After Apple-Picking

POEM TEXT

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.
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
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,
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.
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
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,
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
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
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

SUMMARY

I left my tall two-legged ladder in a tree pointing toward the sky, and I also left an empty barrel next to it. There are probably a few apples left on some branch that I didn't pick, but I'm not apple picking anymore. The night is beginning to feel like winter and I can smell like apples. I'm falling asleep.

I can't stop picturing the strange image I saw while looking through a piece of ice that I picked up out of a water trough this morning, and looked through toward the frosty grass. It started to melt and I dropped it, but I was already starting to fall asleep before it hit the ground, and I knew what kind of dreams I was about to have: close-ups of apples fading in and out, some showing their tops and others showing the opposite ends. I can see every speck of brown and red coloring clearly.

The arch of my foot still aches, and in fact still feels the pressure of a ladder rung. I can still feel the ladder moving slightly as the apple tree's branches bend. I keep hearing the rumbling sound of loads upon loads of apples being rolled into the bin in the cellar. I'm sick of apple picking. I'm so tired, even though I'm the one who wanted this great harvest.

There were thousands upon thousands of apples I could have gently picked and made sure wouldn't fall to the ground. Any apples that touched the ground, even those that weren't bruised or dirtied by the fall, were considered worthless and only suitable for cider. You can see already why I'm going to have a restless sleep, if I even do sleep. If the woodchuck, were he not already hibernating for the winter, could tell me whether the sleep I feel coming is like his hibernation, or if it's just regular old human sleep.

THEMES

WORRY, WORK, AND SLEEP

Frost's poem focuses on someone who's exhausted after a long day's work in an apple orchard. Drifting between wakefulness and sleep, the poem's speaker replays the day's events while feeling anxious about all the apples left unpicked. The poem reflects the often disorienting nature of falling asleep, and sleep itself is presented as neither restorative nor even restful. Instead, the poem suggests the ways that exhaustion serves only to reveal—and, indeed, to

magnify—the speaker's worries.

The poem opens on an anxious note, as the speaker realizes that he or she has left behind a ladder "sticking through a tree" as well as plenty of ripe apples. Though it's the end of the day and the speaker is "done with apple-picking," the speaker can't seem to let go of work, and fantastically, can still even smell the fruit in the night air.

It's not entirely clear where the speaker is yet—whether still in the orchard or home in bed—and the tense of the poem keeps switching between the present and the past. This confusing setting is part of the point: the poem mirrors the discombobulation of drifting off to sleep, where reality and memory seem to intertwine. Indeed, as it becomes clearer that the speaker is in fact falling asleep, it's also clear that the speaker has little control over the images tumbling through his or her anxious mind. Instead the images come forth of their own accord, and in doing so compound the speaker's anxiety about having unfinished business in the orchard.

For example, the speaker dreamily recalls looking through a pane of ice lifted from the drinking trough earlier in the day. That the speaker can't "rub" away the "strangeness" of this image again emphasizes the speaker's helplessness in this exhausted state, while the specific intrusion of ice is a reminder of the impending "winter sleep." Once again, this underscores the speaker's lingering worry surrounding work in the orchard (i.e., the unpicked apples, now left to fall as the seasons change).

As the speaker drifts closer to sleep, anxiety about work troubles his or her thoughts even more acutely. When considering what he or she will dream about, images of "magnified apples" fill the speaker's mind, with "every fleck of russet showing clear." In this dreamlike state, anxiety begins to overtake the speaker's other senses too. The speaker hears "the rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in," imagery that suggests being buried in work. Even the speaker's foot feels "the pressure" of standing on a ladder.

In the end, the speaker, seemingly resigned to this feeling of unease, remarks that it's clear what kind of thoughts will be disturbing his or her sleep. What the speaker seems to desire most is the deep, dreamless rest of hibernation—or perhaps even death, as the words "long sleep" might imply. Yet the final line suggests that all the speaker can hope for is the more fitful "human sleep"—hardly the restorative slumber necessary to tackle the next workday with energy and gusto.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

CREATIVITY AND DISSATISFACTION

The anxiety surrounding work in the poem can be interpreted as an allegory for writing poetry—a draining, often repetitive endeavor that poets may find fulfilling yet also deeply exhausting and dissatisfying. In a broader sense, the poem can thus also represent *any* creative work and the pressure of trying to fulfill creative potential.

Think of the apples that crowd the poem as representing creative inspiration or output. During a creative period, an artist may have many ideas whirling in the mind, just as there are many apples in the orchard during the harvest season. And just as with farmers who need good weather and long days to gather a crop at just the right time, the writer must often work long days to take advantage of a creative phase.

Yet even as the speaker wants to pick all these apples—to explore all these creative avenues, to write all these poems—this work is tiring and repetitive, and at a certain point becomes overwhelming. Eventually, the speaker needs to take a break, to be "done with apple-picking." This suggests that periods of intense creative output must be punctuated by rest, just as soil and trees must be allowed to rest and regain strength between growing seasons.

At the same time, however, the implicit connection between writing and the natural world further suggests that periods of inspiration ebb and flow, just as the abundance of the harvest gives way to the stagnation of winter. The artist can't control periods of creativity any more than the speaker can control the changing seasons, and this is what fuels the speaker's anxiety: right now the speaker's creativity is in overdrive, but he or she's not sure how long this period of abundance will last or how to best to take advantage of it before it's too late.

Indeed, the lines "There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch, / Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall" indicate the speaker's fear, as well as the frustration of being unable to work creatively with all the words and images that have come to the speaker. Making matters worse, the speaker worries that if he or she can't take care of these ideas, they will become worthless and rot; creativity is fickle and fleeting, it seems, which creates a tension between the need to rest and the fear of wasting artistic potential. The artist realizes that the abundance of great ideas will probably end—it always does—and then there will be days or months or years that are unproductive. The poem doesn't arrive at any sort of "solution" to this anxiety and tension, but instead attempts to relay the darker side of creative expression.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 4-6
- Lines 7-26
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Lines 18-20
- Lines 27-29

- Lines 30-31
- Lines 32-39
- Lines 40-42

THE CYCLE OF LIFE AND DEATH

Though a human life often spans decades, an orchard's entire life cycle can be observed in just a year. In the poem, the speaker views the orchard itself as a lens through which to meditate on his or her own passing lifetime and mortality. But while the speaker's contemplation is tinged with fear and confusion, it also seems somewhat hopeful and curious about the changes to come. Through the example of the speaker, the poem suggests that though thinking about death may be uncomfortable, doing so can ultimately make aging and mortality less scary.

Throughout the poem, the speaker notes evocative, sometimes eerie images of the orchard's passage from autumn to winter. With fewer apples on the trees, the orchard begins to look desolate, and with the "essence of winter sleep" coming, it becomes a "world of hoary grass." "Hoary" can refer to the icy frost on the grass, but it also has more general connotations of age and sometimes irrelevance—a "hoary" person would be someone old enough to have hair the whitish color of frost. Similarly, the "blossom end" of each fruit is reminiscent of spring's flowers, while the autumn harvest occurs at the "stem end" where the apples are picked. The fact that the speaker's mind begins to sleepily confuse the images of these two seasons suggests that the orchard reminds the speaker of the way seasons (and years) can race by, bringing death ever closer. Though the speaker never explicitly mentions the transitory nature of life, the poem's images make it clear that such concerns are on the speaker's mind.

The other way that the poem gets at the speaker's preoccupation with death is through his or her anxieties about sleep. The speaker seems to wish for sleep ("I am overtired"), but at the same time, the speaker worries about what's going on in the orchard. These anxieties come to a head as the speaker notes that "all [the apples] / That struck the earth" have been turned into cider, no matter how perfect they were when they fell. It's this thought that "will trouble" his or her sleep the most. That is, the speaker feels unable to fall asleep—or, perhaps, to die peacefully—when troubled by the inescapable knowledge that everything beautiful and pristine (like the perfect apples) must eventually be destroyed by death (just as the apples were turned into cider).

The speaker concludes this thought by saying the apples were "as of no worth"—that is, the unglamorous reality of death makes even wonderful things seem worthless. It's clear, then, that these thoughts upset and frighten the speaker, making any kind of sleep seem like a scary prospect.

However, a few key images suggest that the speaker does have some sources of hope amid this frightening contemplation. First, the poem opens with the image of the speaker's ladder pointed "toward heaven still," which suggests that the speaker has at least some belief in a heavenly afterlife. Perhaps even more importantly, this "heaven" seems to be attainable; the ladder is safely propped in the tree, and the speaker has obviously already put a lot of work into climbing it—the speaker still feels the "pressure" of its rungs in his or her feet.

