

Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay": A Sad Farewell to Golden Ages

There is much more to Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" than some leaves and flowers. Once a reader comes to grips with the general sense of the poem, **the meanings of the words** "green" and "gold" become significant because they **allude** to Eden. The reader suddenly realizes that Frost's little poem is a classic restatement of the age-old **theme**: as sad as it may be, nothing really good and valuable lasts forever.

The general sense of the poem is fairly obvious. A fair paraphrase of the poem runs like this: Nature's beginnings (spring, new birth, youth, and so forth) are as valuable as gold, but those beginnings are almost always over too quickly. As Frost puts it, more or less, gold is too hard a hue to hold for long. Frost then gives a few specific examples. Nature's "early leaf's a flower," i.e., a newly opening leaf is almost as delicate and beautiful as a flower, but it doesn't stay that way long. It soon goes the way of all leaves, of Eden, and of all new beginnings. "Nothing gold can stay" for long; sadly, all good things pass away too soon. In fact, by the time one is mature enough to appreciate what this poem is saying, what Dylan Thomas once called the "green and golden" time of childhood is always in the distant past.

Obviously, much of a reader's sense of what the poem is getting at comes from the connotations of the words "green" and "gold." In addition to its literal reference to the color green, the word "green" suggests newness, youth, freshness, and new beginnings. Also, the word "gold" suggests at least two things: gold is symbolic of great value and it also connects to the Golden Age stories from mythology. Golden Ages were those times in mythology when everything was wonderful, but in all the mythologies Golden Ages are in the past and long gone.

Most important, however, in grasping the meaning of this poem is the allusion to the Garden of Eden. When he says, "Eden sank to grief," he is linking his observation to the moral, philosophical, and spiritual worlds. If Eden came to grief in the same way that dawn gives way to day, that is, in the same way that the magnificent gives way to the ordinary and in the same way that the innocence of childhood gives way to maturity, then we can only sigh a wistful sigh and say "Nothing gold can stay." In other words, there may have been a Golden Age of Perfection once upon a time, but it has long ago retreated into the ordinary.

The general sense of the poem, the connotations of words, the significance of the allusions to Eden and the Golden Ages -- all of these enrich the poem. Although the poem does not bring us some great new insight (we always knew that youth and beauty would pass away), the insight is clothed in new garments. Frost's simple poem brings the old truth to life in a fresh and striking way.