

Choice and Uncertainty in Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*: A Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

The main focus of this article is to identify choice and uncertainty as the primary themes in Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*. The research utilized terminology or phrases as codes that added to the themes of decision-making and lack of clarity. The main information for this research came from the poem, while additional information was gathered from books, academic articles, and online resources. The study found that expressions or codes like "diverged", "sorry I could not travel both", "traveler", "just as fair", "perhaps the better claim", and "less traveled by" highlighted the theme of choice, while assertions, such as "long I stood", "looked down one as far as I could", "I doubted", and "made all the difference" emphasized the theme of uncertainty. The research adds to current literary analysis by exploring themes in *The Road Not Taken*, supporting theories that see the poem as representative of human uncertainty and the attraction of unknown possibilities. It indicates that thematic analysis can reveal patterns in literary works to enhance comprehension of literary categories. This article is important for individuals interested in teaching and analyzing literary works.

Keywords: choice, Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*, thematic analysis, uncertainty

1. Introduction

Robert Frost, born in 1874 and died in 1963, was the poet in the 20th century to receive the most honors in America. His portrayals of New England's countryside are greatly esteemed. He is known for depicting regular individuals in common scenarios (Gerber, 2024). His greatly revered poems include *Mending Wall*, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, and *The Road Not Taken*. His poetry frequently shows a profound understanding of human existence and nature, leading to substantial academic attention. He blends simplicity and depth in his work, enabling readers to uncover profound significance in his portrayal of country life and the environment. His incorporation of natural elements functions as both symbolizing and mirroring human feelings, with nature taking on a persona in numerous of his poems (Monteiro, 1988). He is seen as a distinguished American poet for his depiction of the language, people, and scenery of New England in his works (Meleen, 2020). The poem *The Road Not Taken*, initially printed in 1915 in the *Atlantic Monthly*, is frequently praised for its exploration of

choice and consequence themes, capturing the common human experience of confronting ambiguous decisions. This poem deals with decisions and their outcomes, showcasing his deep philosophical thoughts and his skill in drawing out universal topics through personal introspection (Abrams, 2022). This poetic piece continues to be impactful due to its straightforwardness and profoundness, reaching people of all ages (Pritchard, 1993). Burnshaw (2001) asserts that Frost's emphasis on decision-making and uncertainty in the poem embodies the modernist philosophy, which sees choices as influenced by life's unpredictability. This article uses qualitative content analysis to reveal themes of choice and uncertainty to readers. This technique can provide understanding of how the poem's language mirrors the intricacies of human decision-making, a topic that has not been thoroughly examined in Frostian studies. Thematic analysis plays a crucial role in qualitative research as it offers a methodical yet adaptable way to comprehend intricate data. It enables researchers to uncover patterns and meanings that may not be readily obvious, promoting a more in-depth analysis of participants' viewpoints and experiences. This approach is not just beneficial for producing understandings but also for guiding practice, policy, and additional research (Kiger & Varpio, 2020; Jowsey et al., 2021). Although thematic analysis is similar to qualitative content analysis and other qualitative research methods, its focus on identifying themes sets it apart by not just tallying the frequency of specific words or phrases. This difference enables thematic analysis to explore the underlying meanings of the data, as opposed to simply offering a surface-level summary of its content (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Furthermore, the flexibility of the technique allows for its application within a range of theoretical perspectives and inquiries, rendering it a valuable instrument in multiple disciplines including psychology, sociology, education, and health studies (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

A large portion of the current evaluations of this poem focus on interpretation or quality, highlighting Frost's use of imagery and metaphorical language to represent different directions in life (Meyer, 2015). This examination offers an unbiased way to explore how common and important thematic elements are, giving a new view on Frost's nuanced depiction of decisions (Krippendorff, 2018). Earlier research on Frost's work has highlighted how he depicts inward reflections, prompting readers to reevaluate their beliefs regarding decision-making and independence (Parini, 2004).

This research adds to the expanding realm of qualitative literary analysis by investigating Frost's presentation of uncertainty, a topic that has not been extensively explored in his poetry. This method aims to reveal the frequency and degree to which themes of choice and uncertainty are portrayed, offering a fresh perspective on Frost's poetic technique (Gioia & Kennedy, 2018). The main focus of the article is to analyze decision-making and lack of clarity as the central topics in this poem.