Second, the speaker mentions the hibernation ("long sleep") of "the woodchuck" and wonders whether his or her own "sleep" might be similar—that is, whether there's a chance that the speaker could somehow return to life after dying, just as the woodchuck wakes up after months of hibernation. This return might be some kind of spiritual rebirth, or it might be the less literal regeneration of future generations' going on to tend the orchard after the speaker is gone.

Ultimately, the speaker doesn't know what death will be like—"whatever sleep it is." But by contemplating it and facing its frightening uncertainties, the speaker seems to have found inklings of hope that life and death are, perhaps, something like an orchard's seasons—there may be new cycles of regeneration that are as yet invisible to the speaker.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 7
- Lines 8-9
- Lines 12-15
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 28
- Lines 31-36
- Line 37
- Lines 38-42

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,

The poem's opening lines, in combination with its title, establish the setting: an apple orchard. The fact that the speaker has left a ladder in an apple tree suggests that the speaker has unfinished business, or perhaps was simply too beat after a long day of work to take the ladder down. In either case, even these early lines hint at the poem's overarching tone of worry and exhaustion.

Stylistically these lines also introduce the broken rhythm that readers will later understand mimics the process of falling

asleep, with seemingly random thoughts and images floating through the speaker's mind. Yet even as the poem feels quite conversational and unpredictable, a pattern of alliteration (specifically of /l/, /t/, and /st/ sounds) adds to the poem's sense of fluency, tying various words together despite the poem's unstructured feel:

> My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
> Toward heaven still.

The speaker also declares that the ladder is pointed "toward *heaven*," which, beyond simply being an interesting way to describe the ladder being upright in a tree, suggests certain religious overtones. Perhaps the ladder is a biblical allusion to Jacob's Ladder, a bridge between earth and heaven, life and death. The reference to "heaven" might also make the orchard setting itself evoke the Garden of Eden, a place of abundant life from which human beings were eventually cast out by God. This, in turn, sets the stage for reading the poem as a kind of allegory for the creative process itself—for the way in which the poet must hold fast to periods of creative abundance before being similarly cast out into the metaphorical wasteland of writer's block.

LINES 3-8

> *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.*
> *But I am done with apple-picking now.*
> *Essence of winter sleep is on the night,*
> *The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.*

Lines 3 through 8 further reveal the speaker's sense of anxiety, and by line 7, readers get the first obvious indication that this speaker is in fact falling asleep. The regular iambic pentameter in lines 3 and 4 suggests a moment of clear focus in the speaker's mind, as the speaker frets about work he or she may have left undone. (Note that Frost often favored iambic pentameter along with a more plain-spoken diction in his poetry, because its da DUM rhythm most nearly mimics conversational English.)

> And there's | a bar- | rel that | I did- | n't fill
> Beside | it, and | there may | be two | or three

While line 5 contains five feet (the basic unit of poetic meter), this moment of regular rhythm is interrupted with the trochee in the word "Apples." Strict iambic pentameter reappears in line 6, but in line 7 the rhythm breaks again, before resuming in line 8. This seesawing rhythm subtly mimics the jerkiness of falling asleep—moments of steady focus punctuated by slips as the speaker nods off:

> Apples | I did- | n't pick | upon | some bough.
> But I | am done | with ap- | ple-pick- | ing now.
> Essence | of win- | ter sleep | is on | the night,
> The scent | of ap- | ples: I | am drow- | sing off.

This sensation is amplified by the enjambment between lines 3 and 4 ("fill / Beside") as well as between lines 4 and 5 ("three / Apples"), which causes the speaker's thoughts to spill over from line to line much like they might rush into the mind as one drifts off. Lines 5 through 8, by contrast, are all clearly end-stopped, suggesting the speaker's desire to put the days' events out of mind. The full stops in lines 5, 6, and 8 are particularly evocative: they comprise a declaration, emphasizing that the speaker has *finished* the work he or she intended to do.

These lines also tie into the theme of creativity and dissatisfaction, in that they suggest that the writer or artist needs a break after uninterrupted periods of hard work. The same can also be said for an exhausted worker nearing the end of an intense period of labor. This reading is supported by the phrase "Essence of winter sleep," a complex metaphor that transforms "the scent of apples" into the fragrance of a long sleep. Unpacking the metaphor further, "winter sleep" might refer to the long sleep of death. Considering creativity, a long sleep may be the period of hibernation after a productive season.

LINES 9-13

> *I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight*
> *I got from looking through a pane of glass*
> *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.*

The speaker's attention shifts from thinking about apples and work to the strange imagery of looking at the world through a piece of "glass" taken from the "drinking trough." This glass is likely a metaphor for a piece of ice, the very presence of which suggests that winter is on its way and, as such, that apple-picking season is over. That the grass the speaker saw through this ice was "hoary"—meaning covered with frost or grayish white, as with age—is further suggestive of the turning of the seasons and decay. Winter is often symbolic of death, and here could further symbolize a period of *creative* dormancy following a period of productivity. This realization of how late it is—both in the year, and perhaps more broadly in the grand scheme of the speaker's life itself—might be what so disturbs the speaker while looking through the glass, and why the speaker can't seem to "rub" this image from his or her eyes.

The verb tenses also noticeably shift in this section, from present tense in line 9 to past tense in lines 10 to 12; in line 13, the phrase "it melted" occurs in the past tense, but "let" can somewhat confusingly be read as either the past or the present. This dipping in and out of the present and past again seems to mimic the at times disorienting nature of drowsing off,

reflecting how the speaker seems to be getting lost in thoughts that will lead to sleep. It's as if the speaker isn't simply recalling the events of the morning, but reliving them.

There's a certain juxtaposition between the regular rhythm created by the strict iambic pentameter in this section and the insistence on strangeness. Note how consistent the meter is in these lines:

> I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
> I got from looking through a pane of glass
> 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.

The contrast may relate to the speaker's exhaustion after a hard day's work as well as his anxiety about some work left undone and perhaps his dissatisfaction with his artistic vision.

The end-stops in lines 12 and 13, following three straight lines of flowing enjambment, further evoke the idea of the season, this period of abundance, coming to an unavoidable close; that the speaker "lets" this happen suggests a certain resignation to this impending end. Indeed, the caesura of line 13 supports this, a brief pause—perhaps a breath or a sigh—in which the speaker could choose to do something more active, but in his or her exhaustion does not.

LINES 14-17

> *But I was well*
> *Upon my way to sleep before it fell,*
> *And I could tell*
> *What form my dreaming was about to take.*

The unusual rhythm created in this section is even more evocative of the feeling of falling asleep, as if the speaker can only maintain focus in short bursts. This is implied in the length of the lines, which alternate between two iambs and five iambs. In the longer lines, the speaker has regained focus for a moment to tell readers more about his or her experience and thoughts. This might be a speaker who wants to talk to readers, but has only intermittent energy (shown in the longer lines) to be able to do so. The enjambment of lines 14 and 16 also seem to indicate a fluctuation in the speaker's focus, as the speaker's thoughts drift off onto the following lines.

These lines consist mostly of the soothing sounds of /s/, /l/, /sl/, and /m/. This consonance seems to lull readers and the speaker toward a period of rest, of trying to lay aside the work that has been so intense and taxing. Adding to the restfulness in these four lines is some prominent assonance, which helps elongate several words, slowing down the actual reading of these lines. Readers will find the long /ā/, /ē/, and /ī/ sounds in the words "way," "sleep," "dreaming," and "take." People expect to slow down when they're exhausted from a great day of creative work, or of any work, and the assonance and consonance in these lines help show that on an auditory level:

> But I was well
> Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
> And I could tell
> What form my dreaming was about to take.

There are three rhymes in a row here, the most to occur in such quick succession yet. This, too, adds to the sensation of falling asleep, of perhaps having only enough energy to grasp at familiar sounds rather than wander in search of sonic variation. Because of all this softness, the last word in this section, "take," is all the more jarring, with its hard /k/ and because of its final position in an end-stopped line. This moment feels like the speaker has jerked back awake after barely being able to keep his or her eyes open.

