

## Robert Frost: Nothing Gold Can Stay

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
Then leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

Sometimes poems are not all that difficult, yet move us deeply. They stick with us because they seem, well, so appropriate to our world and our experiences. So it is with this poem by Robert Frost.

Eight lines, six syllables to a line (except for the emphatic final line, which has five), rhymed couplets. Pretty simple. The first six lines each contain five words. Line seven has six, but the 'compensation' for this is the last line, which has only four words. Simple.

Frost has written plenty of 'deeper' poems. A poet who often ponders the depth of human experience, he is more accomplished at complex considerations of human existence than this poem suggests. But every year in early spring I find myself thinking of this poem. I often recite it to anyone who will listen. (I recognize that while it is early spring in Vermont, it is late spring where many of you who receive these emails live, so although the time the poem refers to is relevant to me, it may be already be past for you. Oh well.)

When the trees bud and flower, and leaves first begin to emerge from those buds, the young leaves which appear are deficient in chlorophyll. In a matter of days, the sunlight induces chlorophyll. The leaves turn increasingly green. But there is that first moment when the color of the emergent leaves is pale yellow, what Frost calls "gold." That instance in time is what this poem describes.

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.

The poem tells us that first moment when spring arrives is a golden moment, but the golden moment is not one which lasts. Sunlight, warmth, time: all conspire to turn the leaves green. So the early golden “hue” of first-spring is indeed hard to hold. Time moves on, and the unfolding bud which made the early leaf seem flowerlike passes into leaf-dom, and green succeeds gold. That first moment of spring, of rebirth, passes and because of that passage we are acutely aware of time. Not until the following year will the leaves be floral again, not yet mature and green.

Early spring, according to Frost, reminds us of how quickly time passes, and how irreversible time is.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

says Frost, and we take from that verb – “subsides” – a sense of declension, a going downward, a descent from the heights. Several lines later this will be emphasized by “goes down.” But we know that already, from the subsiding. As the leaves emerge from the buds they become larger (in a poetic tour de force, growing larger is presented by a word for growing less, ‘subside’) – and green. The gold is gone all too quickly. This is likely true of human infancy and youth too, although in the case of humans, the golden time perhaps lasts longer.

In the poem’s next line appears the primary literary allusion in the poem,

So Eden sank to grief

The line is significant, and not because it is ‘literary.’ Paradise does not last, as human existence in the Garden of Eden did not last. A world of suffering and death ensues. No longer does ripe fruit hang from trees, as in Eden, ready for our picking. We must labor, we must struggle to survive: we live in a realm where things ultimately die and all things come to an end. With this line – we should note the great economy of Frost’s allusion and what it brings before us – the poet insists that his subject is not only literal but symbolic. It is not just leaves he is writing about, but life itself. Not just spring in the woods, but human existence.

Frost is often regarded as a New England poet, so let’s go back to the first lines of the first textbook printed in the New World, *The New England Primer*. Here is how the text began:

In Adam’s fall  
We sinned all.

That brief couplet taught the letter 'A,' but it also emphasized that the fall from Paradise, from the wondrous world of Eden, was something that would be repeated again and again within human existence. Whatever paradise existed – for the secular: in the womb, in our earliest existence – has been lost. We live in a world of time, a world which brings endings to whatever has begun. That, according to the Puritans, was what original sin meant, that we live in a world of time and decline.

So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

Everything declines, “goes down.” Rosy-fingered dawn, as Homer called it, becomes daylight; youth quickly matures into age, innocence becomes experience, and the golden hue of spring all too swiftly turns into the solid green of late spring and then summer.

In early spring we notice, acutely, this transitoriness. This past Sunday Buff and I went for a walk in the woods. Some of the trees were gold-tipped. On the floor of the woods, among the leaves, next to our path, were dogtooth violets (*Erythronium americanum*, a variety not of violet but of lily) blooming yellow with red-orange stamens, bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*, also known as bloodwort) blooming in the whitest of whites. All would be gone within days, the yellowish trees, the dogwood violets, the bloodroot .

When Emily Dickinson wrote her great poem “I dreaded that first Robin so,” she chose to focus on how painful spring is, for in that season the world was reborn while she was not. Hers is a brilliant poem, more penetrating than the Frost poem before us. But what Frost chooses to emphasize is also true, that the spring world and everything in it is transitory. He understands, even though the poem foregrounds transience, that spring’s first appearance, while an augury of transitions, it is also almost unspeakably beautiful. We can’t hold on to the beauty, of course, for “dawn does down to day.” But for a brief moment, fleeting to be sure, the world appears to us as golden.

Nothing gold can stay.

That is true, profoundly true, and yet what Frost presents us with is not just the fact of transience, but the beauty that, while ephemeral, appears before us.

This essay is brief because the poem is brief. While the poem is wonderful, it is not overly complex. It tells us of beauty and of transience. So let me close with another poem, this too about spring and time and transience. For reasons I do

not understand, perhaps no other poem echoes in my mind as often as this one, month after month, year after year. It too is not a tough poem. I find it simple yet at the same time penetrating and profound. It is by A. E. Housman, and appeared in the first volume of his *A Shropshire Lad*. (I finally, after years after avoiding him because he *is* a minor poet, taught Housman. Mostly, I must confess, because I love this particular poem. I found teaching him hard, for his poems are pretty simple, although breathtaking in their own fashion. What, after presenting the poem, is there to talk about?)

Knowing how ephemeral beauty is, and how time is irreversible, anticipates spring. Knowing that human life itself is transient, he goes into the woods before spring arrives. Housman admires trees hung not with white blossoms but with the white of a late winter snow. As with some of Wordsworth's early lyrics, the poem deals with deep emotion though arithmetic. Amazing, that: emotion and simple numerical relations, conjoined.

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.

Frost understood what Housman is writing about. For the earlier poet, it was the brief moment when cherry trees blossom, fleetingly. He reveals that since there is not enough time for us to encounter that brief flowering, we must anticipate it.

Frost also understood that time passes all too quickly. Spring recedes, passing into the fulness of summer. Time moves on, we move on, and the brief moment of "gold" is too soon behind us. But, and I think this is why I love Frost's poem, there is a moment when all we behold is beauty. Evanescent, but ours if we open our eyes to it. And, perhaps, capture it in words.

