



Faculty Forum



You Cannot Conceive The Many Without The One
-Plato-

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**Pondering the Effects of the Fall:
Spiritual Symbols in Frost's
"After Apple-Picking"**

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Robert Frost's delightful poem about the end-of-the-day ruminations of a fatigued fruit harvester, "After Apple-Picking," is rich in vivid imagery appealing to the senses, showing Frost's craftsmanship at re-creating the rural setting in our minds. Even more importantly for the poet's literary legacy, this work is laden with spiritual implications of universal import. These symbols show Frost's inner struggle to overcome doubt with faith.

"After Apple-Picking" opens, fittingly enough, at the end of a day of hard labor in late fall: "But I am done with apple-picking now. / Essence of winter sleep is on the night," (6-7). The speaker is the apple-picker; the setting is near the orchard with the apple tree and leaning ladder still in view in the deepening gloom of twilight:

"My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still," (1-2) Using the day of apple-picking as a synecdoche to represent a life of hard labor in one's occupation, one can then see the associated images, "winter," "sleep," and "night" as symbols of death. Winter, when nature appears to be lifeless, follows the summer growing season and the autumn harvest; sleep, when the body is quiescent, not only follows the strenuous work of the day but is also a Biblical metaphor for death (see John 11:11; I Cor. 15:51); night, when sleeping normally occurs, means the end of daylight and life's labors, for as Jesus asserts, "the night cometh, when no man can work" (John 9:4).

Appositely, concerns about the after-life seem to imbue the speaker's thinking from the moment he addresses his readers, for he immediately directs attention to both the ladder he has been standing on and its direction ("toward heaven still"). The ladder is a means for the apple-picker to carry out his life's work; thus, it is a symbol of the poet's artistic endeavors both to describe faithfully humanity's condition and to ennoble his readers through insights in verse. That is why this is not just "a ladder," but rather "My long two-pointed ladder." The ladder is specific and particular to each worker in the fruit harvest. The ascent of the ladder steps "toward heaven" suggest the worker's efforts to curry favor with God as he climbs toward higher limbs,

plucking more fruit at ever higher and less accessible limbs of the tree. The feet of the ladder are planted solidly on the ground, the earth known to Frost and his readers. Furthermore, the ladder leans for support against a tree deeply rooted in the same earth.

The tree, which bears a copious harvest of fruit waiting for the apple-picker's expert hands to gather, symbolizes man's occupation or place of work, which will vary from reader to reader. Since Robert Frost was both farmer and poet, he could appreciate the joys of a bountiful harvest and the hours of exhausting work that harvest represented at a very literal level, while also taking a great sense of personal accomplishment in each finished poem, one of the "ten thousand fruit to touch, / Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall" (30). In short, the tree is a literal worksite to the apple-picker and symbolic of the desk, pen, and paper to the poet, while the ladder is both the fruit harvester's primary tool and a symbol of the poet's craft.

That the ladder described by the speaker is "sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still" (1-2) is fundamental to our understanding of "After Apple-Picking" and, in a broader sense, of the *raison d'être* for Frost's poetry. For even after the apple-picker's labor is done, the upwardly-pointing ladder speaks of the dignity of work, raising man's spirit heavenward. Symbolically, when the poet's lifework is complete, the ladder he leaves standing, pointing heavenward, consists of the poetry which ennobles the soul of man, lifting him toward his Creator in both thought and meritorious deed. The fact that the speaker leaves the ladder sticking through a tree rather than taking it down at the end of the day's work suggests not only the heaven-

ward bent of the worker, but also an unfinished task.

First, let us consider the unfinished task signified by the tree-transecting ladder. Frost's apple-picker leaves no doubt that there was more work to do, for not only was the ladder left against a tree, but, he laments,

And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
(3-5)

The apple-picker places his carefully gathered fruit in a barrel, symbolizing the poet's published work kept and set aside for the enjoyment of posterity. For both laborer and poet, there must be fruit for the orchard manager/fruit inspector (and, symbolically, for the editor/publisher and critic) to inspect for abundant quantity and consistent quality. Note how the speaker addresses both of these concerns, in that order, later in the poem, in lines 28-36:

... I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to
touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
[quantity]
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with
stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth. [quality]

Symbolically, it would seem that the unfilled barrel (3), or an uncompleted opus of poetry, would disappoint not only Frost's publishers and editors, but God, the ultimate Fruit Inspector, as well. The poem does not suggest that the apple-picker will return in

the morning to continue work at the task; quite the contrary, for he says, "I am drowsing off" (8), possibly to something like the woodchuck's "long sleep" (41).

Secondly, the ladder left sticking heavenward through a tree symbolizes an indefatigable, energetic, and continuous effort toward gaining the favor of God through meritorious work. An old Negro spiritual affirms, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder. . . Every rung goes higher, higher." Similarly, the apple-picker takes deep pride that he left little undone on earth, ruefully admitting "there may be two or three / Apples I didn't pick upon some bough"(4). Staying on the ladder was painful and tiring ("My instep arch not only keeps the ache, / It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round." 21-22), but the reward is "hearing from the cellar bin / The load on load of apples coming in" (24-26). The apple-picker looks up at the ladder top pointing upward in the darkening sky and feels some security and satisfaction in his efforts to please the Lord of the harvest. The lingering "scent of apples" (8) in the night air confirms the sense of accomplishment for the apple-picker, now that he is "done with apple-picking" (6).

