



## Is it possible to interpret a poem objectively?

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### Abstract

The present paper has been written with the focus, whether it is possible to interpret a poem in an objective manner or not. In the views of S P Mohanty arts have 'objective value', provided "there is need to explain what is meant by objectivity". If objectivity can be defined, then possibly, literary work of art can also be interpreted objectively. The postmodernist thinkers, such as Lyotard and Baudrilard, who are influential especially in the fields of literary and cultural studies, endorse that 'objectivity is never possible'. The positivist view defines objective knowledge as something we achieve when we have freed ourselves from all bias and all interest; in this conception objectivity is seen as absolute *neutrality*, a complete divestiture of the thinker's subjectivity and her socially situated values, ideologies, and theoretical presuppositions'. The research paper in hand has tended to explain that objective interpretation of a poem, at some level, appears to be there in the domain of 'objectivity'. For this the views of S P Mohanty from his essay, *Can our Values be Objective? On Ethics, Aesthetics, and Progressive Politics* have been emphasized and quoted. For the sake, the author has given an interpretation of the poem, *The Road not Taken* by Robert Frost.

**Keywords:** interpret, objective value, SP Mohanty

### Introduction

The primary focus of the paper is to focus on the question, whether it is possible to interpret a poem in an objective manner or not. S P Mohanty states that 'first there is need to explain what is meant by objectivity'. According to him for objectivity 'philosophers like Quine and Putnam, Nietzsche or Heidegger, all argue that everything that science relies on—its methodology, its understanding of what "facts" are, its practices of confirmation and even observation—is always necessarily theory-dependent rather than innocent, filtered through our values, presuppositions, and ideologies, rather than unmediated and self-evident'. However, contemporary philosophers and most literary theorists disagree anti-positivists have different insights. It is to ask the anti-positivist is this: Does the necessary ubiquity of theories and presuppositions, of biases and ideologies, lead to the conclusion that "objectivity" as such is never possible? Even the postmodernist thinkers, such as Lyotard and Baudrilard, who are influential, especially in the fields of literary and cultural studies, endorse that 'objectivity is never possible'. Mohanty emphasises, 'A very different conclusion has been endorsed by postpositivist thinkers, the "positivist conception of objectivity". This positivist view defines objective knowledge as something we achieve when we have freed ourselves from all bias and all interest; in this conception objectivity is seen as absolute *neutrality*, a complete divestiture of the thinker's subjectivity and her socially situated values, ideologies, and theoretical presuppositions'. Thus in the present paper, the interpretation of Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken* has been observed in the light of the above stated idea. The aim is to determine whether the 'given interpretation' is in the realm of 'objectivity' or 'subjectivity'.

### The Author's Comment on Robert Frost's Poetry

Frost's poetry is simple but profound. It centres around small, familiar but deeply significant joys and sorrows of ordinary men and women. His lyrics and narratives build a scene from nature or an incident from life in the manner of a simple story. However the simplicity happens to be of surface level only. In the subterranean planes, his poems investigate and theorise mysteries and dilemmas of the ordinary human beings with mature insight and intelligence. Like Wordsworth, he seems to be employing the simple plain speeches of the rustics. However unlike his stated 'predecessor', the 'poet of nature', Frost appears to be focusing on the disordered planes, where the rural men and women exist. The poems of Robert Frost seems to be containing the wisdom, learning, and experience of a lifetime. With an eye for beauty and a fine sense of form, he captures and invites the common facets of life with special meaning.

### The Poem

#### The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveller, 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 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 travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

(Robert Frost) The Interpretation of the Poem

*The Road not Taken* is an appropriate example of simplicity, revealing a universal wisdom. The poet himself has expressed that 'delight' and 'wisdom' are the two facets of this poem. In the simple narrative, Frost has provocatively sketched a countryside scene, which takes the reader into the philosophical realms of choices. The point of surprise is that each of the choices can determine, what a person 'will or can be'. The reasons are obvious:

'Two roads diverged in yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both'.

The metaphor, 'two roads' has symbolic representation. It indicates that choices happen to be there in the different walks of personal, social, professional and cultural life. These choices sometimes head towards the opposite directions. If you select one, the other gets rejected. Therefore a person requires time to reflect upon the pros and cons of the choices, offered. In the first appearance, all the choices might equally seem feasible, however a close observation clarifies, 'which' of the 'both' is more worthy to be treaded on. The poet chooses, "I took the one less travelled by", since he feels tempted by its mystery and beauty. Although, poet desires to travel on both the roads, but he cannot do so at the same time. He consoles himself that if someday he returned, he would walk down the road, he has not chosen.

The idea of the road, which Frost could not choose, haunts him. He has some apprehensions that the chosen road would lead to some other unknown paths. This situation might impede his return. In our life too, choices and selections pave way for other paths to be adopted and treaded. And, in consequence, the chances of returning back get mitigated. In addition, the fear of wrong selection also adds to think more about the unthought potentialities of the 'not chosen'.

The first three stanzas are fixed in the past but there is a shift into the future in the last stanza. Frost states that he, in later decades, would reflect on the jiffies of his present decision. Then his experiences would reveal him that the 'road' he took, 'has made all the difference'. He would also come to know that the challenge of a lesser known and travelled road has profoundly changed his life. At the same time, he would never cease to think about the road that could be voyaged. The poem is simple as well as deceptive like dilemma, which is universal as well as touchy.

### Is the Interpretation Objective?

According to Mohanty, 'the contrary view is this image of

complete divestiture is profoundly flawed because such divestiture is never possible for humans. Objectivity is not neutrality. They stress to develop an analysis of the differences between different kinds of subjective or theoretical bias or interest, an analysis that distinguishes those biases that are limiting or counterproductive from those that are in fact necessary for knowledge, that are epistemically productive and useful'. The interpretation in hand, though has influences where personal or subjective concerns are there behind the selection procedures of the poem. Yet the interpretation is empirically motivated in a sense that view, I have attempted to defend is opposed to the postmodernist position that 'objectivity as such is impossible'.

Mohanty further argues that 'objectivity is an epistemic ideal in the realm of values precisely because values often refer to facts and properties that exist independently of our beliefs. Such moral and aesthetic properties as goodness, justice, and beauty are, on this view, complex properties of objects and persons in the world, and we can be right or wrong in our attempts to detect and understand such properties'. In the author's estimation, the interpretation in hand refers to the 'facts' and 'properties' of the poem, (such as 'The metaphor, 'two roads' has symbolic representation'; 'If you select one, the other gets rejected; or 'a person requires time to reflect upon the pros and cons of the choices'; and 'The poet chooses, "I took the one less travelled by"') independently of the author's belief. Thus a poem can be interpreted 'objectively' in a sense that the interpretation will not be completely divorced from 'subjectivity'.

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