Nothing Gold Can Stay

POEM TEXT

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

SUMMARY

In early spring, the fresh buds on the trees are gold. This color is the quickest to disappear from the natural world, however. The fresh blossoms on the trees are flowers, but these flowers disappear quickly too. They turn into leaves that fall to the ground, just as humankind fell from the paradise of the Garden of Eden, and just as the promising early light of morning gives way to daytime. Nothing beautiful, fresh, or pure can last forever.

THEMES

THE TRANSIENCE OF LIFE, BEAUTY, AND YOUTH

"Nothing Gold Can Stay" is about the fleeting nature of beauty, youth, and life itself. According to the poem, nothing "gold"—essentially nothing pure, precious, or beautiful—can last forever.

The poem begins by focusing on changes in the natural world. The "first green" leaves of spring are compared to gold, nature's most prized metal, immediately establishing gold as symbolic of everything that is fresh, youthful, and beautiful. Yet this "hue" is also the "hardest" for nature, personified in the poem as a female figure, "to hold." Nature is trying to stop the freshness of early spring from fading, perhaps like a mother who wishes her children would stay young forever.

This is impossible, and readers know that the first buds of spring will mature and, eventually, fall. The speaker then speeds the natural cycle up to hammer home this point, saying that the first blossom of spring lasts "only … an hour." This is an exaggeration of course, but it emphasizes just how fleeting this fresh, lovely stage of life is. The precious beauty and innocence of youth, the poem is saying, flashes by in the blink of an eye.

The speaker then broadens the poem's scope to include Eden, the biblical paradise from which human beings were expelled according to the Book of Genesis. Eden was a land free from sin and suffering that infamously and inevitably ended, the speaker says, just as the promise of the new morning ("dawn") must give way to the reality of the day. In each of these examples, something beautiful and innocent—untainted by the world—proves fleeting, unable to endure.

In the second half of the poem the speaker also notably starts using language related to sinking or descending to describe the path of everything that is at one time young and beautiful. This suggests that the inability of anything "gold" to last is because *life itself* is a corrupting force that drags such beauty down. Thus, Eden didn't simply end; it "sank to grief." This implies that it began on a high—but, like leaves and flowers that flutter to the ground from tree tops, couldn't stay in such a vaulted place, protected from earthly realities. Similarly, "dawn goes down to day."

The idea of dawn going "down to day" is especially unusual, and inverts the familiar image of the sun *rising* into daylight. Metaphorically, dawn can be interpreted as the beginning of a life—a blank slate for a new day. Its going "down to day" thus highlights the loss or tainting of that opportunity, as well as the process of aging and, ultimately, death. Indeed, the poem looking downward subtly evokes burial and the notion that all life inevitably ends up in the ground.

Overall, then, the poem argues that nothing pure or perfect can last; life takes its toll on everything, and death awaits us all. The promise of spring is followed by autumn and winter; green leaves will turn brown and begin to rot. Yet the poem may not necessarily be trying to create melancholy. Instead, perhaps it's pushing the reader to accept the reality of such transience in order to better appreciate golden moments while they last.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Nature's first green is gold,

The poem starts by asserting that the first "green" of nature is "gold." At first this might be confusing—how can something that's "green" *also* be another color? But the "green" here

refers less to actual color and more to the idea of fresh life; calling something (or someone) "green" means that it's new, innocent, inexperienced. The speaker is saying that the first, fresh growths in Nature, personified as a female entity throughout the poem, are "gold."

Taken literally, "gold" refers to the fact that spring leaves are indeed often a lighter, brighter color than the darker foliage of summer. In fact, new buds on trees are often a very pale green or yellow in color. But "gold" is also symbolic here. Gold is, of course, a precious metal, associated with wealth, beauty, and perhaps purity. Through this metaphor, then, the speaker is saying that the fresh buds of spring are beautiful and valuable. New life, then, is presented as something precious. This connection is underscored by the alliterative hard /g/ sound between "green" and "gold."

At the same time, the language here suggests that things will change, and that something else will follow: the line's focus on "first" green implies that this is a *transitional* state, and that a *different* "green"—a different form of life—will come later.

"First green" is given extra significance because of its adjoining stress. It's a spondee, a metrical beat in a line of poetry that has two accented syllables (stressed-stressed). This is only one of two times that a spondee appears in the entire poem, which means its double stress is meant to be noticed—this beautiful "first green" is meant to stand out. The reader is forced to slow down upon reaching this point, and to examine the significance of the words. This ties into the idea of wanting to hold on to something for longer than possible.