LINES 18-23

> *Magnified apples appear and disappear,*
> *Stem end and blossom end,*
> *And every fleck of russet showing clear.*
> *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.*

Here the speaker describes what his or her dreams will likely look like. Vivid imagery dominates these lines as magnified apples crowd the speaker's vision, and this changes the mood from relaxed to a bit frightening. The fact that the apples show "stem end and blossom end" is perhaps symbolic of the beginning and end of the apple-growing process. Even in sleep, it seems, the speaker can't let go of the day's work, instead zooming in on the subtle variations in color (the "flecks of russet") of the apples that "appear and disappear." These lines give an indication that the speaker's oncoming sleep may not be so peaceful or restorative, as the speaker can't stop focusing on minute details of the apples. If we take the poem as an extended metaphor for creative work, perhaps these represent the various ideas flitting through the speaker's mind; no matter how tired the speaker is, it's as if the speaker can't turn his or her brain off.

The speaker's feet physically ache from standing on the ladder all day, and in fact the speaker feels like he or she is *still* standing on that ladder: the speaker's foot "keeps the pressure of the ladder round," or rung, and this phantom pressure further reflects the inability to move past the events of the day. These lines are brimming with consonance, especially with the sharp /p/ and /k/ sounds:

> My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
> It keeps the pressure

Note also the alliteration of "arch" and "ache," which sonically

connects these two visually similar words, as well as the strong assonance of long /o/ and /e/ sounds in "not only," "keeps," and "the." The percussive consonance creates little pops of sound that disrupt the otherwise smooth nature of the line, perhaps reminiscent of the way this "ache" keeps the speaker awake.

In line 23, the tactile imagery moves from pressure and aching to the sensation of the ladder swaying. The ladder's unsteadiness is rather unsettling. The swaying might show the rhythm of the speaker fading away and losing focus, but this image affects the mood because there's danger inherent in a ladder swaying because the speaker could fall. Again, if we interpret this all as a metaphor for creative work—or, really, any kind of arduous task—perhaps this represents the danger of putting yourself out there: reaching for great achievements always carries the possibility of a great fall. Also note the clear alliteration of "boughs bend" and the diacope of "ladder" in lines 22 and 23, both of which point to a certain musicality beneath the speaker's conversational tone.

LINES 24-29

And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
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.

The speaker laments here that the very thing he or she wished for—a great harvest—has become exhausting and overwhelming. There can be too much of a good thing, it seems, whether that's an abundant harvest or an overflow of creativity. The speaker simply *can't* pick any more apples—indeed, recall that at the beginning of the poem, the speaker had left a barrel empty despite there being more apples on the tree. Perhaps this reflects the need to stop, to "say when" when presented with abundance. It's natural to want to stock up in times of plenty, the poem seems to be saying, but there comes a point when it's exhausting, even impossible, to pick *every* apple—symbolically, to explore every possibility or creative idea.

Now the speaker seems to be experiencing sensory overload, and the techniques used in these six lines—including irregular rhythm and rhyme—strengthen the sensation of being overwhelmed. The rumbling sound of apples going into the cellar bin commands the speaker's attention. The diacope of "load on load" in the speaker's description emphasizes the way this sound of tumbling apples keeps intruding on the speaker's thoughts, keeping the speaker awake and restless.

As in lines 9 through 13, a pattern of short and long lines imitate the speaker's loss of focus. Lines 24 and 26 are set in iambic pentameter, which show the speaker's concentrated attention, as he or she describes the sounds now only heard in memory:

And I | keep hear- | ing from | the cel- | lar bin

Of load | on load | of ap- | ples com- | ing in.

Line 28 is also in iambic pentameter but has an extra syllable creating a feminine (unstressed) ending, a sort of dangling note that reflects the speaker's exhaustion:

Of ap- | ple-pick- | ing: I | am ov | er-tir- | ed

Yet while the remaining lines are mostly iambic (in that they possess the da-DUM rhythm), they have an inconsistent number of syllables. Line 29 also features some metrical substitutions (such as a spondee, or double stress, in the second foot) which together add to the unpredictable tone:

of the | great har- | vest I | myself | desired.

All this combines with clear enjambment punctuated by strong end-stops to create the sense of a loss of control, of the speaker's thoughts spilling out in fits and bursts without regard to structures like form or meter.

LINES 30-31

There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.

On a literal level, the speaker here is saying that there were many apples waiting to be gently plucked from the trees. On a metaphorical level, however, these lines seem to clearly reference creative work: there are "ten thousand thousand" *ideas* that the speaker had wanted grasp. The use of the word "cherish" emphasizes just how dear and treasured the fruits—and these ideas—are to the speaker (note also how this echoes the common phrase "the fruits of your labor," meaning the positive results of your hard work). When the speaker says "and not let fall," this also implies that to not pick this fruit is akin to letting it go to waste (an idea that will be strengthened in the following lines).

The first line uses epizeuxis to create a clear moment of hyperbole, or exaggeration: ten thousand fruit is unbelievable, but "ten thousand thousand fruit" is incredible. How could the speaker ever expect to "touch" this many apples? Along the same vein, how could the writer possibly expect to "touch"—that is, understand or use—that many ideas? It's impossible; at a certain point, you'd have to give up, stop, accept that you can't do *everything*. No wonder the speaker seems so exhausted!

LINES 32-36

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.

In the previous lines, the speaker reflected on both the desire and inability to pick the "ten thousand thousand" apples in the orchard. Here, the speaker reveals the consequences of failing in that task: the unpicked fruit would fall to the ground. This fall might bruise or dirty the fruit (making it "spiked with stubble"), but even if the fruit were to remain intact, it would be considered useless—good for nothing more than making cider.

Consisting of simply "For all," line 32 is the shortest yet in the poem. All of these lines are also arguably enjambed, their imagery and meaning spilling down the page. The highly irregular length and meter of this group of lines suggest that this speaker is anxious but also exhausted, drifting in and out of sleep (or near sleep).

At the same time, it seems the speaker won't let go just yet because he or she still has something significant to impart to listeners—specifically, a warning or caution about what happens to unpicked fruit (metaphorically, to wasted ideas or potential): they will surely go the cider-apple heap "as of no worth." The double stress of "no worth" (a spondee) adds emphasis the phrase, the speaker underscoring the dismal fate of the fallen apples.

The full end-stop immediately afterward further underlines the finality or irreversibility of this fate, and adds a sense of stakes to the speaker's anxiety: the speaker worries that this is his or her big chance to stock up on apples, to pluck each precious apple from the trees before it's too late and those apples are crushed into cider, any other potential use definitively quashed. Symbolically, this suggests that this is the speaker's chance to produce some sort of great creative work or other sort of grand labor, and if the speaker fails to do so, the opportunity may not come again.

The mood of caution is strengthened by this section's diction. There's a sense of violence and danger in the consonance of words like "struck" and "spiked," with their harsh /k/ sounds that seems to mimic the apples smacking into the ground.

LINES 37-42

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
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.

In the poem's final lines the speaker references everything that's come before in order to basically say: "Now you probably understand why I'm having such a hard time sleeping, even though I'm exhausted." The speaker has revealed the way in which thoughts of apples—that is, of work left unfinished—invade the speaker's tired mind, preventing the speaker from achieving the restorative sleep he or she longs for.

The speaker draws emphasis to the nature of sleep through the repetition of the word "sleep" itself four times in six lines, an example of diacope. The speaker is attempting to articulate that there are different *kinds* of sleep—some deep and restful, others not so much. The assonance of the /o/ sounds throughout these lines produces auditory imagery that echoes the relaxed, open mouth of sleep. Readers will find some variation of /o/, /u/, or /oo/ sounds in the words "one," "trouble," "not," "gone," "woodchuck," "could," "long," "coming on," "or," and "some." While not all of these words produce the exact same sound, they are quite similar and together in such quick succession produce the sensation yawning.

A woodchuck is a small animal that hibernates throughout the late fall and winter. In saying "were he not gone," the speaker is revealing that the animal is already hibernating (that is, that he has entered his "long sleep"), and thus that it must be very close to winter indeed. More importantly, the speaker brings up the woodchuck in order to question whether the speaker's own impending sleep will be long and restful—a sort of human hibernation.

This "long sleep" could be a metaphor on several levels. It could suggest a period of inactivity and rest that allows a writer or artist to regain creative strength. Alternatively, this the long sleep could represent death itself.

In the final line of the poem, however, the speaker offers a different interpretation of the sleep to come: that is, that it could be "some human sleep." This likely means regular old sleep, the kind most people try to get eight hours every night and which may or may not be restful. The "just" before the phrase "some human sleep" is markedly dismissive, suggesting that the speaker really wants the "long sleep" mentioned in the prior line. A simple night's rest isn't nearly enough for the speaker, which suggests how deeply exhausted and drained this person must be. Ultimately, readers are left to decide on their own what sort of sleep the speaker will undergo—the only thing that's clear is that it will be troubled.

