

ARTICLE

Robert Frost's Readers: The Racial Road Not Taken

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(Received 24 October 2025; revised 17 February 2026; accepted 19 February 2026)

Abstract

Robert Frost's Readers: The Racial Road Not Taken seeks to make “good trouble” by reading our country’s most cherished poem to challenge our country’s most potent shibboleth. “The Road Not Taken” is America’s iconic and most misunderstood poem, and I argue its reception speaks volumes about the current backlash to the Black Lives Matter movement that has resulted in efforts to scrub our troubled racial past from our museums, schools, and public places. I argue that for over a century readers have failed Frost’s chief challenge, which has been to encourage us to think about the speaker’s “nonconformism,” and our own. We have failed because since 1915, the year the poem appeared, most readers have seen fit to define their cherished nonconformism by ignoring the racial segregation and discrimination that has long befouled the nation and continues to plague us. This article chronicles the many historical events since the early twentieth century that might have encouraged readers to connect their free thinking with considerations of race in America, but did not. Instead, generations of scholars, readers, and advertisers have been mum about the poem’s relevance to matters racial.

Keywords: American poetry; Black Lives Matter; race relations; reader response; Robert Frost

Many American recoil from reflecting on our unpleasant racial history—from acknowledging the road we have taken to get where we are. While scholars, writers, and activists have encouraged us to confront that past, many decline, demanding instead that these efforts end so they can return to the sentimental comforts of half-blind patriotism. They are led by an administration that cleanses our schools, museums, public places, and minds of any sign of our troubled racial past, and so we endure yet another bout of white supremacist backlash, with its ugly pedigree of post-Reconstruction, post-school desegregation, post-civil rights, and post-urban rebellion reaction.

These erasures are what Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” allows us to confront. It is our most famous poem, and almost everyone knows it. We find it everywhere in our culture—advertising, music, and our schools where it is even occasionally memorized, though for the most part that practice has gone the way of the hickory stick. David Orr’s insightful *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong* catalogs the following items to demonstrate how deeply ingrained the poem is in American culture: we find it on coffee mugs and refrigerator magnets; in innumerable

graduate speeches; as titles of TV episodes of *Taxi*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *Battlestar Galactica*; as a Spry Fox video game; in the language of over 2000 news stories; and in the titles, subtitles, or chapter heads of over 400 books, including M. Scott Peck's 1978 mammoth self-help bestseller *The Road Less Travelled*. Orr reports "The Road Not Taken" is the most searched American poem, over four times as searched as the second-place poem, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.¹

As cherished as the poem is, most readers get it wrong, thinking it celebrates what many Americans take to be their most salient attributes as Americans: their fierce independence of mind, and their freedom to choose their own fates. The speaker of the poem, after all, is a man who once arrived at a fork in the road and chose to take the one "less travelled," a decision he says he will recount in the future, presumably to show he is a free-thinking nonconformist. Read Frost's poem carefully, however, and you will realize that in fact it subverts the self-described maverick speaker, who admits on three separate occasions—a lot in a poem of only 20 lines—that there never was a road "less travelled" because there was no real difference between the roads. First, the speaker looked down one road, "Then took the other, as just as fair." Second, "Though as for that the passing there/had worn them really about the same." And third, "And both that morning equally lay/In leaves no step had trodden black." At the poem's end, when the speaker states he will declare that his choice of "taking the one less travelled by ... has made all the difference," it is not clear whether he has convinced himself that he is a freethinker after all, or whether he plans on misrepresenting the significance of his choice. The land mines Frost places in the poem in fact subvert the notion that the speaker is the nonconformist he says he will claim to be.

Much, apparently, is at stake with this claim, not only for the speaker, but for millions of readers as well, who have felt compelled to confirm the speaker's false assertion. What Frost has done in this poem, and done brilliantly, is clear a path for us to question the insistent need to associate ourselves with individualism and nonconformism, an association millions of readers have eagerly made at the same time they have accepted the conventional interpretation of the poem. Frost has created a myth, or rather, those who have misread him have created a myth that has worked precisely the way myths operate in Frost's poetry as described by Lawrance Thompson, his official biographer: "One very old use of myth is to let a story show the ways in which human beings have shielded themselves against life-injuring or even life-destroying experiences by placing themselves in harmony with various life-encouraging forces."² From what "life-injuring" or "life-destroying" experiences have readers of "The Road Not Taken" shielded themselves? Have the "life-encouraging forces" with which they have aligned themselves really encouraged life? Despite Americans' pride in our fiercely independent national character, there have been "roads not taken" that might lead us toward a reckoning with the limits of our commitment to nonconformism.

