

Brian Frantz  
Dr. -----  
English 12 Micro 1, spring  
1/8/04

### A Sociological Analysis of Selected Poems by Robert Frost

Though interesting in light of their narrow internal context, Robert Frost's poems have much farther-reaching applications. This is not unusual for poems, as most are meant to convey a far broader message than what can be understood from the text alone. Yet unlike the works of many of his contemporaries, Frost's are lucid and easily related to what we already know of life and society. This paper will explore the societal applications of "The Road Not Taken," "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," "Mending Wall," and "Birches."

A short work about decision-making, "The Road Not Taken" is relevant to our daily lives. Constantly faced with choices, we, like the narrator, must choose between different paths without knowing where they ultimately might lead or what obstacles might litter their path. As the narrator struggled between taking the popular path and the "less traveled" one, we also must constantly decide between following society and going in the opposite direction. Ultimately, whether the option is of moral, practical or social significance, the paths we take today affect where we will be tomorrow, as illustrated in the *Back to the Future* movies. Yet despite which path we choose, life will inevitably contain surprises for which we have no way of planning. Whether our decision was a wise one will depend on whether these surprises ultimately have a good or ill effect on our life. This idea is applicable to the life of a Christian. Christians are frequently called to choose "the road not taken" – to wisely travel the narrow path which contains surprises that are from God and which will ultimately "make all the difference."

Another brief poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” illustrates the fact that though life and society bring many distractions or temptations, we must remain focused on our goal if we are to ever reach it. In the case of the horseman in the woods, the “lovely, dark, and deep” woods tempted him to stop and simply enjoy the beauty around him. Tension thus formed in the rider’s mind. One part of him wanted to stop and savor the moment, and another told him that he must press on toward his goal. While not all distractions or temptations are bad – diversions are important for one to maintain his sanity and happiness – there are times when they can be dangerous. If the rider stopped in the middle of the forest for too long, he could either be late in arriving at his destination, or could fail to reach it entirely. The society of the forest beckoned him to bask in its beauty, but he chose instead what was more important and lasting – to make good on his promises and move on. This may be applied to our lives as well. When making decisions, we place values on each option. In the case of the rider in the woods, he valued his trustworthiness above the temporary pleasure he would derive from staying in the forest. Society can be helpful and hurtful in allowing us to reach our goals. It can provide people/circumstances which allow us to move forward, yet it can also bring forth temptations which can divert us from our larger aims. If at a certain moment we place a higher value on one of these diversions, we may end up making unwise decisions that prevent or delay our reaching our ultimately more valuable goal. The rider in this story succeeded in pursuing his goal in the midst of temptation. To reach ours, we must do the same.

“Mending Wall” conveys a slightly more obscure message, at least in my estimation. About the narrator and his neighbor seeking to repair the mysterious gaps in their fence, this poem follows the questioning musings of the narrator as he tries to decide why they have a fence at all. As he points out to his neighbor, they have no livestock but merely trees, so why

wall each other out? His neighbor only replies “good fences make good neighbors.” Yet something elusive is always trying to tear down the fence. Perhaps the point of this poem is to question why so many people live detached lives from each other. Is it distrust? Whatever the motive, society is awash with walls. Whether the divider is between color, creed, or capital, there is always something that tells us they don’t belong there. Yet for one reason or another, much energy and effort is required to chip away from them and they are nearly always rebuilt. Perhaps they exist more because we learn to love them and are opposed to the discomfort of change as was the case with the character Brooks Hatlen in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Perhaps we are so self-centered that we wish to be detached from society. In the end, good fences may make good neighbors, but only because no-one is willing to put forth the effort to learn to live without them.

Finally, “Birches” seems to focus on the narrator’s longing for a simpler time. Frost writes of wishing to see children simply enjoy simple pleasures in nature, who would perfect the art of swinging from birches. He expresses a desire to leave the worry and stress of earth for a short while and then to gently touch back down, as one does when he climbs a birch and swings down from the top. When “weary of considerations” that he must face in daily life, the narrator wants to escape the rat race and spend some time alone in the woods swinging from birches. Every human being must experience this type of wish from one time to another. Whether facing finals week in High School or College, being stressed at the workplace, or experiencing any of life’s other anxieties, we often desire not to operate in the social order, but to escape it completely for a time. For many, so much of their life is at the mercy of their career or circumstances that the occasional vacations located throughout the year provide their only time to relax and preserve their sanity.

One of the more enjoyable poets I have read, Robert Frost hides positive messages in interesting stories that are both understandable and enjoyable. But not only are the stories themselves interesting – what each has to say about society is also worth examining. Whether addressing the need to make proper decisions in spite of society's worldly leanings, the importance of escaping society or the danger in remaining detached from it, Robert Frost packages important truths in entertaining, accessible poems.