SYMBOLS

APPLES

Apples appear throughout the poem as symbols of creative ideas or the products (that is, the "fruits") of one's labor. The speaker wishes for a "great harvest," but at the same time, the speaker feels overwhelmed by the "ten thousand thousand" apples that all need to be handled with care and thought. In other words, the apples convey that the speaker treasures creative work but also experiences it as a burden. After all, if the speaker doesn't take good care of the

apples, they'll rot or be turned into cider, "As of no worth." The speaker seems to fear causing a similarly sad fate for his or her creative projects, even as he or she is too tired to fight harder against that fate.

Apples—or perhaps the orchard more broadly—may also symbolize the cycle of life and death. Once the apples have been picked from the trees, the orchard appears dead until its rebirth in spring, at which point new apples blossom; new life replaces the old. The speaker's preoccupation with the endless cycles of apples falling hints that the "sleep" he or she worries about may actually be death itself. In this case, the apples don't just symbolize the speaker's creative work—they also symbolize the speaker himself or herself, and perhaps all other human beings as well. It may be that the speaker is worried about creative output not just for its own sake, but also because leaving works of art (like this poem) behind is one small way to fight against the inevitability of death—to assert one's legacy before new life takes over.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "two or three / Apples I didn't pick "
- **Line 18:** "Magnified apples"
- **Line 20:** "every fleck"
- **Line 26:** "load on load of apples"
- **Line 29:** "the great harvest"
- **Line 30:** "ten thousand thousand fruit "
- **Line 35:** "the cider-apple heap"

SLEEP

On a literal level, this poem explores what it's like to fall asleep—the way people drift in and out of consciousness and how thoughts seem to come into the mind of their own accord. Symbolically, however, sleep represents both restorative rest and death.

On the one hand, the speaker obviously needs to sleep in order to continue the work left undone in the orchard. The speaker even acknowledges being "overtired" and suggests that a long hibernation (like that of the woodchuck in winter) might be welcome. In this way, sleep seems to represent a time of creative dormancy, often necessary for an artist or writer after a particularly productive period.

On the other hand, the speaker also says that this much-needed sleep will be "troubled." One reason for this worry seems to be the lingering sense of the orchard's overwhelming work; the speaker can't stop picturing the apples and their life cycles. But the speaker also seems to worry about what, exactly, this sleep will be like, saying "whatever sleep it is." The speaker contrasts the idea of the woodchuck's hibernation with a simpler "human sleep" and wonders about the differences between the two. It seems, then, that simply falling asleep at the end of the day is a symbolic stand-in for the much more mysterious sleep of death itself. Essentially, the speaker knows that death is inevitable and even necessary (just as the apples in the orchard must die so that new fruit can blossom), but because it's such a mystery, it's troubling to contemplate.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "winter sleep"
- **Lines 14-17:** "But I was well / Upon my way to sleep before it fell, / And I could tell / What form my dreaming was about to take."
- **Line 38:** "This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is"
- **Lines 40-41:** "his / Long sleep"
- **Line 42:** "human sleep"

LADDER

The ladder that the speaker leaves in the orchard subtly symbolizes the connection between earth and the afterlife, as well as the difficulty of bridging the gap between two.

The speaker starts by describing the ladder as literally pointing "toward heaven," making an explicit connection between earthly work (like picking apples) and ascending to heaven. This phrase also alludes to the biblical story of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28.10 – 19), reinforcing the idea that the speaker is preoccupied with thoughts of death and the afterlife.

On the one hand, the symbol of the ladder suggests hope; after all, it gives the speaker a way out of the drudgery of the orchard and into heaven itself. But on the other hand, the speaker also associates the ladder with the "ache" (line 21) it creates in the speaker's feet, which makes it seems like a somewhat painful path. What's more, the ladder "sways" (line 23); it's not entirely stable. It seems, then, that the ladder represents both the possibility of an afterlife and the impossibility of knowing for sure how to get there.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still"
- **Lines 21-22:** "My instep arch not only keeps the ache, / It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round."
- **Line 23:** "I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Though the poem doesn't have a clear rhyme scheme, its language is still quite musical to the ear. This is in part because of alliteration, which appears relatively consistently throughout the poem, though often in a restrained, subtle way.

Often, the poem's alliteration echoes the content of the lines in which it appears. For example, in the first line, there is clear alliteration of the /l/ sound in "long" and "ladder." This repeated, leisurely sound seems to almost lengthen the phrase itself. By contrast, the influx of /s/, /t/, and /st/ sounds in lines 1 and 2 pop out sharply, almost as if they're "sticking through" the line just as the ladder is "sticking through a tree toward heaven still."

There is also frequently alliteration of /a/ sounds, perhaps unsurprising given the title of the poem (which is itself alliterative: "After Apple-Picking"). This subtly evokes the presence of apples throughout the poem, perhaps reflecting how the speaker can't stop thinking about them.

Alliteration can also suggest a sense of fatigue, as the reader's ear may grow tired of hearing the same sound over and over. Note the alliteration (created in part through phrasal repetition) of /o/, /l/, and /h/ sounds line 26 and 27:

> Of load on load of apples coming in.
> For I have had too much

There is also further consonance /l/ and assonance of /o/ sounds here, which, combined with the alliteration, create a sense of utter exhaustion. The long /o/ is like a repeated yawn, while the /l/ slows down the line itself. No wonder the speaker has had "too much" of this!

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "l," "t," "l," "st," "t"
- **Line 2:** "T," "st"
- **Line 3:** "th," "b," "th"
- **Line 4:** "B," "th," "b"
- **Line 5:** "b"
- **Line 6:** "B"
- **Line 8:** "a," "a"
- **Line 9:** "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "h," "h"
- **Line 13:** "b"
- **Line 14:** "B," "w," "w"
- **Line 15:** "w"
- **Line 17:** "W," "w," "t," "t"
- **Line 18:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 19:** "e," "a," "e"
- **Line 20:** "e"
- **Line 21:** "a," "k," "a"
- **Line 22:** "k"
- **Line 23:** "b," "b"
- **Line 26:** "O," "l," "o," "l," "o"
- **Line 27:** "h," "h"
- **Line 28:** "O," "a," "a," "o"
- **Line 29:** "O"
- **Line 30:** "Th," "t," "th," "th," "f," "t," "t"
- **Line 31:** "l," "l," "f"
- **Line 32:** "F"
- **Line 33:** "s"
- **Line 34:** "N," "n," "s," "w," "s"
- **Line 35:** "W," "c"
- **Line 37:** "w," "w"
- **Line 38:** "s," "w," "s"
- **Line 39:** "W"
- **Line 40:** "w," "w," "l"
- **Line 41:** "L"
- **Line 42:** "s"

ALLUSION

There are arguably two allusions in the first two lines of the poem, with their reference to a ladder "sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still." The ladder might refer to Jacob's Ladder in the Bible, while the orchard itself might refer to the biblical original garden, the Garden of Eden. While both allusions are subtle, Frost was deeply familiar with the Old Testament and as such was likely aware of both stories.

In the story of Jacob's Ladder, the ladder appears to Jacob (a patriarch of Judaic peoples) in a dream as a link between heaven and earth. Jacob sees angels ascending to heaven and descending to earth via the ladder, and the ladder in "After Apple-Picking" may subtly hint at this divine connection. Perhaps the speaker is suggesting that work—be it apple-picking or creative labor—is a noble pursuit.

The speaker is also falling asleep and beginning to have dreamlike visions, creating another parallel with the story of Jacob. The ladder being representative of a bridge between heaven and earth is further implied as the poem's speaker explores the nature of sleep—whether or not the speaker's impending sleep will be normal human sleep or a long sleep like hibernation or the final "sleep" of death.

The stronger allusion is to the story of Adam and Eve. While it is not specifically mentioned in the poem, the abundance of the apple orchard arguably alludes to the Garden of Eden, the biblical paradise in which Adam and Eve lived before Eve ate fruit from the tree of knowledge. In the story of the Garden of Eden, Eve's dissatisfaction—her wish for more knowledge—led to humanity's downfall. Here, the speaker is also dissatisfied, having been unable to pick all the fruit in the orchard. If we understand these apples to represent creative ideas and potential—themselves a kind of "knowledge"—then it's possible to read the speaker's dissatisfaction as parallel to Eve's.