The importance of the article is in its capability to provide a new viewpoint on the poem through qualitative approaches, examining how Frost's depiction of choice and uncertainty impacts how readers interpret the poem, aligning with research that emphasizes the value of literary analysis in comprehending psychological and emotional reactions to literature. The research adds to existing literature on how readers interpret unclear literary themes by exploring the intricate themes of the poem and drawing on studies that highlight the impact of choices on decision-making processes. The study's limitations involve concentrating only on Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken*, using qualitative content analysis instead of quantitative interpretations, and examining themes of choice and uncertainty without delving into other possible themes or broader biographical contexts of the poet's life. The research includes utilizing a thematic analysis method to assess themes of choice and uncertainty present in the poem. The main material of the poem consists of specific keywords and phrases about decision-making and ambiguity.

1.1 Literature Review

Reviewing literature involves examining the fundamental ideas of choice, uncertainty, and thematic interpretation. It also discusses the opinions of writers about the poem *The Road Not Taken*.

1.1.1 Choice

Choice involves the selection of options and is a key part of human behavior, showing individual control and liking (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Evaluating different options is essential in decision-making, as it entails considering the expected results and engaging cognitive processes to assess the risks, benefits, and values linked to each alternative (Schwartz, 2004). Choice, being primarily related to psychology and behavior, demonstrates an intricate connection between autonomy, situational aspects, and personal objectives (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000). Research indicates that although choice can boost motivation and happiness, having too many options can result in decision exhaustion, bewilderment, and remorse (Chernev et al., 2015). Furthermore, the decision-making process is not solely individual, as it is impacted by societal, cultural, and environmental factors that shape personal preferences and the perception of autonomy (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

1.1.2 Uncertainty

Uncertainty is when the results of events or decisions are unknown, usually because of limited or unclear information, making it hard to predict future outcomes (Knight, 1921). Making decisions often involves uncertainty about risks and rewards, causing stress, hesitation, and anxiety due to limited understanding of the situation (Ellsberg, 1961). Studies indicate that uncertainty is a key factor in influencing cognitive and emotional reactions, as individuals tend to find situations with unknown outcomes more stressful than those that are clear (Loewenstein et al., 2001). In addition, the concept of uncertainty is key in risk theories as it distinguishes between situations with known probabilities and those that are based on speculation. Dealing with uncertainty involves utilizing adaptive techniques, like gathering more information or using heuristics, to handle its psychological impact and to make well-informed choices (LiCalzi & Bordley, 2000).

1.1.3 Concerning the Poem *The Road Not Taken*

Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken* (1915) has fascinated both readers and critics for a while due to its examination of choice, individualism, and the uncertainties of human experiences according to Bloom (2003). Frequently misunderstood as a praise of rebellion, the poem actually offers a complex perspective on making decisions, showcasing Frost's doubts about definitive explanations of choices and their outcomes (Pritchard, 1993). The speaker's contemplation of the road "less traveled" shows how decisions are sometimes nostalgically idealized or given more importance than they had originally, implying that the importance we give to choices may be created rather than innate (Holland, 1988). Critical analyses show how Frost utilizes metaphor and imagery to express the intricate balance between chance and intentionality in life's decisions, exposing the "simultaneous attraction to freedom and apprehension of loneliness" that comes with choosing one's own path (Poirier, 1977). Researchers also indicate that the recurring theme of uncertainty, as seen in the phrase "I questioned whether I would ever return," reflects on existential concepts, showing choices in life as permanent and influenced by uncertainty (Hirsch, 2002). In this manner, the poem delves into a common conflict between remorse and approval, as the speaker recognizes the uncertainty of what could have occurred (Lentricchia, 1995). Additionally, the poem invites various interpretations and challenges superficial understandings, as Frost acknowledged. The poet's intention to question the concept of "decisive" choices is emphasized by the

misinterpretations the poem has received. In general, his work reflects deeply on the essence of decision-making and self-awareness, acting as a tool for self-reflection amid life's unavoidable ambiguities (Parini, 2004).

