"The Road Not Taken" is a poem by Robert Frost. It was published in 1916, and has become one of America's most famous poems. The poem is about choices. It's also a bit of a puzzle. Here we give you the poem and then a guide to understanding its riddle.
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.

First, look at the shape of the poem on the page. There are four stanzas, or verses, of five lines each. All the lines are capitalized, lined up evenly on the left and of about the same length. The rhyme scheme is A B A A B, and there are four beats per line. Most of them are iambic, which means an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

The strict form makes it clear that the author is very concerned with form and regularity.

This formal style is totally Frost. He once said that writing free verse was “like playing tennis without a net.”
Notes On Content

On first reading, the content of “The Road Not Taken” also seems formal, moralizing and American:

> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
> I took the one less traveled by,
> And that has made all the difference.

These three lines wrap the poem up and are its most famous lines. Independence and self-reliance are two of the great American virtues. But just as Frost’s life was not as simple as we imagine it to be, so “The Road Not Taken” means more than just rebellion.

Frost himself called this one of his “tricky” poems. First there is that title: “The Road Not Taken.” If this is a poem about the road not taken, then is it about the road that the poet actually does take? How about the one most people do not take, the one that has

> And having perhaps the better claim,
> Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Or is it about the road the poet did not take, which is the one that most people do take?

For all that, is the point actually that it does not matter really which road you take? Even when you look way down to the bend you can’t actually tell which one to choose:

> 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.

Pay attention here, and note that the roads are really about the same. In stanza 1, in the yellow woods a road splits, and our traveler stands for a long time looking as far as he can down the bend. It is not immediately apparent which way is “better.” In stanza 2, he takes “the other” road, which is “grassy and wanted wear.” Still, the point is, they both are “really about the same.”

Ask yourself what season is this, what time of day, what feeling do you get from “yellow”? 
Are you reminded of baseball great Yogi Berra’s famous quote, “If you come to a fork in the road, take it”?  

Because in stanza 3, Frost makes clear that the roads are similar, and no one has yet walked upon the leaves on either one. Oh well, the poet sighs, I’ll take the other one next time. However, Frost knows that usually when you take one way you keep going that way and rarely if ever circle back to try the other.

**With Old Age Comes Wisdom**

In the fourth and final stanza, the poet is old, remembering back to that morning on which this choice was made. Which road you take now seems to make all the difference, and the choice was clear, to take the road less traveled. Old age has brought wisdom to a choice that was, at the time, basically random. But because this is the last stanza, it seems to carry the weight of truth. The words are concise and tough, not like the words in the earlier stanzas, which are not clear.

The last verse upends the whole poem. A casual reader will say “Gee, this poem is so cool, listen to your own drummer, go your own way, Voyager!” In fact, though, the poem is more complicated.

The poem was written while Frost lived in England. He would often go on country rambles with the poet Edward Thomas, who couldn’t decide which way to go. Is this the final trickiness in the poem, that it is actually a personal jab at an old friend, saying, “Let’s go, Old Chap!”?

From Lemony Snicket’s "The Slippery Slope" by Daniel Handler: “A man of my acquaintance once wrote a poem called ‘The Road Less Traveled.’”

In the book, Snicket says that the poet found that the road was peaceful but quite lonely, and he was probably a bit nervous. "If anything happened on the road less traveled, the other travelers would be on the road more frequently traveled and so couldn’t hear him as he cried for help. Sure enough, that poet is now dead.”
Quiz

1. Read the sentence from the section "Notes On Content." Then, fill in the blank.

"In leaves no step had trodden black."

The word "trodden" in the sentence above tells the reader that _____.

(A) no one had walked on the leaves
(B) the leaves had been walked on many times
(C) no one had cleared the path of leaves yet
(D) the path had been recently cleared of leaves

2. Read the selection from the section "Notes On Content."

Independence and self-reliance are two of the great American virtues. But just as Frost's life was not as simple as we imagine it to be, so "The Road Not Taken" means more than just rebellion.

WHY does the author mention "rebellion"?

(A) to show a stark contrast between the poet's word choice and the poem's themes
(B) to suggest the poet's primary reason for writing the poem is fairly straightforward
(C) to show a direct link between the poem's theme and common American virtues
(D) to suggest that the poem's themes are more complicated than they appear
3  Read the paragraph from the section "With Old Age Comes Wisdom."

In the fourth and final stanza, the poet is old, remembering back to that morning on which this choice was made. Which road you take now seems to make all the difference, and the choice was clear, to take the road less traveled. Old age has brought wisdom to a choice that was, at the time, basically random. But because this is the last stanza, it seems to carry the weight of truth. The words are concise and tough, not like the words in the earlier stanzas, which are not clear.

HOW does this paragraph contribute to the entire article?

(A) The paragraph concludes an earlier line of argument and focuses on the poet's word choice.

(B) The paragraph introduces a transition in the poem and emphasizes the change in the poet's style.

(C) The paragraph marks a transition in the author's argument and emphasizes information about the poet's life.

(D) The paragraph describes an alternative reading of the poem and challenges earlier pieces of evidence.

4  Read the paragraph from the section "Notes On Content."

Because in stanza 3, Frost makes clear that the roads are similar, and no one has yet walked upon the leaves on either one. Oh well, the poet sighs, I'll take the other one next time. However, Frost knows that usually when you take one way you keep going that way and rarely if ever circle back to try the other.

HOW does this sentence develop the idea that the poem is NOT as straightforward as it appears?

(A) by showing the limitations of the literal interpretation of the poem

(B) by suggesting that the poet is not talking about actual roads

(C) by describing how a small choice can have a major impact on a person's life

(D) by explaining why people rarely return to take another path