LINE 2

Her hardest hue to hold.

The poem's second line supports the idea that this "first green" cannot last by stating that gold is the most difficult color for nature to "hold." In other words, this "gold" quickly fades or disappears. Taken literally, this might refer to the transition of those young buds of spring into the deeper-hued leaves of summer. Taken metaphorically, this implies that the preciousness of youth quickly gives way to maturity.

Frost again personifies nature as a female entity. This is a familiar association (think of the phrase "Mother Earth") based on the idea that nature nurtures and provides for humanity. The personification of nature adds to the pathos of this line, as it subtly presents nature as a kind of mother whose children—those buds and flowers of spring—inevitability grow up, lose their innocence, and, eventually, die. No matter how much the natural world may want to preserve the beauty and freshness of her children, it is ultimately impossible to do so.

The perfect end rhyme between the words "gold" and "hold" highlights the connection between the two key ideas of transience in the lines. "Gold," a symbol for youth and beauty, is set in direct relation to the verb "hold," which is a temporary action. It's impossible to hold something or someone forever, thus implying that a state of youth cannot last.

The combination of alliteration in "her hardest hue to hold" propels the line forward, the repeated /h/ sounds like a big exhalation of breath; it's as if the line forces the reader to sigh in resignation. The meter here is also clearly iambic:

Her hardest hue to hold.

The line follows a steady, predictable da DUM pattern that suggests a sort of inevitable motion or inescapable reality; this golden hue *will* slip through nature's fingers.

LINE 3

Her early leaf's a flower;

The personification that was introduced in the previous line continues, as the speaker states that "her" (nature's), "early leaf's a flower." This may literally refer to the initial flowering of spring plants, but could also refer to the delicacy and freshness of new leaves after a long winter. The word "flower," like the word "gold," has associations with youth and delicate beauty.

As with line 1, though, there's a sense of transience here. Only "early" leaves are flowers, just as only the "first green is gold." This again connects youth and innocence to beauty and preciousness, while also implying that change is imminent. This sense is furthered by Frost's decision to write "leaf's" rather than "leaf is." On the one hand, the contraction here is necessary to uphold the poem's meter. Read the two lines aloud and notice how that pesky "is" would disrupt the da DUM iambic flow of the line:

Her early leaf's a flower

Versus:

Her early leaf is a flower

The contraction also certainly helps to convey a sense of speed—the phrase "leaf's a flower" is literally made shorter, reflecting how fleeting this state will prove to be. The combination of consonance and assonance (long /ee/, /er/, /l/, and /f/ sounds) also makes all the words in the line essentially blend together, whooshing past the reader in a blur.

LINE 4

But only so an hour.

The pleasant description of leaves and flowers is quickly undermined by the reminder that, although these things may be lovely, they only last "an hour." Those "early" flowers soon turn into more mundane leaves, or wilt and die altogether.

This is, of course, another metaphor. The use of an hour,

instead of being a literal measure of time, is an arbitrary indication of a *brief* period of time, which also happens to rhyme well with "flower." Frost is being hyperbolic in order to emphasize the fleeting nature of the delicate freshness and beauty represented by the flower. Change and decay, the speaker is saying, are just around the corner.

This line is also visually the shortest in the poem, which adds to the feeling of brevity. The blunt period end stop concluding the line then acts as a harsh reminder that time must cut short all life's pleasurable experiences.

The long assonant /o/ sounds of "only so," meanwhile, imbue the line with a mournful, tolling resonance. Paired with the line's overall focus with speed and change, this only serves to demonstrate that even a slow, conscious appreciation of the first spring blossom is a fleeting observation at best, and never an actual way of prolonging the season.

LINE 5

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

The first four lines of the poem follow a pattern: lines 1 and 3 introduce a lovely image from the nature world, while lines 2 and 4 then insist that such loveliness is fleeting.

The second half of the poem seems to condense both parts of this structure—the beautiful image and its inevitable decline—into single lines. The poem thus moves more quickly at this point, as if someone has pressed fast-forward on the passage of time.