1. The poem in and out of history

No doubt the most consistently "life-destroying" experience in our history has been slavery and its legacy of racism. From the time Frost's youngest readers were born to the present, there has been ample reason to think that any true nonconformist would want to be fully alert to, and dissent from, the unequal and deeply damaging treatment of African Americans—damaging to whites as well, as James Baldwin fearlessly pointed out. What

¹ Orr 2015, 3–4, 6, 10.

² Thompson 1966, xiii.

have been some of the tragic events a true nonconformist would want to know about? We might begin with the 1898 Wilmington, North Carolina destruction of black-owned businesses by a mob of 2000 white supremacists that killed dozens of African Americans. Then there was the 1906 Brownsville Affair, in which President Roosevelt, without a trial to rely on and based on rumor, dishonorably discharged all 167 black soldiers of the 25th Army Infantry Regiment for the wounding and death of two white citizens of the Texas town, despite the unanimous claims of innocence among the troops. In the same year, there was the brutal race massacre in Atlanta that resulted in the murder of an estimated 25 black residents. In 1910, attacks on African Americans broke out in several cities in the wake of African American boxer Jack Johnson's defeat of the white champion Jim Jeffries. The same year Frost wrote "The Road Not Taken" D. W. Griffith's notoriously racist *Birth of a Nation*, America's first box office hit, was screened in the White House. Echoing Woodrow Wilson's words in his five-volume *History of the American People*, the film itself quoted the president: "The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation ... until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country."³

In 1917, the East St. Louis Massacre, a white-led rampage, resulted in the murder of between 39 and 150 African Americans; 1917 was also the year 110 black soldiers were convicted of murder, mutiny, and other crimes at three military trials held at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio for acts of self-defense following racist attacks outside of Houston. In the largest mass execution of American soldiers by the Army in American history, 19 were hanged. In the same year, race riots broke out in Chester, PA and Lexington, KY, followed by race riots in Chicago (1919) and Omaha (1919). The Tulsa Massacre occurred in 1921. These are just some of the events in America's racial history that we might expect nonconformist early readers to have had in mind when reading the poem. If "The Road Not Taken" is, as Frost once joked "a war poem," his remark more aptly applied to the domestic race war than to the war then raging in Europe.

Yet reckoning with race in America has been the road not taken by readers of Frost's poem. Ads for Mentos, Nicorette, AIG insurance, iMac, Monster.com job searching, Playstation 4's horror/survival game "Until Dawn," the Kia Sorrento, the Ford brand in general and the Ford Ranger in particular—all traded in the risible yet lucrative proposition that they can create a herd of buyers by telling consumers they can avoid herd mentality by purchasing their products.

Singer-songwriter Melissa Etheridge dubbed her 2005 greatest hits compilation *The Road Less Travelled* (a paraphrase of a line in the poem often thought to be its title); country singer George Strait titled his 21st studio album *The Road Less Travelled* (2001), which included a similarly titled single with the lyrics "For the road less traveled ain't for the faint of heart/ For those who choose to play it safe and never stray too far/Me, I wanna live my life and someday leave my mark." Singer-songwriter Bruce Hornsby's 1988 single "The Road Not Taken" employed the line to describe the singer's decision not to pursue a relationship with a young Appalachian woman. The male in Brooklyn rapper Talib Kweli's 2002 song "Won't You Stay" appealed to a woman, sung by Kendra Ross, to spend the night: "We about to take the road less travelled/You ain't gotta go home." The song took in the difficulties of relationships in the black community and beyond from both a male and female perspective, and thus it obliquely addressed matters of race; it is the closest example I know of that even remotely deploys Frost's poem in this way.

³ Wilson 1908.

