. But first, it is important to be able to tell the reader the most essential fact about the poem. It has a definite mood or atmosphere; it is written from a particular point of view; it can be concrete or abstract, sarcastic or serious, tragic or comic, ironic or literal, and many more.

As one of Figurative languages, or in some book it is said as rethorical devices, Irony plays important rule in expressing a poet's feeling. Even, it is sometimes said that human being live in an age of irony. It is because irony appears in many aspect of life. Suppose there is a political candidate give a terribly long speech, one that rambles on and on without end. Afterward someone might turn to a friend sitting next to her, roll her eyes, and say, 'Well, *that* was short and to the point, wasn't it?' she is being ironic. She is counting on her friend to turn the literal meaning of her expression, to read it as exactly the opposite of what her words actually mean.

When irony works, it helps to cement social bonds and mutual understanding because the speaker and hearer of irony both know to turn the utterance, and they know that the other one knows they will turn the utterance. "Irony is a kind of winking at each other, as we all understand the game of meaning reversal that is being played." (Barry Brummett, *Techniques of Close Reading*. Sage, 2010).

"Irony has always been a primary tool the under-powered use to tear at the over-powered in our culture. But now irony has become the bait that media corporations use to appeal to educated consumers. It is almost an ultimate irony that those who say they do not like TV will sit and watch TV as long as the hosts of their favorite shows act like they do not like TV, either. Somewhere in this swirl of droll poses and pseudo-insights, irony itself becomes a kind of mass therapy for a politically confused culture. It offers a comfortable space where complicity does not feel like complicity. It makes you feel like you are counter-cultural while never requiring you to leave the mainstream culture it has so much fun teasing. We are happy enough with this therapy that we feel no need to enact social change." (Dan French, review of *The Daily Show*, 2001).

In this research, the writer wants to see the irony in one of Robert Frost's poems since what is written in a poem sometimes meant otherwise. As one of the most famous American poets, he won four Pulitzer Prize and he was given a chance to read his poem *The Gift Outright* at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy, (Schmidt, Gary D. 2000), Frost wrote so many poems which employs figurative Languages including irony.

Irony in *The Road Not Taken*

Irony is the use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning; a statement or situation where the meaning is contradicted by the appearance or presentation of the idea. Three kinds of irony are commonly recognized, they are:

- Verbal irony is a trope in which the intended meaning of a statement differs from the meaning that the words appear to express.
- Situational irony involves an incongruity between what is expected or intended and what actually occurs.
- Dramatic irony is an effect produced by a narrative in which the audience knows more about present or future circumstances than a character in the story.

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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;

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
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I marked the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.

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.

The main theme of the poem “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost is the importance of decisions that one makes, and how they can affect the future. In the poem Robert Frost effectively uses symbolism and irony to tell the reader that the road the speaker chooses can be either a wrong or a right decision, but either way it will make all the difference in the end.

The poem starts with a speaker standing in a yellow wood considering a fork lying ahead of him. The described setting gives out the whole idea of the poem. Lives are like roads with diverging paths that represent different choices that must be made. Frank Lentricchia claims that: “There must be two roads and they must, of course, be different if the choice of one over the other is to make a rational difference.” The speaker of the poem is not sure which path to take. He looks down one path as far as he can see. It’s almost like he is trying to take a peek into the future and see the outcome of the decision if he takes the first path. Next, he examines the second path just as careful and compares the two. They both are “worn about the same” (Line 10). The only difference between the two is that one is unclear and is “bent in the undergrowth” (Line 5) and the other one is grassy. Undergrowth is in the way and prevents the speaker from seeing what is further down the road. It can also mean roughness and difficulties on the way. The grassiness, on the other side, makes the road more attractive and easy to access. It can also symbolize comfort and a worry free journey. Choices are always difficult. Most people, making these choices, are full of fear of what lays ahead. They are also full of doubt if the right decision is being made.