Two lines ago the leaves were being born, but now, just a few syllables later in line 5, they appear to be falling to the ground and piling on top of one another. "Subsides" is an interesting word to use in this context. Its root is from the latin *subsidere* which means to settle or sink. Frost chooses to use this fairly uncommon word in a poem which generally consists of simple language, therefore highlighting its significance. The use of "subside" instead of "fall," for example, suggests that the leaf wasn't that far away from the ground to begin with, and doesn't have long to travel. This adds to the feeling that everything is just one short step away from its own ending.

The repetition (technically diacope) of the word"leaf" is also interesting here. It possibly alludes to the phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" from the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, which is part of passage commonly read at funerals. This change in seasons is thus a reminder of mortality.

It's also possible to connect this idea to line 3, and the assertion that nature's first leaves are flowers. Figuratively speaking, if the first leaf is a "flower" then that could mean that the flower is perhaps becoming an ordinary leaf again.

The concept of "subsiding" in relation to the beauty of a flower can therefore be interpreted metaphorically. Instead of literally meaning that the leaf has fallen to the floor, perhaps it's lost its luster or shine, becoming less than it was before.

The repeated "leaf" also gives the line a cyclical feel, which may put a more positive spin on the leaf's demise. Perhaps it has joined its other fallen leaves in becoming part of the soil, which will nourish the tree and allow new leaves to form. This idea of life as cyclical is also reflected by the seasons: spring passes to summer, to autumn, to winter, but will eventually return. For a moment, then, the poem doesn't seem quite so pessimistic about the inevitable end of everything. The next few lines, however, will challenge this idea.

LINE 6

So Eden sank to grief,

The speaker suddenly expands the scope of the poem. Instead of taking an intimate look at the demise of a single leaf or flower, now the speaker looks at the entire Garden of Eden—the biblical paradise from which Adam and Eve were infamously expelled, introducing sin and suffering into the world.

Again the language here evokes downward movement and decay; the leaf "subsides," while Eden sinks. The poem's pace becomes even more rapid here too, as the entire Fall of Man is rendered in a single line; "Eden sank to grief" with the same rapid speed that transformed gold into green and made a flower become a leaf. The beauty and joy of Paradise itself has proven as fleeting as everything else in the poem.

Within the line, assonance creates a sonic connection between "Eden" and "grief," highlighting the connection between both concepts. The sibilance of the words "so" and "sank" feels like the air hissing of out of a balloon. As with the breathy /h/ alliteration in line 2, the sound of the line feels like a resignation. The world hasn't ended with any grandeur, but rather fizzled out.

It's interesting that the biblical imagery is included in the poem at all. In an earlier version of the poem, sent to George R. Elliott in 1920, the last three lines were:

> In autumn she achieves
> A still more golden blaze,
> But nothing golden stays.

It's clear that Frost decided to include the reference to make a wider point. His allusion to humanity's fall from grace asks the reader to consider a range of issues related to human nature; evil, transgression, and perhaps even the possibility that nature declines as a *consequence* of humanity's sin.

LINE 7

So dawn goes down to day.

The seventh line introduces another contradictory metaphor in the poem, as "dawn," or early morning, is described as going "down to day." The normal language about dawn is the exact opposite: the sun comes *up* or *rises*. As with that symbolic

"green" in line 1, however, it's best to read this line figuratively. The speaker seems to be saying that the horizon becomes much less beautiful after the sun has risen into a new day and the golden tones of dawn have left the sky.

This fits into the context of the poem's second phase: everything is sinking, including what should be rising, implying that change and decay are inevitable.

Dawn, the new day or early morning, is also a time associated with fresh starts, new beginnings, and possibilities. So taken even less literally, perhaps this means that the fresh promise of dawn—the unspoiled beauty of the morning—inevitably gets muddied by the realities of daily life. Innocence and purity can't last—which is the same idea presented by the sinking of Eden and the fleeting nature of that early leaf and "first green" of springtime.

Up until this point, the poem's main focus has been on the change in the seasons, and the annual cycle. It then touched on the entire biblical history of humanity (in a single line!) with the sinking of Eden. Now, the poem turns its attention to the daily cycle of night and day.

This jump to the much shorter daily cycle compared to the longer cycle of the seasons again speeds up the poem. This is heightened by the active present tense of "goes," which intensifies the speed and immediacy of this process. It's as if the dawn is going down *right now*. The slant rhyme present in "dawn" and "down" further blurs the two, again making it seem like dawn already is bleeding into the daytime. The full stop at the end of line then creates a sense of finality, of this being an inarguable truth.