1.1.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis involves systematically organizing and analyzing qualitative data by identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes found within the data. It allows researchers to understand different aspects of the research subject by analyzing the themes that arise from the data set (Dawadi, 2020; Delve & Limpaecher, 2023c). Known for its flexibility, this method allows researchers to adjust the analysis to suit their individual requirements and situations, making it suitable for those unfamiliar with qualitative methods (Braun & Clarke, 2012). It is a method of qualitative data analysis which is utilized to recognize, examine, and understand patterns, known as "themes," within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is well-known for its adaptability, enabling researchers to explore intricate social concepts by categorizing data based on common themes instead of depending on established theoretical structures (Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, it is especially appropriate for initial investigations in which researchers seek to reveal significance and trends in detailed qualitative information, like interview transcripts or open-ended surveys (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Typically, the process of thematic analysis includes six phases starting with becoming familiar with the data, then moving on to coding, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and finally writing up the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This methodical process provides a structured method for analyzing data, with room for adjustments and responses to emerging themes during coding (Terry et al., 2017). It is frequently utilized in multiple areas such as psychology, sociology, and health research because of its strong and user-friendly characteristics (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). It is applicable in both inductive and deductive approaches; where the former is driven by data, and the latter is guided by existing theories or frameworks (Guest et al., 2012).

TA provides researchers with a valuable opportunity to dive deep into data, leading to a more comprehensive grasp of participants' viewpoints and experiences (Nowell et al., 2017). Nevertheless, a frequent criticism is that it may lack depth when not conducted with thoroughness, resulting in shallow interpretations if themes are not defined or placed within the research framework accurately (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This technique is successful in uncovering concealed patterns and offering an understanding of occurrences that could be missed in quantitative studies (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). It is a commonly used qualitative research technique for examining and making sense of patterns in qualitative data. This method is especially useful for revealing the deeper patterns and significance within intricate datasets, which frequently include materials like interview transcripts, focus group chats, and open-ended survey answers. The purpose of thematic analysis is to generate in-depth and detailed descriptions of the data, enabling a more profound comprehension of the topic under study. Thematic analysis usually includes a series of essential steps in the process. Researchers thoroughly engage with the data in order to fully grasp its content. This process includes examining the data multiple times to discover initial thoughts.

Creating a starting point for codes: Scientists categorize the information in a structured way, pinpointing characteristics that pertain to the study's query. The process of coding can be carried out by hand or with the help of qualitative data analysis tools, and it lays the groundwork for constructing themes (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023c; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Looking for Patterns: Codes are organized into possible themes, as researchers search for connections within the codes. This step consists of categorizing like codes to create larger themes that encompass important elements of the data.

Examining Themes: The themes that have been identified are evaluated to make sure they reflect the entire data set accurately. This process could include enhancing themes, combining or dividing them depending on how accurately they represent the subtleties of the data (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Defining and naming themes: Clearly defining and naming each theme to capture the essence of the data. Having clear communication of the results is crucial.

Creating the report: Ultimately, researchers gather their discoveries to form a report, using relevant data excerpts to back up their interpretations of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is frequently misunderstood despite being widely popular. Numerous researchers may not have a complete understanding of its fundamentals, resulting in problems like using the method incorrectly or overlooking important parts of the analysis process (Morgan, 2022). Adequate instructions and thorough training are crucial for researchers to effectively employ thematic analysis and produce valuable outcomes. It is a fundamental technique in qualitative research that helps organize intricate data into coherent themes. The methodical way it identifies and explains patterns is essential for researchers looking to reveal the detailed insights that qualitative data provide.

2. Material and Method

This study utilized codes representing option and ambiguity as elements in the poem. The main source of information came from the poem The Road Not Taken, with primary data presented in codes, while secondary data were collected from sources including journal articles, books, and website materials spanning from 1921 to 2024.

3. Analysis

The researcher executed a thematic analysis related to the theme of choice and uncertainty.

Table 1: Expressions or Codes Contributing to the Theme of Choice

Expressions / Codes	Theme
Diverged	Choice
sorry I could not travel both	
traveler	
just as fair	
perhaps the better claim	
less traveled by	

The code “diverged” represents the point of decision-making, where the speaker encounters a fork in the road. This divergence symbolizes life's crossroads, where choices lead individuals in different directions, suggesting that paths in life often separate, forcing one to make a commitment to a single path.

The expression “sorry I could not travel both” expresses the speaker’s regret at not being able to experience both paths. This reflects the limitations of choice, acknowledging that every decision involves sacrifice. The line suggests a longing for omniscience and the desire to experience all possible outcomes, a common human experience when faced with meaningful choices.

By using the term “traveler”, the speaker emphasizes the journey aspect of life and decision-making. A traveler is someone in motion, moving forward, yet often without full knowledge of where they are headed. This identity highlights the uncertainty and exploration that accompanies each decision.