It is the dissatisfaction of the Garden's first humans that causes their trouble. Similarly, in "After Apple-Picking," the speaker causes trouble for himself or herself. The speaker is anxious that there's a barrel unfilled (line 3) and dissatisfied that the great harvest is one that the speaker can hardly handle it (line 27–29). Then there is also the regret (lines 32–36) that some of the harvest would have to go "to the cider-apple heap / As of

no worth."

Reading this poem as an allegory for the creative process, the allusions are particularly important. The creative impulse occurs in the garden (the center of creation), and perhaps the ladder in the garden represents the artist's access to that creative impulse, which has no physical location and may seem similar to a divine entity. The writer worries about the access the ladder provides, especially when he or she leaves the ladder in the garden (lines 1 – 2) or the ladder sways (line 23), which indicates the instability of the creative impulse. What's more, the orchard is entering its dormant season—winter—and so it seems that this will be a period of no creativity. Perhaps the speaker fears being cast out of creative inspiration just as Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "My long two-pointed "
- **Lines 1-2:** "ladder's sticking through a tree / Toward heaven still,"
- **Line 22:** "It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round."
- **Line 23:** "I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend."
- **Lines 29-36:** "Of / . / There were / , / 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 / As of no worth."
- **Line 29:** "the great harvest I myself desired"
- **Line 30:** "ten thousand thousand fruit to touch"

ASSONANCE

Though this poem doesn't have a regular rhyme scheme, it frequently creates subtle internal rhyme and musicality through its use of assonance.

Assonance is often used to unify lines of poetry, and this effect can be heard in lines 14 through 16, where the speaker rhymes the words "well," "fell, and "tell" to rhythmically link lines of varying lengths. The lines of alternating length indicate the seesawing focus of the speaker who wishes to fall asleep, while the assonance in the end-rhymes demonstrates that the speaker is still somewhat awake and able to think coherent thoughts.

There are examples of assonance scattered throughout the poem, many of which set up internal rhymes of sorts. For example, the short /e/ in line 7 in the word "essence" correlates to "scent" in line 8. This assonance strengthens the olfactory image of the apple scent. In line 11, the short /i/ sound is found in the words "skimmed," "this," "morning," and "drinking." The assonance in this line reinforces the action of lifting a pane of ice from the drinking trough and its light sound subtly suggests the ice's fragility.

Another interesting example of arguable assonance is found in line 21, where "ache" sounds like a near-rhyme to "sway" in line 23. Lines 21 through 23 address the speaker's tactile memories, and the use of assonance here helps the reader imagine what the speaker feels. While the majority of descriptions that writers use involve sight and sound, the use of tactile imagery (that is, imagery concerned with touch) is sometimes harder to convey, yet the assonance here recreates a sense of the pressure the speaker feels when standing on the ladder.

Also of note is that beginning in line 23, the vowels become more open, relying especially on a long /o/ sound as in "coming" and "of." The /o/ sound is produced with a relaxed jaw, and the exhausted speaker would naturally tend to speak with a more slack, open mouth (think of a person speaking through a yawn). For example, in lines 30 and 31, "thousand" and "down," with their open sounds, nearly rhyme because of their assonance in the /ow/ sound. By the last six lines of the poem, various subtly shifting /o/ sounds appears to mimic the breath of one falling asleep.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "o," "ou"
- **Line 3:** "i," "i"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i," "o," "o"
- **Line 6:** "u," "a," "o," "i," "a," "i"
- **Line 7:** "E," "e," "o," "i," "i," "o"
- **Line 8:** "e," "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 9:** "I," "y," "i"
- **Line 10:** "I"
- **Line 11:** "i," "i," "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 13:** "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 14:** "I," "e"
- **Line 15:** "y," "e"
- **Line 16:** "I," "e"
- **Line 17:** "y"
- **Line 18:** "a," "a," "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 19:** "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 20:** "e," "e," "e"
- **Line 21:** "o," "o," "ee," "e," "a"
- **Line 22:** "ee," "ou"
- **Line 23:** "ee," "a," "a," "a," "ou," "e"
- **Line 24:** "ee," "e"
- **Line 26:** "O," "oa," "oa," "o," "o"
- **Line 27:** "o," "a," "a"
- **Line 28:** "O," "a," "I," "a," "o," "i"
- **Line 29:** "O," "I," "y," "i"
- **Line 30:** "ou," "ou," "ui," "o"
- **Line 31:** "i," "i," "i," "ow," "a"
- **Line 32:** "a"
- **Line 34:** "i," "i"
- **Line 35:** "a"
- **Line 36:** "A," "o," "o"
- **Line 37:** "O," "ee," "ou"

- **Line 38:** “i,” “ee,” “o,” “ee,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 39:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 40:** “oo,” “ou,” “i,” “i”
- **Line 41:** “l,” “i”

CAESURA

While caesura is used in just a few lines of the poem, these rare midline pauses usually suggest brief breaks in thought as the speaker recalls bits of memories or begins to drift off to sleep.

For example, in line 8, the colon after “The scent of apples:” is followed by a complete break in the speaker’s train of thought, where he or she says: “I am drowsing off.” Because of this particular caesura, readers can almost feel the sensation of drowsing. It is difficult when one is nodding off to keep to a smooth train of thought, and the caesura lets the speaker dramatize that difficulty here.

The same sort of break occurs in line 28, when the speaker declares that he or she has had too much “of apple-picking:” followed by “I am overtired.” Here again, the caesura demonstrates that the speaker is simply too exhausted to continue with one unbroken thought, and the caesura marks the spot where the reality of that exhaustion brings the speaker's active "apple-picking" to a halt.

In line 38, the caesura serves a different purpose, and that is to make an aside: “This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.” Very near deep sleep, the speaker still grapples with defining what, exactly, this sleep *is*. This question is important to the speaker because the idea of sleep may signal either normal rest or a hibernation-like sleep, or even the final sleep: death.

In addition, if one thinks of the speaker as a writer or artist (reading the poem allegorically), then sleep might also indicate either a break in the speaker's creative process or the end of the speaker's creativity altogether. The caesura makes the words "whatever sleep it is" seem almost like a casual aside, but at the same time, it draws the reader's eye to those words—it's as if the speaker is trying to downplay but failing to do so. It seems, then, that this question of defining sleep is important but also uncomfortable (or even frightening) for the speaker to face directly.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** “,”
- **Line 8:** “:”
- **Line 13:** “,”
- **Line 28:** “:”
- **Line 31:** “,” “,”
- **Line 38:** “,”
- **Line 41:** “,”

CONSONANCE

Consonance, like alliteration and assonance, contributes to the poem’s musicality. A good example of this effect can be found in lines 12 and 13. In these two lines, the repetition of the /l/ sound mirrors the idea of the ice melting and falling before it breaks:

> And held against the world of hoary grass.
> It melted, and I let it fall and break.

The use of consonance also contributes to the poem's overall sense of tension and pressure. For example, the repeated /d/ sounds in lines 22 and 23—“ladder-round,” “ladder,” “bend”—reinforce the idea of a persistent "ache" that the speaker can't escape. This same /d/ consonance shows up in lines 28 and 29, with the words “overtired” and “desired.” The effect is similar, emphasizing the weight of the hard work the speaker has done.

In some spots, however, consonance also establishes a gentler tone using softer sounds. For example, in lines 7 and 8, a repeated /s/ sound (technically an example of sibilance) indicates a change in the speaker's mindset, as the speaker momentarily drops the discussion of work and begins to nod off:

> Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
> the scent of apples: I am drowsing off.