LINE 8

Nothing gold can stay.

After eight short lines the poem is over, neatly illustrating its own claims about the fleeting nature of beauty. The repetition of the word "gold" brings the poem full circle. Everything mentioned above in the poem might be thought of as "gold"—that "first green," the "early leaf," "Eden," and "dawn" are all beautiful, precious, and full of promise, yet they all are also fleeting. They are "gold," but, the speaker asserts, gold simply cannot "stay."

The use of the word "stay" is interesting. The speaker could have said "last," but this is a more passive term. To "stay" implies that something has agency, that it sticks around of its own accord. This adds yet more poignancy to the poem by subtly granting all this "gold" a sense of self—the theoretical *ability* to stay that, tragically, just cannot be applied here.

The word "nothing" here rings out particularly strongly as well because it breaks the poem's metrical pattern. "Noth**ing**" is a trochee, meaning this line begins with a **stressed** beat—whereas most of the lines before it began with the unstressed beat of an iamb. The stress here underscores the main idea of the poem: that nothing and no one escapes decline. The period at the end of line 8 then adds a sense of severe finality to the poem.

This line's consonance and assonance also echo the first line of the poem with its /n/ and /g/, long /o/, and /a/ sounds. In fact, the essential message of the whole poem can be summarized by juxtaposing line 1 and line 8: "Nature's first green is gold," but "Nothing gold can stay."

SYMBOLS

GOLD

Gold in the poem represents youth, beauty, and purity. This is a common symbolic association. Think of when people refer to an era as a "golden age" to mean a period of happiness, peace, and prosperity. When the speaker says that "Nothing gold can stay," this is thus a symbolic reference to the idea that no beauty or joy—really, no good thing—can last forever.

More specifically, the poem begins with a comparison between the first buds of spring—"Nature's first green"—and gold. Gold is a precious and valuable metal, often used for ornamentation and jewelry. It's also quite soft. The metaphor here thus implies that the first buds of spring are like gold in that they are beautiful, precious, and delicate.

The word "green" itself specifically connotes youth, innocence, and inexperience. As such, there are really *two* metaphors at work here. The first growths of springtime are *literally* fleeting in that they quickly give way to the darker, lush leaves of summer. But the poem is also saying that youthful beauty and innocence are precious, and that these qualities slip through nature's fingers all too quickly as well.

Many of the images that Frost uses, while not all explicitly described as "gold," are nevertheless associated with the color. Spring flowers may be bright yellow, for example, and the glow of a sunrise at dawn is golden hued.

Gold is also relatively rare. As such, a further implication might be that it's precisely the *impermanence* of all these things that makes them so precious in the first place.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Nature's first green is gold, / Her hardest hue to hold."
- **Line 8:** "Nothing gold can stay."

NATURE

Nature in the poem comes to represent the life cycle more broadly. This is specifically illustrated by the

journey of a "leaf" from infancy to maturity. The "leaf" represents the changes that take place over the course of a life.

Nature's "first green" is a reference to the delicate leaves and buds of early spring, which are indeed often a pale green or yellow color. The word "green" is associated with youth and naivety, implying that this represents childhood—the early stage of life filled with innocence and potential. That this green is "gold" implies that childhood is precious.

Alas, this phase of life is over all too quickly; it is "Nature's ... hardest huge to hold." The personification of Nature as a female figure suggests the natural world as a kind of mother trying to preserve her children's youth.

"Nature's ... early leaf," in turn, is "a flower." A flower, too, is beautiful yet delicate. However, the leaf is only beautiful for "an hour." The speaker is being hyperbolic here; flowers typically bloom for longer than an hour! This exaggeration is meant to highlight the speed at which life moves, how the beauty and innocent of youth so quickly give way to maturity and, eventually, decay and death.

The leaf's description as being "gold and "green" can also be taken as saying something about personal changes. Greenness, again, is often associated with purity and naivety. The leaf's implied discoloration thus implies that life itself is a loss of innocence and purity. This is heightened by the reference to the Fall of Man from the Garden of Eden in line 6 of the poem. Not only do individual human beings lose their pure, precious beauty as they age, the poem implies, but in fact all humankind has already lost the pure beauty that existed in Eden.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Line 7

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Nothing Gold Can Stay" packs a lot of alliteration into its 8 lines. This alliteration combines with the poem'a steady meter and rhyming couplets to give it a very musical sound; the poem is easy to memorize and satisfying to read aloud. This musicality, in turn, adds to the poem's sense of having an important message that should be passed on to others.

