

# "After Apple-Picking"

**Author:** Robert Frost

**Date of birth:** March 26, 1874

**Place of birth:** San Francisco, California

**Date of death:** January 29, 1963

**Place of death:** Boston, Massachusetts

**Country:** United States

**Culture:** American

**Type of poem:** Lyric

**Appears in:** *North of Boston*, 1914; *The Poetry of Robert Frost* edited by Edward Connery Lathem, 1969

Robert Frost occupies an unusual position in American literature. Not only is his work well respected by academics, other poets, and dedicated readers of poetry, but it is also widely popular. Frost wrote accessibly about topics of broad interest. His texts often deal with aspects of everyday life in ways that both exhibit and inspire real thoughtfulness. Certainly this is true of "After Apple-Picking," one of many poems by Frost that use some aspect of rural life to imply larger ideas about life in general.

As is often the case in Frost's work, the poem features a first-person speaker who is not merely an anonymous, disembodied voice; he is a hardworking farmer whose living depends on his success in both growing and harvesting apples. While recounting recent experiences in picking them, he reflects on this satisfying but tiring task. He combines attention to the physical toll taken by hard work with equally strong attention to the ways such work can affect one's spirit and emotions. The speaker is enormously tired; barely able to stay awake, he yearns for sleep. But his days-long experience of apple-picking will haunt even his dreams. He cannot enjoy any real escape from work, even when he is literally unconscious.

Like many of Frost's other lyrics, "After Apple-Picking" features a strong narrative element, not only expressing thoughts and feelings but also telling a story. As many psychological studies have shown, humans have an innate interest in hearing and creating stories; they organize their lives and thoughts through narratives. For this reason, Frost's frequent decision to incorporate storytelling into his lyric poems gives them strong appeal. But Frost's stories are often both realistic and symbolic. The ladder the speaker describes is real, but the fact that it points "toward heaven" (line 2) already gives the poem

extra metaphorical resonance. If the speaker had used "sky" instead of "heaven," the language would seem less suggestive. But no sooner does the poem seem to imply lofty thoughts than it immediately, and literally, comes back to the earth: the now speaker refers to "a barrel that I didn't fill" (3). Here, as throughout this poem—and throughout Frost's poetry in general—the language is simple, clear, straightforward, relaxed, and colloquial. "Didn't" is a more effective word choice than "did not," for example, because it helps characterize the speaker as unpretentious and informal.

The speaker obviously works hard but is now simply too tired for further work, stating, "But I am done with apple-picking now" (6). This very short sentence follows a very long one—a fact that typifies Frost's skill in avoiding literal monotony. The poem is full of varied rhythms. These include not only variety in sentence length but also variety in the lengths of lines as well as varieties and subtleties of meter and rhythm. The poem is built (as so many poems in English are) around a standard iambic pentameter meter: ten syllables, with accents on each second syllable, as in "But *I* am *done* with *apple-picking now*." Against this standard pattern, Frost can work all kinds of interesting variations, as in the emphatic stress on "Apples" in the immediately preceding line. The speaker's mind is burdened with thoughts of apples; how appropriate, then, that he gives this word unusual stress.

This poem, however, is not simply about apple-picking. It is also about the passage of time, the blurring of perceptions, and the transition from one experience to another—from day to night, from today to tomorrow, from autumn to winter, from consciousness to sleep, from sleep to dreaming, and so on. The speaker blurs distinctions between fall and winter by calling the "scent of apples" (8) harvested in the fall the "essence of winter sleep" (7). He also fuzzes the difference between being awake and being asleep by announcing that he is, right now, in the process of "drowsing off" (8). Whereas at the beginning of the poem he seems to be outside next to a tree, in line 8 he suddenly seems to be inside ready for sleep.

Perhaps the most explicit reference to blurred perceptions occurs when the speaker describes having earlier "look[ed] through a pane of glass" (10), which it turned out was not glass at all but a sheet of ice lifted from a "drinking trough" (11). At first the speaker says the ice "melted," but then he says he "let" the ice sheet "fall and break" (13). By first mentioning melting and then mentioning breaking, the speaker again undermines the reader's expectations, here by having one assertion seem to suddenly contradict a preceding assertion. All the examples of transition

already mentioned, combined with this very vivid imagery of first melting and then broken ice, help emphasize the idea of mutability, or constant, inevitable change, a common literary theme.

Paradoxically, the speaker was already "upon [his] way to sleep" (15) in the morning when he picked up the ice. Once again, distinctions are blurred: while one normally associates daytime with full alertness and nighttime with sleep, the speaker here implies that he felt sleepy even during the day. He is both physically and mentally exhausted. Even when he sleeps he thinks of apple-picking. This task has made a deep impression on both his body and his mind, just as the poem itself impresses on readers the sheer physical and mental effort involved in picking apples.

The poem is interesting not only for what it says but also for numerous small details of phrasing, including the onomatopoeia of the word "rumbling" (25), the effective repetition of "load on load" (26), and the almost biblical-sounding reference to "ten thousand thousand fruit" (30). Apple-picking involves almost all the senses, including sight, smell, hearing, and touch. The pickers' work is all-consuming, and perhaps Frost even slyly suggests that all human labor is punishment for the apple-picking done by Adam and Eve. In any case, most humans can relate to this speaker's sense of profound exhaustion and need for sleep. But even that sleep, it seems, will not be truly restful; apple-picking will continue in dreams just as during the workday.

## Further Reading

Muste, John M. "After Apple-Picking." *Masterplots II: Poetry*, edited by Philip K. Jason and Tracy Irons-Georges, rev. ed., Salem Press, 2002. *Literary Reference Center*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=103331POE10259650000007&site=lrc-live. Accessed 22 Feb. 2018.

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Frost, Robert. "After Apple-Picking." *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem, Henry Holt, 1979, pp. 68–69.

O'Connell, Mike. "Frost's 'After Apple-Picking.'" *Explicator*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2006, pp. 97–98.

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