The last three lines of the poem present a mix of hard and soft sounds, perhaps to emphasize the uncertain nature of the speaker’s sleep. On the one hand, there is the harsh /k/ sound in “woodchuck,” “could,” “like,” “describe,” and “coming.” On the other hand, there are the softer sounds of /s/ in words including “say,” “his,” “just,” "some," and "sleep.” This juxtaposition creates a memorable contrast and highlights the tension between the speaker's anxiety about sleeping and his or her desire to fall asleep anyway.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “l,” “t,” “t,” “l,” “s,” “s,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 2:** “T,” “s,” “t,” “ll”
- **Line 3:** “th,” “r,” “b,” “rr,” “l,” “th,” “ll”
- **Line 4:** “B,” “b”
- **Line 5:** “pp,” “p,” “p,” “b”
- **Line 6:** “B,” “pp,” “p”
- **Line 7:** “ss,” “n,” “c,” “n,” “s,” “s,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 8:** “sc,” “n,” “s”
- **Line 9:** “nn,” “s,” “ss,” “m,” “m,” “s”
- **Line 10:** “m,” “ss”
- **Line 11:** “s,” “k,” “s,” “m,” “k”
- **Line 12:** “h,” “l,” “g,” “s,” “l,” “h,” “g,” “ss”

- **Line 13:** “t,” “l,” “t,” “l,” “t,” “t,” “ll,” “b”
- **Line 14:** “B,” “w,” “w,” “ll”
- **Line 15:** “p,” “w,” “p,” “f,” “f,” “ll”
- **Line 16:** “ll”
- **Line 17:** “m,” “m,” “m,” “t,” “t,” “t”
- **Line 18:** “M,” “pp,” “pp,” “pp”
- **Line 19:** “m,” “n,” “d,” “n,” “d,” “m,” “n,” “d”
- **Line 20:** “nd,” “ck,” “c”
- **Line 21:** “p,” “k,” “p,” “ch”
- **Line 22:** “k,” “p,” “p,” “r,” “r,” “dd,” “r,” “r,” “d”
- **Line 23:** “dd,” “s,” “s,” “b,” “s,” “b”
- **Line 24:** “c,” “b”
- **Line 25:** “s”
- **Line 26:** “l,” “d,” “l,” “d,” “l”
- **Line 27:** “h,” “h”
- **Line 28:** “pp,” “p,” “t”
- **Line 29:** “t,” “s,” “t,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 30:** “Th,” “r,” “r,” “t,” “n,” “th,” “n,” “d,” “th,” “n,” “d,” “fr,” “t,” “t,” “t,” “ch”
- **Line 31:** “Ch,” “r,” “n,” “n,” “l,” “f,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “l,” “f,” “ll”
- **Line 32:** “F,” “r,” “ll”
- **Line 33:** “Th,” “s,” “ck,” “th”
- **Line 34:** “N,” “n,” “b,” “s,” “s,” “k,” “s,” “bb”
- **Line 35:** “c,” “pp,” “p”
- **Line 36:** “w”
- **Line 37:** “n,” “n,” “s,” “wh,” “t,” “w,” “t”
- **Line 38:** “s,” “s,” “wh,” “s,” “s”
- **Line 39:** “W,” “n,” “n”
- **Line 40:** “w,” “ck,” “c,” “s,” “wh,” “s,” “l,” “k,” “s”
- **Line 41:** “L,” “s,” “l,” “s,” “s,” “c,” “s,” “c,” “m”
- **Line 42:** “s,” “s,” “m,” “m,” “s,” “l”

DIACOPE

Diacope occurs fairly often in this poem, and generally serves to reflect the speaker's obsessive and exhausted state: words frequently repeat in close succession, underscoring the fact that the speaker cannot stop thinking about work and is drowsing off. In the beginning of the poem, for example, note how often the speaker uses the word "apple[s]," clearly revealing what is on his or her mind.

Later, in line 19, diacope reinforces the fantastical image of the apples that the speaker sees floating in his or her visions:

> Magnified apples appear and disappear,
> Stem **end** and blossom **end**.

The repeated use of the word “end” foregrounds the parallels and differences between the two kinds of apples the speaker imagines. Specifically, the “stem end” refers to the ripe fruit, ready to pull from the stem. “Blossom end,” in contrast, recalls the beginning of the apple's life cycle, when it was only a flower. By calling such direct attention to the two ends of the apple's life cycle, the diacope underscores the theme of time's relentless passage and the seasons of growth and rest that come with it.

Diacope also occurs with the repetition of "keep" in lines 21 and 22, reinforcing the fact that the speaker can still feel the ladder underneath his or her feet; the speaker "keeps" saying "keep" to assert just how acutely he or she can feel the pressure and ache from standing on the ladder all day. The diacope of "ladder" has a similar effect: the ladder's presence intrudes on two lines in a row. Another use of diacope occurs in the phrase “load on load” in line 26. Here, the repetition of “load” emphasizes both the overwhelming harvest and the sense of burden that the speaker feels in dealing with it.

The final instance of diacope is perhaps the most notable, because it underscores the speaker's central preoccupation with sleep and also shows how forcefully sleep comes to claim the speaker at the end of the poem. The word "sleep" repeats four times in the poem's final five lines, with the density of the word seeming to represent the speaker's growing anxiety about what kind of sleep he or she is about to experience. The way the word "sleep" suddenly shows up so frequently also suggests that sleep (whether simple "human sleep" or the mysterious sleep of death) is inevitable. The speaker has hinted at sleep throughout, but in these last lines, it's everywhere; the speaker has no choice but to face it, no matter how reluctant he or she may be to do so.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “Apples”
- **Line 6:** “apple”
- **Line 8:** “apples”
- **Line 19:** “end,” “end”
- **Line 21:** “keeps”
- **Line 22:** “keeps,” “ladder”
- **Line 23:** “ladder”
- **Line 26:** “load,” “load”
- **Line 38:** “sleep,” “sleep”
- **Line 41:** “sleep”
- **Line 42:** “sleep”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs frequently in “After Apple-Picking,” affecting the rhythm and pace of the poem throughout. At some points, enjambment helps the lines move fluidly from one to the next, making certain sections feel smooth and predictable. But at other points, enjambment makes the lines feel uneven and sometimes even confusing, creating unexpected twists and turns in the speaker's logic. This strange, inconsistent sense of rhythm is a key way in which the poem draws the reader into the speaker's experience of falling gradually into a fitful sleep.

In the places where enjambment smooths out the connections between different lines, it's almost as if the lines literally fall into each other, giving the reader a parallel experience to the speaker's experience of falling asleep. For example, the series of enjambments in lines 14 through 17 let the reader experience how smoothly the speaker's mind can descend toward sleep, with each line feeding seamlessly into the next (and with the end-rhyme reinforcing this sense of flawless connection).

A similar effect occurs in lines 24 through 26, as the lines flow smoothly together in the same way that the apples fall into the "cellar bin." Each line reveals a new detail about what sound the speaker is "hearing," but there is no real separation between any of these pieces of information. In this instance, the effect is also a little ominous; the lines feel endless in the same way that the speaker feels the apples are endless, and so enjambment helps the reader understand the overwhelming reality of all these apples.

At other points, however, enjambment has almost the opposite effect, bringing to life the speaker's experience of struggling to keep his or her thoughts in line as sleep approaches. For example, the enjambment between lines 9 and 10 surprises the reader by connecting the "strangeness" of the speaker's vision to a mysterious "pane of glass." Since it's not immediately clear what the speaker is talking about here, the lines seem to meander between unrelated ideas, with enjambment making close connections between things that seem quite different.

The ends of lines 10 and 11 are also enjambed, slowly revealing that the speaker is talking about a sheet of ice, but because this simple idea is revealed in a roundabout and initially confusing way, the reader experiences the image in the same hazy, surreal way that the speaker does. Here and in several other spots throughout (lines 32 through 36, for instance), enjambment lets the poem mimic the uneven, sometimes unsettling way that the speaker's exhausted mind connects various parts of the speaker's experience.

Recall that you should not rely solely on punctuation to determine enjambment; we've marked a couple lines here as being enjambed despite their use of final commas, because, read within the poem as a whole, they feel as though their full grammatical or syntactical meaning spills over from one line to the next. It is possible to interpret them differently, however.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tree"
- **Line 2:** "Toward"
- **Line 3:** "fill"
- **Line 4:** "Beside," "three"
- **Line 5:** "Apples"
- **Line 7:** "night,"
- **Line 8:** "The"
- **Line 9:** "sight"
- **Line 10:** "I," "glass"
- **Line 11:** "I," "trough"
- **Line 12:** "And"
- **Line 14:** "well"
- **Line 15:** "Upon"
- **Line 16:** "tell"
- **Line 17:** "What"
- **Line 18:** "disappear,"
- **Line 19:** "Stem"
- **Line 24:** "bin"
- **Line 25:** "The," "sound"
- **Line 26:** "Of"
- **Line 27:** "much"
- **Line 28:** "Of ," "overtired"
- **Line 29:** "Of "
- **Line 30:** "touch,"
- **Line 31:** "Cherish"
- **Line 32:** "all"
- **Line 33:** "That," "earth,"
- **Line 34:** "No," "stubble,"
- **Line 35:** "Went," "heap"
- **Line 36:** "As"
- **Line 37:** "trouble"
- **Line 38:** "This"
- **Line 39:** "gone,"
- **Line 40:** "The," "his"
- **Line 41:** "Long"

HYPERBOLE

There are a few well-placed examples of hyperbole in this poem. The first two examples, in line 20 and line 26, are somewhat subtle, and both have to do with the speaker's perception of just how overwhelming the enormous harvest of apples is. In line 20, the speaker claims to clearly see "every fleck of russet" (that is, every variation in color) in every apple that he or she remembers. This claim is not literally true (no one can pay *that* much attention to detail), but to the speaker, it *feels* true. The use of hyperbole shows that the details of the apples completely fill the speaker's mind.