Alliteration also connects certain words in the poem. For example, in line 1 the hard /g/ sound shared be "**g**reen" and "**g**old" connects the two words on the level of sound, supporting their metaphorical connection within the line.

Line 2 then contains the most alliteration per line, with four repeated /h/ sounds:

> **H**er **h**ardest **h**ue to **h**old.

The /h/ sound requires an exhalation of breath, making the line feel like a sigh—perhaps reflecting a sense of resignation at the fact that this golden hue simply cannot last. The reader's breath also almost runs out by the end of the line, reflecting the idea of time being up.

In line 6, the sibilance of "**S**o" and "**s**ank" evokes the air being let out of a balloon, reflecting the feeling of Paradise sinking into the earth. Sibilance is also evocative of a hissing snake—which, of course, was the creature who tempted Eve and spurred the Fall of Man in the Bible.

The alliterative letters within the lines move from /g/ to /h/, to /l/, to /s/, and lastly to /d/. This movement from sound to sound emphasizes the fact that nothing can stay. This alliterative progression also very subtly forces the tongue to move in the mouth from high to low. The /g/ and /h/ sounds require a higher tongue position than the more guttural /l/ and weighty /d/ sounds. This emphasizes the idea of falling as the poem moves from higher, airy sounds to darker ones. This underlines the message of the poem, that everything which is at one time light and youthful must sink into dullness.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "g," "g"
- **Line 2:** "H," "h," "h," "h"
- **Line 5:** "l," "l"
- **Line 6:** "S," "s"
- **Line 7:** "d," "d," "d"

METAPHOR

"Nothing Gold Can Stay" creates some vivid images of the natural world, drawing on leaves, flowers, and sunrises. But Frost does more than just *describe* nature; in every line, he uses some form of metaphoric language to weave together ideas about change, transience, and endings.

The very first line begins by stating that "green is gold." Notice that green *is* gold, not *like* gold, highlighting that this is a metaphor rather than a simile. The speaker isn't literally saying that the color green is also the color gold. Instead, this means that the "first green," the early buds of spring, are associated with everything that gold represents. Gold is generally associated with beauty, purity and preciousness, so instantly the reader knows that spring holds figurative value to the speaker. The fresh, new growth of spring is innocent, beautiful, and precious—and also fleeting; this is only the *first* green, which implies that other stages will follow.

In every line, the speaker continues to use metaphorical language to build the poem's argument. Nature is personified as a female entity throughout, trying to "hold" onto the golden "hue" of that "first green." Nature can't *literally* hold anything, let

alone a color. This is a figurative way of saying that the fresh growth of early spring quickly fades.

The speaker again turns to metaphor when saying that nature's "early leaf" remains "a flower" for just "an hour" before "leaf subsides to leaf" (presumably when leaves begin falling in autumn). This is not meant to be taken literally. The first blooms of trees are often indeed flowers that then become leaves, but flowers here are a stand in for both springtime and delicate, fresh beauty in general. The speaker is then being hyperbolic in order to again emphasize the fleeting nature of the beauty represented by the flower. In other words, the speaker asserts that beauty cannot last.

The word "gold" then reappears as part of another metaphor in the last line of the poem. Gold has come to signify youth, innocence, beauty, and so forth, and the speaker is now saying that none of these qualities will be around forever.

Ultimately, the whole poem can be thought of as an extended metaphor for the life cycle. In this interpretation, the change in seasons comes to represent the change that takes place over a life. Babies become children, who become adults, who become elderly and die. The images of leaves, flowers, and sunrises all combine to contribute to a sense of loss, of transience and brevity that inevitably accompanies the beauty and preciousness of life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8

ASSONANCE

Assonance adds to the poem's intense musicality. It feels sing-song like at times because of the combination of consonance, assonance, and clear end rhyme throughout. This, in turn, makes the poem all the more memorable.

