

“After Apple-Picking”

*My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
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. 5
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass 10
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well, Upon my way to sleep before it fell, 15, And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear. 20
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound 25
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch, 30
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap 35. As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone, The woodchuck could say whether it's like his 40
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.*

Summary

After a long day's work, the speaker is tired of apple picking. He has felt drowsy and dreamy since the morning when he looked through a sheet of ice lifted from the surface of a water trough. Now he feels tired, feels sleep coming on, but wonders whether it is a normal, end-of-the-day sleep or something deeper.

Form

This is a rhyming poem that follows no preordained rhyme scheme. "After Apple-Picking" is basically iambic, and mostly in pentameter, but line-length variants abound. Line 1, for example, is long by any standard. Line 32 is very short: one foot. The poem's shorter lines of di-, tri-, and tetrameter serve to syncopate and sharpen the steady, potentially droning rhythm of pentameter. They keep the reader on her toes, awake, while the speaker drifts off into oblivion.

Commentary

First, a comment on form. Throughout the poem, both rhyme and line-length are manipulated and varied with subtlety. The mystery of the rhymes—when will they come and how abruptly—keeps words and sounds active and hovering over several lines. We find the greatest separation between rhyming end-words at the poem's conclusion. *Sleep* comes seven lines after its partner, *heap*, and in the interim, *sleep* has popped up three times in the middle of lines. Sleep is, in fact, all over the poem; the word appears six times. But the way it is delivered here, the last rhyme is masterful. *Heap* first rhymes internally with *sleep*, then again internally with *sleep*, and then again, and only pairs up with the end-word *sleep* in the poem's last line. At this point, we've nearly forgotten *heap*. *Sleep* seems to rhyme with itself, with its repetition, like a sleepy mantra or a sleep-inducing counting of sheep. The poem arrives at final *sleep* not through a wham-bang rhyming couplet but more "sleepily."

"There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority." This is Robert Frost in 1946, in an essay for *The Atlantic Monthly*. "After Apple-Picking" is about picking apples, but with its ladders pointing "[t]oward heaven still," with its great weariness, and with its rumination on the harvest, the coming of winter, and inhuman sleep, the reader feels certain that the poem harbors some "ulteriority."

"Final sleep" is certainly one interpretation of the "long sleep" that the poet contrasts with human sleep. The sleep of the woodchuck is the sleep of winter, and winter, in the

metaphoric language of seasons, has strong associations with death. Hints of winter are abundant: The scent of apples is “the essence of winter sleep”; the water in the trough froze into a “pane of glass”; the grass is “hoary” (i.e., frosty, or Frosty). Yet is the impending death destructive or creative? The harvest of apples can be read as a harvest of any human effort—study, laying bricks, writing poetry, etc.—and this poem looks at the end of the harvest.

The sequence and tenses of the poem are a bit confusing and lead one to wonder what is dreamed, what is real, and where the sleep begins. It’s understandable that the speaker should be tired at the end of a day’s apple picking. But the poem says that the speaker was well on his way to sleep before he dropped the sheet of ice, and this presumably occurred in the morning. The speaker has tried and failed to “rub the strangeness” from his sight. Is this a strangeness induced by exhaustion or indicative of the fact that he is dreaming already? Has he, in fact, been dreaming since he looked through the “pane of glass” and entered a through-the-looking-glass world of “magnified apples” and the “rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in”? Or is the sheet of ice simply a dizzying lens whose effect endures? If, in fact, the speaker was well on his way to sleep in the morning, does this lend a greater, more ominous weight to the long sleep “coming on” at the poem’s end?

The overall tone of the poem might not support such a reading, however; nothing else about it is particularly ominous—and Frost can do ominous when he wants to. How we ultimately interpret the tone of the poem has much to do with how we interpret the harvest. Has it been a failure? Certainly there is a sense of incompleteness—“a barrel that I didn’t fill.” The speaker’s inner resources give out before the outer resources are entirely collected. On the other hand, the poet speaks only of “two or three apples” remaining, and these only “may” be left over. Do we detect satisfaction, then? The speaker has done all that was within his power; what’s left is the result of minor, inevitable human imperfection. Is this, then, a poem about the rare skill of knowing when to quit honorably? This interpretation seems reasonable.

Yet if the speaker maintains his honor, why will his sleep be troubled? There were “ten thousand thousand”—that is to say, countless—fruit to touch, and none could be fumbled or it was lost. Did the speaker fumble many? Did he leave more than he claims he did? Or are the troubled dreams a nightmare magnification and not a reflection of the real harvest?

Lines 28-29 are important: “I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired.” If there has been failure or too great a strain on the speaker, it is because the speaker has desired too great a harvest. He saw an impossible quantity of fruit as a possibility.

Or he saw a merely incredible quantity of fruit as possibility and nearly achieved it (at the cost of physical and mental exhaustion).

When we read “After Apple-Picking” metaphorically, we may want to look at it as a poem about the effort of writing poetry. The cider-apple heap then makes a nice metaphor for saved and recycled bits of poetry, and the long sleep sounds like creative (permanent?) hibernation. This is one possible metaphoric substitution among many; it seems plausible enough (though nowise definitive or exclusive). However, our search for “ulteriority” may benefit from respecting, not replacing, the figure of the apples. Apple picking, in Western civilization, has its own built-in metaphorical and allegorical universe, and we should especially remember this when we read a poet whose work frequently revisits Eden and the Fall (c.f. “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same,” “It is Almost the Year Two Thousand,” “The Oven Bird”). When the poet speaks of “the great harvest I myself desired,” consider also what apples represent in Genesis: knowledge and some great, punishable claim to godliness—creation and understanding, perhaps. This sends us scurrying back to lines 1 and 2, where the apple-picking ladder sticks through the tree “Toward heaven still.” What has this harvest been, then, with its infinite fruits too many for one person to touch? What happens when such apples strike the earth—are they really of no worth? And looked at in this new light, what does it mean to be “done with apple-picking now”?

All of these questions are enough to make one forswear metaphor and limit oneself to a strict diet of literalness. But that isn’t nearly as much fun.