Robert Frost has gone his own way. He could not help it; his destination-and perhaps his destiny – was directed by the spirit behind the man. This inevitable progress in indicated in "The Road Not Taken,". Once while travelling alone, Frost tell the reader, he stood at a fork in the road, undecided which path to take. Finally, he chose one because it seemed a little less frequented, though actually there was no such difference, for “the passing there had worn them about really the same. Yet, even at the moment of choice, the poet quizzically imagined that the choice was important, that he would someday tell himself he took the less travel road: “and that has made all the difference”. The poet difference is in him from the very beginning, long before he sets out on his career. The road that Robert Frost took was not the only different road, the right road for him, but the only road he could have taken.

“The Road Not Taken” perhaps the most famous example of Frost’s own claims to conscious irony and "the best example in all of American poetry of a wolf in sheep's clothing." Thompson documents the ironic impulse that produced the poem as Frost's "gently teasing" response to his good friend, Edward Thomas, who would in their walks together take Frost down one path and then regret not having taken a better direction. According to Thompson, Frost assumes the mask of his friend, taking his voice and his posture, including the un-Frostian sounding line, "I shall be telling this with a sigh," to poke fun at Thomas's vacillations; Frost ever after, according to Thompson, tried to bring audiences to the ironic point, warning one group, "You have to be careful of that one; it's a tricky poem - very tricky". Thompson's critical evaluation is simply that Frost had, in that particular poem, "carried himself and his ironies too subtly," so that the poem is, in effect, a failure. Yet is it simply that - a too exact parody of a mediocre poetic voice, which becomes among the sentimental masses, ironically, one of the most popularly beloved of Frost's "wise" poems.

It might be argued that in becoming Thomas in "The Road Not Taken," Frost momentarily loses his defensive preoccupation with disguising lyric involvement to the extent that ironic weapons fail him. A rare instance in Frost's poetry in which there is a loved and reciprocal figure, the poem is divested of the need to keep the intended reader at bay. Here Frost is not writing about that contentiously erotic love which is predicated on the sexual battles between a man and a woman, but about a higher love, by the terms of the good Greek, between two men. As Plato says in the Symposium (181, b-c), "But the heavenly love springs from a goddess [Aphrodite] whose attributes have nothing of the

female, but are altogether male, and who is also the elder of the two, and innocent of any hint of lewdness. And so those who are inspired by this other Love turn rather to the male, preferring the more vigorous and intellectual bent." If the poem is indeed informed by such love, it becomes the most consummate irony of all, as it shows, despite one level of Frost's intentions, how fraternal love can transmute swords to plowshares, how, indeed, two roads can look about the same, be traveled about the same, and be utterly transformed by the traveler. Frost sent this poem as a letter, as a communication in the most basic sense, to a man to whom he says, in "To E. T.," "I meant, you meant, that nothing should remain / Unsaid between us, brother . . . " When nothing is meant to remain unsaid, and when the poet's best hope is to see his friend "pleased once more with words of mine," all simple ironies are made complex. "The Road Not Taken," far from being merely a failure of ironic intent, may be seen as a touchstone for the complexities of analyzing Frost's ironic voices.

What is ironic in this poem is that Frost claimed that he had taken the road which less traveled by which caused the difference in his life. It seems that he was proud with the things he had done. He repeated the word "I" twice which shows his reader that he is 'the one', not anyone else, who dare the hard challenge. Contrary to this line, still in the same stanza, it semmed that Frost regreted his choice. It is this choice which made what he is now, which somehow, not good enough as in "I shall be telling this with a sigh". To some reader, "the difference" in " And that has made all the difference" could mean good achievement but to others it could be worse. That is why he regret the thing that he had chosen.

CONCLUSION

Robert Frost employs many types of figurative language in his poem "The Road Not taken". The most outstanding one is Irony. Irony and other types of Figurative language can help reader to understand a poem better. The very strong and clear irony in that poem is that Frost claimed he had thoughtfully chosen the best way in his life, but still, he did not get the better result.

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