2. The poem and race relations

The poem's very popularity depends on readers' reluctance to consider nonconformism in the context of race in America. Orr suggests just such a correspondence: "The moment at the crossroads is the moment in which all decisions are equally alike. We haven't moved, we haven't chosen, we haven't sinned. And of course, one goes to the crossroads to meet the Devil, the angel who is also a monster. One goes to the crossroads to find America, the free land born in slavery."⁴ Orr's observation does not just refer to Frost's crossroad, it calls to mind Robert Johnson's classic number "Cross Road Blues," in which a Black man is stranded at a crossroad in the deep South at sunset, and he fears for his life as he appeals to God and sinks into despair:

I went to the cross road, fell down on my knees
 I went to the cross road, fell down on my knees
 Asked the Lord above, "Have mercy now, save poor Bob if you please"
 Mmm, standin' at the cross road, I tried to flag a ride
 Standin' at the cross road, I tried to flag a ride
 Ain't nobody seemed to know me babe, everybody pass me by
 Standin' at the cross road, baby, risin' sun goin' down
 Standin' at the cross road, baby, risin' sun goin' down
 I believe to my soul, now, poor Bob is sinkin' down⁵

The legacy of slavery looms over Robert Johnson's cross road, in no small measure because of the "sundown laws" that forced African Americans to leave town by nightfall under threat of violence. That legacy makes its presence felt in Frost's poem, if only obliquely. Careful readers will notice that blackness is part of the poem. Recall that the speaker observes of the two roads that "both that morning equally lay/In leaves no step had trodden black." Blackness is what conformists produce on well-travelled roads when their traffic treads the beaten path, pounding the leaves until they turn black. Conversely, after peering down one road, the speaker tells us that instead he "took the other, as just as *fair*," thus describing both roads as equally appealing and also—the association is undeniable—lightly colored.

According to novelist and critic Toni Morrison, a common linguistic strategy used by white writers to erase the presence of African Americans is to employ figures of speech that serve as codes that displace rather than name them. Little is revealed about African American experience, but because the strategy "counts on the reader's complicity in the dismissal," more is revealed about whiteness.⁶ If the binary of dark and light in the poem substitutes for a binary of black and white, the actions of conformists whose crushing footsteps render leaves black can be read as acts of racial discrimination that produce under-the-heel, beaten down populations. Now suddenly the black/back rhyme of lines 12 and 15 gains a striking new association that conjures up blackness, regression, and the heel on the back. With this racial dynamic operating "in the dark" as it were, we can better understand why the speaker of the poem is so intent on renouncing well-travelled roads, even though all the evidence shows he has in fact taken one.

Talk about race in a poem that avoids race may seem far-fetched to some readers. But what is far-fetched depends on what is etched, and certainly every reputable recent history of the United States demonstrates how powerfully etched into the American skin have been our

⁴ Orr 2015, 64.

⁵ Johnson 1990, *CBS Records*, CK46222.

⁶ Morrison 1993, 63.

racial wounds. As W. E. B. Du Bois acerbically put it, the foundational role of slavery “always takes its accustomed seat at the nation’s feast.” Stepping on communities of color has been a regular feature of American society, as has the compulsive erasure of such acts. In his pungent 1965 *Ebony* article “The White Man’s Guilt,” James Baldwin identified this inhibitory history in which “a great deal of one’s energy is expended in reassuring white Americans that they do not see what they see” because “what they see is a disastrous, continuing present condition which menaces them, and for which they bear an inescapable responsibility. But since, in the main, they seem to lack the energy to change this condition, they would rather not be reminded of it.”⁷ This erasure is undoubtedly a part of what the speaker of “The Road Not Taken” enacts when he falsely touts his nonconformist individualism and denies that he has chosen a well-travelled road. It is what generations of readers have done as well by celebrating this speaker, and by implication, themselves.

With his subtly provocative poem and canny title, Robert Frost reminds us of our road not taken—or road not yet taken until we work our way beyond our misguided complacencies and national trauma by, in the words of Cathy Caruth, “our ability to listen through the departures we have ... taken from ourselves.”⁸ As “The Road Not Taken” makes clear, because we face the future by shaping and reshaping our pasts through retelling our narratives retrospectively, there is always hope that new stories will be told.

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Author contributions. Conceptualization: H.T.

Conflict of interest. The author declares no competing interests.

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⁷ Baldwin 1998, 722.

⁸ Caruth 1995, 10.

Cite this article: Teres, Harvey. 2026. “Robert Frost’s Readers: The Racial Road Not Taken.” *Public Humanities*, 2, e51, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10153>