

## Ephemera: Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay"

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**Instructor:** Dr. Mary Sue Ply

**Essay Type:** Poetry Analysis

### Nothing Gold Can Stay

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

The smallest poem tends to be both the rose's blossom, as well as its sharpest thorn. The ear delights in its concentrated rhythms while its brevity lends itself to a poignancy often lost in longer poems. A line that would blend with thousands of other fabulous lines in an epic stands out in a short lyric like the refraction of light in a masterfully faceted diamond. This is the case with "Nothing Gold Can Stay" by Robert Frost (2006), a poem which shows the ephemerality common to youth in nature, the early theological beginnings of man, and the passing of each day. Frost's poem focuses on the concept of blossoming, of potentials met, and of the inevitable downfall or decay of these. Frost gives no consolation for the "grief" suffered after this decay, but merely states the fact of its occurrence. The acceptance of the bitter fact that "nothing gold can stay" is itself a consolation, making the fact of a blossom's withering an absolute truth and therefore, perhaps, a little easier to understand.

The first line “Nature’s first green is gold,” denotes the natural world, that is, the New England forests Frost loved for most of his life. The “nature” in this line may also be human nature, or the lifetime of a person in comparison to the seasons of the natural world in which that person lives. The use of “nature” here is an example of metonymy; its meaning is more conceptual than concrete, linking any and all specific ideas within the catchall word “nature,” as well as widening the subject of the poem, suggesting that it is concerned with far more than the denotative meanings of its words. Following the inclusive abstraction of “nature” is the idea of it having a “first green,” suggesting both the green of leaves on trees and other plants or the early youth of the individual (it could just as well mean the “first green” or youth of an idea--the poem then being about the nature of ideas, or the nature of thought itself). The word “gold” either suggests the early leaf which lacks sufficient chlorophyll to be completely green, or perhaps a gold as in a golden age, an idealistic time in one’s life, or perhaps even monetary gold, signifying the physical component of things which, as the end of the poem suggests, cannot stay.

The ephemeral quality of nature’s “gold” is given in the second line, where the poem says that the gold is “her hardest hue to hold.” Frost makes “nature” feminine here, perhaps playing on the connotations inherent with this choice, from the cliché of “mother earth” to the general idea that “nature” is generative, fertile, a mother-like, feminine force. By making “nature” feminine, Frost slightly narrows down the connotative focus of the word “nature”; here, it seems more likely he is speaking of the nature of the flora and wildlife of earth, which includes, but is not exclusive to, humanity. This “nature” is subtly personified when it is said that it can “hold” onto the “hue” of “gold.” Therefore, the early color of leaves before they fully develop is seen as so heavy that the leaves metaphorically drop it from their hands. Ironically, the lighter gold of early leaves is much heavier than the darker green that replaces them. The implied weight of this

“gold,” on which Frost focuses his entire poem, makes it much more precious than what follows the initial blossoming of things in nature. The “hardest hue to hold” is implied to be the one hue, or quality, desired the most to be kept.

The next sentence extends the personification of nature while bringing the metaphor into another set of images. Here, nature’s “early leaf” is a flower; / But only so an hour.” Again, the poem concentrates on the peak of youth. The “first green” of the first line becomes “early leaf,” extending Frost’s train of thought paradoxically: what is an “early leaf?” This “early leaf” represents the first leaves to sprout from the branches of trees as spring arrives, but in human nature what does this “first leaf” symbolize? Perhaps it represents the first leaves, i.e. pages, of poetry written by the unknown author, or the first signs of a young person entering adulthood. This “early leaf” is a flower, the fullest realization of potential that lasts “only so an hour.” In the connotative situation of the poem, the message remains that this blossoming, this culmination and realization of great potential, cannot last for very long. Frost goes on to say: “Then leaf subsides to leaf,” indicating the decay of leaves that once, in the earliest moment of their lives, held onto something as pure and precious as gold. “Leaf” here is a vehicle for the material components of life, from the early leaves of spring decaying and falling upon leaf after leaf on the dry, brittle floor of autumn to a person’s body as eyesight diminishes, motor skills fade, and control over various bodily processes is relinquished with age.

Thus far in his poem, Frost has made an argument that the nature in which humans live and, by extension, the nature of human life begins at a point of great optimism in which all potentials represented by the flower’s bud have been met in the open blossom. This point in the lifetimes of all living things from trees and flowers to human beings is the hardest point at which to remain, and lasts only, at the most, an hour. Frost supports his argument by extending it

beyond the set of natural images that open the poem. “So Eden sank to grief,” he says, connecting the fall from gold to green (then eventually, though he does not mention this, to dead, brittle brown), the flower’s short hour of life, to the theological origins of the world which, after the arrival of man and woman, “sank to grief.” The use of “Eden” is another example of metonymy in this poem, in which the very beginning of time is represented by this one name in Judeo-Christian myth. “Eden” represents the pure world before man was created to name everything, to tend to the animals and the earth, and before he and his wife disobeyed the divine by eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge, thus gaining mortality and ushering in death upon the earth. Eden represents all beginnings, before there was knowledge of decay. Frost uses this element to illustrate the universality of his idea that all things in nature, including the lives of people, reach an apex before they sink “to grief.”

If the mention of the myth of Eden extends the poem’s meaning beyond merely the sprouting of leaves and blossoming of flowers to common occurrences that have taken place since the beginning of known time, then the next line brings the reader’s attention back to the present to illustrate that this kind of decay occurs every day. “So dawn goes down to day,” Frost says, ignoring the fact that night follows day, but focusing on that singular moment when the sky is freshly awakened by the sun, when the full power of daylight is not quite realized, but a softer light, much like the softer gold of leaves before they are green, is present. This light of dawn as it intensifies to daylight is, like the flower, ephemeral, as if the heft of such lightness is too difficult for the sky to hold on to, perhaps more beautiful than nature can stand; therefore, the strain of keeping it is relieved and daylight comes. Frost suggests there is a purity in this “early leaf” of the day, just as there was a purity in Eden before its fall, before the knowledge of life and death was discovered. This purity, though, only lasts “an hour,” and to finalize this inevitable decay of

purity the poem ends with the philosophical statement: “Nothing gold can stay.” This is the conclusion drawn from progressing meditation on early leaves in spring to the theological beginning of existence to the natural fall of dawn into day. Frost is not being entirely pessimistic in his poem; he is saying only that it is the “gold” in things which cannot last, their brightest, “hardest hue to hold.” The potential of a human life is only met once and not met again, according to the poem. Purity is lost when knowledge is gained.

If purity is lost with the knowledge of imminent decay, what is gained? Frost offers no consolation for the loss of “nature’s first green.” But by developing his argument throughout the poem, juxtaposing the apex of achievement in nature and humanity with its mournful destruction, he offers the opportunity to enjoy the seasonal gold, the early flower, and the culmination of dawn into day more fully with the knowledge that it must, inevitably, subside.

#### Work Cited

Frost, Robert. “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*. Ed. Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1995. 206.

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**Dr. Ply’s Comments:** *Kevin’s paper was written to fulfill the poetry explication assignment for ENGL 300 in Fall 2003. His analysis of Frost’s poem does an excellent job of interpreting the metaphors and color imagery. The paper also demonstrates how the poet can say so much in so*

*few words—to the reader who is willing to dig below the surface denotations of the poet's language and spin out the implications of the images. I plan to use his paper as a sample/model in future sections of ENGL 300.*