The third significant symbol in "After Apple-Picking" is "a pane of glass" that the speaker in the poem "has skimmed [that] morning from a drinking trough" (11). The "glass" is an obvious metaphor for ice, for later it melts, falls, and breaks on the "hoary" (frost-covered) grass. The ice is an important symbol in the narrative the speaker relates to us, for he remembers what he saw through it that morning just before he falls asleep and dreams. Although he does not reveal to us the specific scene the ice revealed, the sight was indelible and disturbing in his memory: "I cannot

rub the strangeness from my sight / I got from looking through a pane of glass" (9-10) and so as the ice melts, the speaker lets it "fall and break" (13). The ice or glass is an allusion to I Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face," a passage dealing with our limited knowledge on the earthly side of existence before the afterlife in heaven brings complete knowledge. Accordingly, the ice is a symbol of our imperfect knowledge of the afterlife.

The fact that the speaker skimmed the ice in the *morning* speaks of a time in his youth when he looked out on the "world of hoary grass," the sphere of activity before him in life, and contemplated the heavenward call, even before he climbed the ladder leaning against the apple tree and set his hands to work. The "strangeness" he cannot rub from his sight, i.e., forget, is a momentary view of heaven. However, the speaker admits candidly, perhaps remorsefully, "I let it fall and break" (13), excusing his responsibility for the loss of the beatific vision by his sleepiness, in the next two lines: "But I was well / Upon my way to sleep before it fell" (14-15) Had Frost deliberately suppressed a sense of divine realities in order to pursue "apple-picking," or earthly pursuits? Perhaps so, and his lethargy or torpor in the morning, speaks of his sense of mortality, even during the days of his youth. As a descendant of Adam, who ate of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge and good and evil and died, passing on the curse of sin and death to his descendants, the apple-picker thus acknowledges his spiritual parentage and consequent fate, death.

A vivid dream, the fourth spiritual symbol (18-26), succeeds the "pane of glass" the speaker saw in the morning. By

shifting to present tense from the past tense he has used to narrate the day's experiences, Frost invites us into the apple-picker's consciousness at night, symbolic of his old age. Significantly, the strange sight through the pane of ice was in the morning, while the dream is at night, recalling the words of the apostle Peter, "your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams" (Acts 2:17). In his dream the apple-picker sees, feels, and hears: he sees the apples, now "magnified" (18) in their magnificent russet color, he feels the ache that the ladder rung has pressed into the arches of his insteps (21-22); and he hears "the rumbling sound" of a huge harvest of apples coming into the cellar bin (24-25). The dream symbolizes all the poet hoped to accomplish in his lifetime as a poet: success based on poem after carefully crafted poem received with acclaim by an appreciative public or, more generally, a lifetime spent garnering success in one's chosen field of work. The harvester sees the fruit of his endeavors, fruit he himself desired (29), but bears the pain ("[m]y instep arch not only keeps the ache," 21) and fatigue ("I am overtired" 28) and marks caused by laboring on the ladder ("the pressure of a ladder-round" 22), symbol of his craft, while hearing with approval the "load on load" of apples coming in, evident proof that his labor has been successful. Here the dream ends.

Before the tired apple-picker can return to the troubling subject of his impending sleep, i.e., death, he makes two statements that both assess the value of the harvest and declare its divided destiny. First, the harvest was immense, for "[t]here were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch," (30) an overstatement of the abundance of apples to pick, symbols of the poems Frost produced over the years. The fact that the harvester would "[c]herish

in hand, lift down, and not let fall" (31) these apples symbolizes the consummate care and skill exercised by artists and poets as they produce their art and poetry. Indubitably, the speaker values the harvest dearly, for he himself desired "the great harvest" and it was he who cherished in hand each fruit, with care not to let it fall. Secondly, the harvested fruit which was carefully lifted down "and not let fall" goes into the cellar bin with the implied approval of the orchard manager or owner. Using apples as symbols of completed poems, these are ones accepted and published by the poet's editors and publishers. Some apples are dropped by clumsiness or negligence and "[n]o matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble," are rejected and consigned "to the cider-apple heap / As of no worth" (32-36). The symbolism goes beyond the poems accepted or rejected by a publisher to the spiritual destinies of human souls, heaven or hell.

Frost reinforces the connection between the apples' destinations and his consideration of his own approaching demise by the abrupt, yet apposite juxtaposition of these thoughts, as seen in lines 35-36, where the dropped apples

"[w]ent surely to the cider-apple heap / As of no worth," followed immediately in lines 37-38 by "One can see what will trouble / This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is."

His ladder pointed heavenward notwithstanding, the apple-picker is a bit anxious about the future "sleep," for he knows that even seemingly unblemished apples went to the cider-apple heap as castaways, so his carefully hand-picked, cherished, and scrupulously handled apples may not satisfy the Judge of all. The apple-picker derives some small comfort for his apprehensions by considering the hibernating habits of a woodchuck, which returns to his wonted habitat

after a winter's long sleep. Is Frost thinking of reincarnation here, or just an afterlife that is carried on in a manner similar to life on this earth? The fact that the absent, already hibernating woodchuck is left to answer the question is indicative of Frost's own uncertainties. At the same time, Frost's candor in confronting the big question about man's eternal destiny displays his greatness as a poet.

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