Similarly, line 26 describes "load on load of apples" that are still tumbling into the cellar. It's probably true that the harvest is large, but the hyperbole here makes the apples sound endless. Again, the effect is to convey the speaker's exhaustion and feeling of being overwhelmed.

Line 30, however, brings this use of hyperbole to an undeniable high. The speaker claims to have had to pick "ten thousand thousand" apples with no help from anyone else, which is clearly an impossible thing for any one person to accomplish in a single season. But again, the speaker experiences this fact as true; this "great harvest" is beyond the normal bounds of what the reader might otherwise imagine. Note that "thousand thousand" is also an example of epizeuxis.

This instance of hyperbole also has the secondary effect of being rather impressive and even inspiring. It makes it clear that, even though all these apples (or, in the poem's central metaphor, all these creative ideas) are overwhelming, they're also a kind of miracle that makes the ordinary world feel extraordinary.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Line 20:** "every fleck of russet"
- **Line 26:** "load on load of apples"
- **Line 30:** "ten thousand thousand fruit"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

Although the poem never explicitly states this, "After-Apple Picking" is often read as an extended metaphor for creative work and, more specifically, the composition of poetry such as Frost's. The poem can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the process of any purposeful work and the products it yields.

In this extended metaphor, the apples the speaker labors over and worries about are a stand-in for the creative ideas and/or completed works of a writer or artist. That is, they are literal versions of the "fruits" of a creative person's labor. Through discussing the work of picking apples, the speaker makes it clear that creativity is both a gift and a burden. On the one hand, the speaker is overwhelmed by the fear of not making the most of his or her creativity. This worry shows up most vividly in lines 32 through 36, when the speaker imagines all the perfect apples that go "to the cider-apple heap." The poem suggests that just as the speaker will lose any apples that he or she lets fall to the ground, so too will a writer lose good ideas that he or she doesn't nurture into creative works.

However, it's clear that even though the speaker *wants* to take good care of all the apples ("cherish in hand," line 31), there are just too many of them ("ten thousand thousand fruit," specifically) for such thorough work to be possible. Through the speaker's clear sense of being overwhelmed by the "loads on loads of apples" (line 26), the poem conveys the idea that part of being creative is being uncomfortably overwhelmed by ideas. That is, it's never possible to develop every idea that one might want to, no matter how good one's intentions are. Sometimes, the artist has to rest, even when creative work calls.

On the other hand, the near-impossible abundance of apples in the poem also suggests that creative work is a kind of miracle that should be cherished, even though it's also overwhelming. Even though the speaker is "overtired" (line 28), this exhaustion seemingly comes from having worked hard at something meaningful. What's more, the speaker's preoccupation with sleep draws a subtle connection between creative work and the idea of immortality. That is, the speaker knows that he or she will eventually have to experience the "long sleep" (line 41) of death, but the image of the apple-picking ladder stretching "toward heaven" (line 2) suggests that creative work can somehow bridge the gap between human life and a divine afterlife.

Perhaps the speaker thinks that being an artist is a way of working toward a literal, Christian idea of "heaven," or perhaps the ladder points instead to the idea that leaving behind works of art after one's death creates a kind of symbolic immortality on earth. Either way, these hints at the positive aspects of the speaker's work picking apples lets the extended metaphor suggest that there's a divine side to creating works of art, even though doing so is exhausting and impossible to do perfectly.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

At the end of the poem, the speaker imagines speaking to a woodchuck about sleep. By thinking that the woodchuck might talk back in the same way a human might, the speaker is using anthropomorphism.

This works mostly to reinforce the shift toward sleep at the poem's end. That is, if the speaker were awake, the speaker might wonder what a woodchuck thinks, but he or she probably wouldn't imagine an animal literally talking. This dreamlike shift in the speaker's thought process shows that the process of falling asleep that has stretched across the poem is now actually turning into real, unavoidable sleep.

What's more, giving the woodchuck a human capacity for thought and speech underscores the connection between humans and the life cycles of nature. Just as the woodchuck has to hibernate in order to live, the speaker (and other humans) must accept their need for rest and, eventually, even face the inevitable fact of death. The use of personification shows that the speaker has begun to accept these realities on some level, even as he or she continues to struggle anxiously against sleep.

Where Anthropomorphism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 39-42:** "Were he not gone, / The woodchuck could say whether it's like his / Long sleep, as I describe its coming on, / Or just some human sleep."

METAPHOR

In addition to the poem's extended metaphor about creative work, it also contains one instance of an additional individual metaphor.

This metaphor comes when the speaker describes looking through a "a pane of glass" taken off the top of a "drinking trough." The speaker isn't talking about a piece of literal glass, but is rather using the image of glass to stand in for ice (specifically the kind of thin, fragile ice that forms at the surface

of water in the late autumn or early winter).

The metaphor serves a couple of different purposes. First, it makes the scene the speaker describes feel eerie and surreal; it's not immediately clear to the reader what this "glass" is or where the speaker got it, which makes the otherwise mundane scene in the orchard seem unexpectedly mysterious. This sense of uncertainty mirrors the speaker's anxiety and passes some of it on to the reader through the confusion of this moment.

Second, the words "pane of glass" bring to mind a window in a way that the words "sheet of ice" wouldn't have. That is, the metaphor suggests that the speaker isn't just looking *through* the pane, but also *into* something beyond it, the way you might peek into (or out of) a house through its window. It seems like the speaker is peering out of one location and into another, even though the details of those locations are hazy (as noted when the speaker describes "the strangeness" of his or her "sight"). This sense of looking uncertainly into a different place subtly reinforces the idea that the speaker might be mulling over the imagined worlds of creative work, or perhaps even contemplating the deeper mystery of death itself.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "a pane of glass"

EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis occurs once in "After Apple-Picking," with the exact repetition of the word "thousand" in line 30.

The effect of this repetition is fairly straightforward, but it's nonetheless important. This is a key line in the poem, where the speaker reveals exactly how overwhelmed he or she feels by the "great harvest" of countless apples. The speaker isn't giving the reader a literal count of how many apples were harvested, but rather conveying a sense of never-ending enormity. There aren't just a thousand apples here, or even ten thousand; there are ten *thousand* thousand, a number that feels incomprehensibly large. The use of epizeuxis brings the reader into the speaker's experience of feeling completely overwhelmed by all these apples (or, following the poem's extended metaphor, all these creative ideas and projects).

It's worth noting that this actual number could also be written as ten million, but that simpler phrasing doesn't have quite the same effect. Because it's more concise, "ten million" actually sounds smaller than "ten thousand thousand." The repetition of the word "thousand" brings to life the speaker's perception of "load on load of apples coming in" (line 26), with the word rolling relentlessly toward the reader in the same way that the apples bombard the speaker.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 30:** "thousand thousand"

VOCABULARY

Bough (Line 5, Line 23) - A large tree limb or branch.

Essence (Line 7) - Essence can a fundamental, basic quality. It can also refer to a scent or fragrance.

Skimmed (Line 11) - To skim is to remove or take from the surface.

Drinking trough (Line 11) - A long, open container with water for livestock to drink from.

Hoary (Line 12) - Hoary is often used to describe something that is white or silvery in color—for example, an aging person's hair. Another meaning is "frosty" or "icy."

Russet (Line 20) - A reddish, brownish, or yellowish color.

Instep arch (Line 21) - The middle part of the foot.

Cherish (Line 31) - To treasure something.

Spiked (Line 34) - To be covered with hard, sharp points.

Stubble (Line 34) - The waste left over after a harvest. Orchard stubble, then, would be leaves and twigs mixed in with the harvest and possibly left attached to apples.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem consists of a single stanza of 42 lines. The generally free-flowing nature of the stanza establishes its conversational tone and also helps reflect the idea that the speaker is drowsing off (and, as such, isn't going to stick to a strict poetic form).