Much of the assonance is of course tied to the poem's use of rhyming couplets, discussed more in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide. Shared vowel sounds occur within lines as well, however. For instance, take line 3:

> Her early leaf's a flower

The repeated /ee/ and /er/ sounds add to the beauty of the line, which in turn evokes the beauty of the early spring flowers being described. The following line's assonant "only so an hour" briefly slows the line's pace. The wide long /o/ sounds create a somber, mournful tone reflecting the poem's assertion that the flower's beauty simply cannot last.

The second half of the poem features an extended string of assonance that weaves in and out of the lines. Long /ee/ sounds give way to long /o/ sounds, which in turn give way to long /a/ sounds:

> Leaf subsides to leaf
> So Eden sank to grief,
> So dawn goes down to day
> Nothing gold can stay.

The assonance's continuation over the line breaks effectively pushes the poem ahead, marching it forward and speeding up the pace. This develops the idea of the inexorable movement of time.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "o"
- **Line 2:** "o"
- **Line 3:** "er," "ea," "y," "ea," "o," "er"
- **Line 4:** "o," "o," "ou"
- **Line 5:** "ea," "ea"
- **Line 6:** "E," "ie"
- **Line 7:** "o," "oe," "a"
- **Line 8:** "o," "a"

ANAPHORA

Frost uses repetition, specifically anaphora, to contribute to the poem's sense of rhythm. The first example comes in lines 2 and 3, with the repetition of "Her":

> Her hardest hue to hold.
> Her early leaf's a flower;

This first introduces, then reinforces the personification of nature as a female entity within the poem. This widens the poem's scope, implicitly including human experience in the process it describes.

The other example of anaphora appears in lines 6 and7:

> So Eden sank to grief,
> So dawn goes down to day

This repeated "So" (in this context meaning 'just like' or 'thus') adds to the feeling of an inevitable march forward in time and evokes the step-by-step process of change. The repetition of "So" also presents these two steps as essentially on the same level, despite the fact that one relates to the entire history of humankind—the biblical Fall of Man—while the other is about perhaps the most quotidian thing of all, the transition from

sunrise to daytime. Time has become the great leveler of all things in this construction, doing away with the ultimate Paradise as swiftly as it pushes dawn into day.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Her"
- **Line 3:** "Her"
- **Line 6:** "So"
- **Line 7:** "So"

CONSONANCE

Frost uses consonance throughout the poem. As with the poem's use of alliteration and assonance, this consonance enhances the poem's musical quality and also emphasizes certain important ideas. Take the very first line of the poem, where the repeated /n/ and /g/ sounds of "Nature's," "green," and "gold." The clear consonance makes the line all the more memorable, almost like an accepted saying or aphorism.

As noted in our discussion of alliteration, the many /h/ sounds in the next line force the reader to exhale; it's as if the line itself is sighing in resignation that this golden hue cannot last. Later, note the soft /l/ and /f/ sounds that fill line 3:

> Her early leaf's a flower

These gentle, lilting sounds enhance the sonic beauty of the line. The next line, though, breaks with this gentle lyricism and relies on more nasally /n/ sounds in "only" and "an."

Towards the end of the poem, the consonance gets heavier. Notice the plodding /d/ and /g/ sounds that seem to reflect the sinking being described:

> Then leaf subsides to leaf.
> So Eden sank to grief,
> So dawn goes down to day
> Nothing gold can stay.

The soft /s/ sounds (sibilance) also create whispering, hushed tone in these final moments, which emphasizes both the strain and the sadness of letting something go.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "N," "g," "n," "g," "ld"
- **Line 2:** "H," "h," "d," "h," "h," "l," "d"
- **Line 3:** "r," "r," "l," "l," "f," "f," "l," "r"
- **Line 4:** "n," "n," "r"
- **Line 5:** "l," "f," "s," "s," "l," "f"
- **Line 6:** "S," "d," "s," "g," "f"
- **Line 7:** "S," "d," "n," "g," "d," "d"
- **Line 8:** "N," "g," "d," "n"

PERSONIFICATION

Frost uses personification throughout the poem. Nature itself is personified from the start, specifically deemed a "Her" in lines 2 and 3:

> **Her** hardest hue to hold.
> **Her** early leaf's a flower;

Nature is often personified as a female entity and depicted as possessing stereotypically feminine qualities; think of concepts like Mother Nature and Mother Earth. This familiar association heightens the implications of this personification. Nature, in the poem, takes on the persona of a mother who wants her children—those buds and flowers of springtime—to stay young forever. The use of the word "hold" intensifies this image: the reader can imagine a mother clinging to her child, knowing that her ability to do so will lessen and disappear as the child grows up. By calling nature "Her," the poem connects the natural cycles being described to the course of a human life.