When the speaker describes both roads as “just as fair”, he reveals the ambiguity inherent in choices. Both options appear equally valid or appealing, implying that the speaker lacks any clear, definitive reason for choosing one over the other. This reinforces the idea that in life, decisions are often made without the certainty of which is best. The code “perhaps the better claim” introduces doubt, as the speaker momentarily tries to convince himself that the path which he chooses might be better. However, this tentative tone suggests uncertainty and reinforces that the speaker cannot be sure if this choice will yield greater satisfaction or success.

The expression “less traveled by” adds a sense of individuality and uniqueness to the choice made. Choosing the less common path reflects the speaker's desire to pursue something different or unconventional. However, this phrase is later undercut by the realization that the differences between the two paths were minimal, underscoring the unpredictability and complexity of choice.

Each of these codes contributes to the theme of choice, particularly how choices are accompanied by ambiguity, regret, and the complexity of decision-making. The speaker's reflection on these choices suggests that life's decisions, while seemingly significant, often lack clear, absolute meaning until viewed in retrospect. The tension between choice and uncertainty remains central to the poem, revealing the inherent complexities of navigating life's divergent paths.

Table 2: *Expressions or Codes Contributing to the Theme of Uncertainty*

Expressions / Codes	Theme
long I stood	Uncertainty
looked down one as far as I could	
I doubted	
made all the difference	

The expression “Long I stood” captures the speaker's hesitation at the crossroads. This pause reflects his internal struggle, as he grapples with the decision at hand. The extended period of contemplation suggests uncertainty about which path to choose, emphasizing the difficulty and weight that comes with making life decisions without a clear outcome.

By the line “Looked down one as far as I could”, the speaker attempts to foresee the consequences of taking that path, yet his vision is inherently limited. This line highlights the impossibility of fully predicting the future and suggests that any choice is made with incomplete information. It underscores the uncertainty of the decision-making process, where the speaker can only see a limited distance before the path curves out of sight, symbolizing the unforeseeable twists of life.

When the speaker expresses that “I doubted”, he reveals a sense of finality and irreversible change that each choice brings. This doubt underscores the uncertainty and anxiety tied to making a definitive choice, knowing that it may preclude other possibilities. It suggests an understanding that, once a path is chosen, the chance to explore the alternative is likely lost forever, which heightens the emotional weight of the decision.

The concluding line “made all the difference” seems to assign profound significance to the choice made, yet it is ambiguous whether this "difference" is positive or negative. This line leaves the reader questioning if the speaker truly believes his decision was meaningful or if he is simply rationalizing it in retrospect. This ambiguity reinforces the theme of uncertainty,

suggesting that the real impact of our choices might remain forever unclear, with significance often being attributed only in hindsight.

Together, these codes illustrate the theme of uncertainty by showing the speaker's desire to make an informed choice, his awareness of the limited knowledge available, and his ongoing doubt about the path taken. They reflect the existential reality that, despite careful consideration, we can never be certain of where our choices will lead. This lingering ambiguity and the speaker's retrospective view on his decision reveal the complexity and inherent unknowability in life's choices.

In *The Road Not Taken*, the concepts of "Decision" and "Doubt" mirror life's intricate choices and the unavoidable uncertainties that come with them. Frost utilizes these themes to demonstrate how decisions impact who we are, with doubt leading to deeper self-reflection and pondering about the roads chosen and not chosen.

4. Conclusion

This article focuses on how choice and uncertainty are key themes in the poem. The study shows how Frost's language and structure convey the emotional weight and uncertainties of decision-making through thematic analysis. The results indicate that the phrases "diverged", "sorry I could not travel both", "traveler", "just as fair", "perhaps the better claim", and "less traveled by" have a significant impact on shaping the theme of choice. Likewise, the phrases "long I stood", "looked down one as far as I could", "I doubted", and "made all the difference" work as symbols that convey the theme of doubt. The frequency and percentage of codes surrounding the topics of choice and uncertainty enhance the complexity of the poem, underscoring that each decision brings a range of possible results and regrets. Through the use of a qualitative approach in analyzing literature, the research enhances our comprehension of Frost's writing while also establishing a model for upcoming studies that connect empirical methods with literary interpretation. Future researchers should consider using a variety of qualitative methodologies to investigate different thematic aspects in Frost's poetry, improving comprehension of his literary techniques. They should also compare his work with other texts exploring themes of choice and uncertainty to identify similarities and differences in portrayal.

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Appendix-I

Poem: The Road Not Taken

- Robert Frost

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 kept 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.