There are some structural units within the poem that seem to stand apart, however, that correlate with meaning. For example, an initial sestet (lines 1 to 6) introduces readers to the poem's circumstances: the speaker has been picking apples, and though there are a fair amount remaining in the trees, the speaker is not going to pick any more. Later, lines 9 to 13 arguably form a quintet as they present the incident of the speaker looking at the landscape through a pane of ice.

METER

The meter of many lines in "After Apple-Picking" is a rough version of iambic pentameter (a da DUM rhythm with five poetic feet, for a total of ten syllables per line). Robert Frost often favored this meter since it most nearly imitates the natural speech of rural New Englanders. However, the meter varies significantly throughout, often in a way that mirror's the ideas the speaker is expressing.

The poem does not begin with iambic pentameter, but rather with iambic hexameter (six iambs per line) in line 1:

My long | two-point- | ed lad- | der's stick- | ing

through | a tree

Then, the very next line subverts the meter further, with just two iambs:

Toward heav- | en still

Then, the next several lines fall into a meter that's mostly iambic pentameter, though there are occasional variations and the pattern of stresses isn't particularly obvious. Take lines 3 and 4:

And there's | a bar- | rel that | I did- | 'nt fill
Beside | it, and | there may | be two | or three

A similar meter persists through line 13, suggesting that after a somewhat rocky start, the speaker has grown focused and able to express his or her thoughts steadily.

However, the meter shifts again in lines 14 through 17, which alternate between iambic dimeter and iambic pentameter:

But I | was well
Upon | my way | to sleep | before | it fell
And I | could tell
What form | my dream- | ing was | about | to take.

In these lines, the speaker begins to describe the process of falling asleep. The varying lengths of the lines combined with their steady iambic forms creates a sense of gentle rocking that reflects this idea of sleep gradually arriving.

From this point on, the meter shifts frequently, continuing to mirror the speaker's changing mindset as he or she falls into a fitful sleep. For instance, line 18 has 11 beats, while line 19 has only six. Some lines (such as line 35) are still in steady iambic pentameter, creating a sense of tension between moments of clear thought and moments of sleepy confusion. This tug-of-war in the meter continues throughout the poem, highlighting the speaker's anxiety and giving the reader insight into his or her experience.

RHYME SCHEME

"After Apple-Picking" has no reliable rhyme scheme.

The first four lines rhyme ABBA, while the next two lines form a rhyming couplet (CC). Lines 7, 8, and 9 rhyme in a DED pattern.

After these lines, however, the rhyme scheme follows no particular pattern. Sometimes three lines in a row will rhyme, while other times a line might stand alone without rhyming with any others. Some instances of individual rhymes show up in the following lines: 10 and 12, 13, 17, and 21, 14 - 16, 18 and 20, 24 and 26 (with a near-rhyme in line 23), 28 - 29, 31 - 32, 33 and 36, 39 and 41.

The poem's lack of a definite rhyme scheme is contrary to Frost's usually precise use of rhyme, so while the rhyme in this poem may seem random, it's certainly not insignificant. Rather, the scattered and broken rhymes (interspersed with occasional instances of clear, steady rhyme) mimic the speaker's confused mindset as he or she drifts uneasily off to sleep.

SPEAKER

"After Apple-Picking" does not reveal much about its speaker; for example, the reader doesn't learn the speaker's name, gender, or race. That said, the first-person speaker is similar to a persona that Robert Frost frequently chose to adopt in his New England poems: the farmer-sage, a wise person who lives simply and farms the land. This speaker observes the world, often with close attention to the details of nature, and reflects upon what he or she perceives. The speaker of "After Apple-Picking" is in many ways in keeping with this common feature of Frost's poetry.

More specifically, this poem's speaker is someone who is both devoted to work and troubled by the endless burden of it. On the poem's surface, this person works in an orchard, overwhelmed by the quantity of apples in the season's harvest. But on the level of the poem's extended metaphor, the speaker is also someone who engages in some kind of creative work, likely composing poetry like Frost himself. Following this metaphor, the "apples" are really creative ideas or projects; the speaker wishes for a "great harvest" of inspiration, but seems to be dismayed to find that it's impossible to actually follow through on that many ideas.

The speaker struggles to resolve this dilemma throughout the poem but is ultimately unable to do so, instead falling into a fitful sleep that, while badly needed, also keeps the speaker away from the work that he or she wants so badly to complete. What's more, the poem also hints that the speaker might be worried about more than just the burdens of work and creativity; the speaker's uncertainty about "whatever sleep" is coming suggests that perhaps the deeper mystery of death is also on the speaker's mind.

SETTING

The broad setting of "After Apple-Picking" is a New England farm, specifically the apple orchard that the speaker has recently finished working in. The orchard is clearly indicated by the poem's title, its repeated mention of apples, and the first two lines where a ladder in a tree is mentioned. The season must be autumn, because apples are typically ready to harvest after the summer. The poem seems to move into the speaker's home as it progresses, and the speaker considers the day's work and his or her desire for sleep. This would further suggest

that the poem takes place in the evening.

The fact that this is New England is implicit because, for one thing, this is one region where American apples are grown. Of course, the poem's broader context makes this explicit: "After Apple-Picking" appears in *North of Boston*, a book in which most of the work is set in New England. Also, the woodchuck (line 40) is an animal seen on New England farms.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"After Apple-Picking" appears in Frost's second book of poems, *North of Boston*. This volume, which was published in 1915, contains many of the poems for which Frost is most famous—including "Home Burial," "Death of the Hired Man," and "Mending Wall."

Robert Frost wrote poems in the modernist period of the early 20th century. While his work contains some modernist traits, Frost wrote mainly in more recognizable verse forms, often adhering to familiar rhythm and meter in ways that other modernists usually did not. Like the modernists, however, he incorporated a more natural diction into his work, generally using the regional diction of New England in the early 1900s. Frost also favored blank verse—unrhymed iambic pentameter. In the cases where Frost does use rhyme, it's usually secondary to the natural rhythms of New England speech.

But despite Frost's use of some features of modernism, he never aligned himself with any particular school of writing and was known for his unique style and willingness to incorporate aspects of a variety of poetic traditions. In particular, his existential themes and focus on the details of nature as metaphors for the human condition also connect his work to an earlier generation of New England poets, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson.

Frost's years in England, from 1912 to 1915, put him in touch with a number of poets who would prove to be important influences. These poets include Robert Graves, W. B. Yeats, Rupert Brooke, Ezra Pound, and Edward Thomas. It was in this atmosphere of poetic exploration that Frost was able to perfect the use of metaphor, meter, and line that is evident in his first two books, *A Boy's Will* and *North of Boston*, which were first published in England. It was Frost's friendship with Pound that led to the publication of his first two books of poems, and Pound's influence is also clear in Frost's precise and focused imagery and meditations on an indifferent universe. Frost's work is often compared to that of Robert Graves as well, in large part because both poets were more formal in their work than others of the modernist period. Both preferred to incorporate traditional lines, forms, rhythm, and meter into their poetry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Frost and his family lived on the thirty-acre "Derry Farm" in New Hampshire from 1900 until 1912, and Frost's work is greatly influenced by those years. Frost's focus on the natural world in both his personal life and his writing is especially notable given the societal shifts toward industrialization and urbanization that were ongoing at the time this poem was written.

Though Frost wrote actively through some of the most important events of the 20th century, including both World Wars, he rarely addresses this historical context directly in his poetry. Instead, his poems often convey a sense of deeply personal unease that reflects the anxieties of a changing world through the lens of individuals' emotions. In the case of "After Apple-Picking," for example, the speaker's desire to stay awake and engaged with work (despite being completely exhausted) may be a subtle commentary on the challenges of keeping up with the ever-changing demands of an increasingly complex world at the turn of the century.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Robert Frost's Biography — A summary of Frost's life as a poet and his publications. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)
- Quotes from Robert Frost — A collection of readers' favorite lines from Frost's writing. (https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7715.Robert_Frost)
- Robert Frost reads "After Apple-Picking" — An audio-recording of Robert Frost reading "After Apple-Picking," along with the text of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4IjN_jiMD4)
- "Robert Frost's America" — A 1951 Atlantic Magazine article providing an in-depth look at the people and region of Robert Frost's New England. (https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/poetry/frost/vand.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- Fire and Ice
- Mending Wall
- Nothing Gold Can Stay
- Out, Out—
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- The Road Not Taken

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