In line 6, Eden is personified as well, described as sinking "to grief." Eden therefore takes on human characteristics in its ability to feel emotion. The intensity of the line is made more vivid by the word "sank," which creates an image of a person sinking to the ground in despair at the realization that all good things—even Paradise itself—must end.

The final line of the poem, "Nothing gold can stay," combines both metaphor and personification. Gold here represents youth, beauty, purity, etc.—all the things alluded to so far in the poem. The idea that none of this can "stay" imbues the gold with a sense of agency. The speaker doesn't say that nothing can "last," a more passive verb. Instead, the active verb "stay" suggests that all these good things have the theoretical *ability* to stay yet *must* leave. This agency, in turn, adds to the final poignancy of the poem. It suggests the sense of melancholy that humans feel when confronted with the inevitable march of time.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Line 3
- Line 6
- Line 8

VOCABULARY

Hue (Line 2) - A color or shade.

Subsides (Line 5) - Sinks or falls to the bottom.

So (Line 6, Line 7) - In this context, "so" is used as a comparative word, similar to "like."

Eden (Line 6) - The Garden of Eden, the biblical paradise in which, according to the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve lived. After Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, God expelled her and Adam from Eden. This is known as the Fall of Man.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Nothing Gold Can Stay" is a compact poem that packs a lot into its eight lines. These lines can be broken down into four sets of rhyming couplets. The form is simple and predictable, a sense further supported by the poem's steady meter and rhyme scheme. This simplicity makes the poem easy to read and remember, and allows its message to ring out clearly.

The poem can also be thought of as having two sections. The first, lines 1 to 4, focus on establishing the fleeting nature of youth and beauty. In this chunk, lines 1 and 3 introduce the fresh beauties of early spring—the young buds on the trees and flowering plants. Lines 2 and 4, however, assert that such beauty and purity can't last.

Lines 5 to 8 then take an even more pessimistic tone. Whereas the transition from beauty to transience took place over two lines in the first half of the poem, now each transition is condensed into a single line: leaf to leaf, Eden to grief, dawn to day. This second half of the poem piles loss on top of loss, and does so at a rapid clip. The speed of the second half the poem reflects the argument of the first: that all these "golden" things are fleeting.

METER

The poem's primary meter is iambic trimeter. This means that each line contains three iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-stressed, or da DUM, syllable pattern. Take line 2:

Her hardest hue to hold.

Iambic meters generally echo the way people talk, giving the poem a steady yet predictable feel. The meter is very regular throughout the poem, giving the lines a strong sense of inevitability; everything must keep pushing forward, just as time itself never stops moving forward. The steady rhythm also makes the poem easy to memorize. This adds to the feeling that it's a kind of maxim or a proverb—advice to be given, rather than an idea meant to be thoroughly interrogated by the reader or listener.

While most of the poem uses iambic tetrameter, there are two important exceptions to this metrical structure. This break from the steady iambic in the rest of the poem is a clear sign that the poet wants the reader to take note of *these* lines particularly. The first comes in line 1:

Nature's first green is gold,

And the next is in line 8:

Nothing gold can stay.

Both lines open with a trochee, which is the opposite of an iamb. Where an iamb goes da DUM, a trochee is stressed-unstressed, or DUM da. In the first line "Nature" is trochaic, and in the last "Nothing." The first word of each line is emphasized, creating a sonic connection between "Nature" and "Nothing" (a connection further enhanced by the fact that both words begin with the letter *n*). This is an interesting way of underlining the message of the poem: that nothing lasts. By comparing the vast idea of "Nature" and everything it contains with the finality denoted by "Nothing," the speaker implies that *everything*, even nature itself, will eventually end.

The first line of the poem also contains a spondee, a beat in a poetic line that consists of two accented syllables (stressed-stressed). The spondee of "first green" slows down the line, forcing the reader to linger over this phrase. The poem is about the impossibility of holding on to beauty or youthful innocence forever. Stretching out the meter via "first green" suggests that the speaker is trying to hold onto this freshness for just a little while longer.

The final line of the poem is also missing a syllable. Iambic tetrameter should have six syllables per line, but here there are only 5:

Nothing gold can stay.

