

## Intro to Poetry Handout: 2041

For the purposes of our class, we will read a variety of poems. My first point to emphasize is that, while I know poetry can be both scary and off-putting, we are not here to become masters of reading poetry. Instead, most of the poetry we read in this class we will read for **content** and **theme**. In other words, attempting to wrangle the meaning from the poem and applying that meaning to the subject of our class and of each week will be our goal.

Of course, part of the fear of poetry comes from the poetic **form** (because poems are written in verse, they use rhyme, meter, and other technical features to get their meanings across). As our course proceeds, we will discuss and cover certain poetic technical features, like basic rhyme scheme and the breakdown of the poem (lines, stanzas, sections, etc.), but our goal will always be to gain an understanding of what the poem could mean in the context of our course.

Thus, my challenge to you over the course of the semester is to try to read courageously. Don't fear the poem. Ultimately, poems are only words on the page that add up to possible meanings. Our goal will be to determine what the poem could mean by using evidence from the poem itself. In other words, in reading, I'm asking you to formulate an **argument** about what the poem could mean. As you should know from Composition classes, an argument is only your opinion that you use to sway others. While some possible meanings are clearer than others, formulating what you think the poem means and why is a smart way to approach the assignments for our course.

Now, a note on rhyme scheme – the rhyme scheme helps us understand how a poem hangs together. Poems with regular schemes give us a framework that adds **music** to the poem. The most important things to watch for are **irregularities**, as when the scheme changes or breaks unexpectedly. We will look at examples of rhyme schemes as we proceed in our course.

Finally, if you are unfamiliar with poetry or would like a brief refresh on how to approach a poem, check out this fairly simple site through the Purdue University OWL. The "Writing about Poetry" entry, along with the Poetry: Close Reading entry can help give a general overview. Here is the link: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/615/01/>

Note: The above link includes reading poems for meter (stressed and unstressed syllables). For our purposes, we will only speak about this in a cursory manner, so don't stress (apologies for the pun) this aspect of reading poetry. Again, our focus is on the content and on how the poem fits the larger goals of our class. So don't fear the poem!

Directions: For the following two poems, try to work out the meaning of each. First, read the poem through to get a feel for it or a basic overview. Next, try to mark each poem for rhyme scheme (as explained by the OWL site). Finally, try to look at what you've come up with and decide what you think the poet is attempting to get across.

If you find you are having a difficult time readings these poems, don't worry. This is only the beginning. Hint: Both poems are about the choices an individual makes – but what choices?

## Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1838)

### A PSALM OF LIFE

WHAT THE HEART OF THE YOUNG MAN  
SAID TO THE PSALMIST

TELL me not, in mournful numbers,  
Life is but an empty dream! —  
For the soul is dead that slumbers,  
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!  
And the grave is not its goal;  
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,  
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,  
Is our destined end or way;  
But to act, that each to-morrow  
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,  
And our hearts, though stout and brave,  
Still, like muffled drums, are beating  
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,  
In the bivouac of Life,  
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!  
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!  
Let the dead Past bury its dead!  
Act,— act in the living Present!  
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,  
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,  
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,  
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,  
With a heart for any fate;  
Still achieving, still pursuing,  
Learn to labor and to wait.

## Robert Frost (1915)

### 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 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.