The poem itself—an artifact of beauty—is thus cut short too soon.

RHYME SCHEME

"Nothing Gold Can Stay" has a very tight rhyme scheme. The poem consists of four couplets and every end word is perfectly rhymed, resulting in the following pattern:

AABBCCDD

The tight rhyme makes it enjoyable to read aloud and pleasing to the listener's ear. This simple rhyme structure is also perhaps comparable to a nursery rhyme, the first poems children learn. Nursery rhymes often impart absolute truths or messages in a simple and memorable format. In the same way, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" presents a sweeping idea about the transience of life itself in a clear, concise, and seemingly simple package.

The poem's rigid structure has a sense of inevitability to it too, carrying the poem forward and making it sonically predictable. That is, the reader comes to *expect* that each end word will have its rhyme in the next line. This mirrors the message of the poem—that seasons, time, and life must march onward toward

their inevitable conclusion.

SPEAKER

It is unclear *who* exactly the speaker is. It's possible that it's Frost himself, but the poem offers no name, age, nor gender. The poem isn't about the speaker; instead its message is meant to present a universal truth about the fleeting nature of youth and beauty, and as such the speaker's identity doesn't come into play.

That said, the speaker's tone is crucial to the poem. Whoever this speaker is, they're pretty pessimistic, insisting that nothing beautiful will stay that way forever. And although the speaker is essentially offering a personal opinion about the inability of youth and beauty to remain, the lack of a clear identity makes the speaker's voice seem all-knowing and impossible to argue against. There is no "I" in the poem. The information is simply presented as fact, contributing to the feeling of hopelessness that runs through the poem.

SETTING

"Nothing Gold Can Stay" can be thought of as having no specific setting, or of having a sweeping setting that encompasses the entirety of human history. Its first few lines may transport the reader to a sunny day amongst trees in early spring, but this soon changes as the timeframe within the poem speeds up. Those buds and flowers turn into leaves, which then fall to the ground in line 5—suggesting a swift passage of spring to summer to autumn. The poem then rushes back to the dawn of human history according to the Bible, when Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden and sin and suffering were introduced into the world. The timeline then becomes its smallest yet, encompassing just a sunrise. And the final line appears to exist *outside* of time altogether, and instead to be simply a *commentary* on it.

This lack of singular, specific setting supports the reading of the poem's pithy message as a kind of aphorism (a short, memorable saying which gives insight into human character) that's being offered from the speaker to the reader.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Nothing Gold Can Stay" was published in Frost's fifth poetry collection, *New Hampshire*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1924. The collection contains some of Frost's best known poems, such as "Fire and Ice" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Frost worked on "Nothing Gold Can Stay" for three years, from 1920-1923, and wrote six versions of the poem in total.

Frost was writing in the early 20th century during the modernist literary period, a time when many writers aimed to disrupt stiff, traditional poetic structures and forms. Frost's work does contain some modernist qualities in that he favors natural diction (New England dialect in particular) and blank verse in many of his poems.

That said, Frost also uses more familiar poetic structures in much of his work (this poem, for instance, is highly metrical and has a strict rhyme scheme). His focus on nature and rural life also contains echoes of the romantic literary period, a time when poets sought to capture the mystery, wonder, and power of the natural world.

Among his contemporaries, Frost is often compared to Robert Graves. Both were writing at around the same time, and used more formal poetic structures than others writing in the modernist period. Both poets favored traditional forms, rhythm and meter in their poetry.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Between 1900 and 1912, Frost and his family lived on the 30-acre Derry Farm. This period strongly influenced Frost's poetry and his relationship to the natural world. Frost's focus on nature and rural life is especially significant given general society's move towards industrialization at the time he was writing. However, Frost's poetry spoke to a wide population of people who were starting to question industrialization, especially in the aftermath of the First World War.

Indeed, although there is no direct reference to historical context in this poem, themes of loss and unease tend to run throughout Frost's poetry and reflect the historical events of the period in which he was writing. The poem was written in 1923, just five years after the end of WWI and just three years after the end of the Spanish Flu pandemic. These two events in combination caused the deaths of millions of people, and imbued survivors with a sense of disillusionment towards the promises of safety and prosperity preached by modern society. In "Nothing Gold Can Stay," the speaker's lamenting the loss of youth and beauty may be a way of highlighting the tragedy of those who had lost their lives and naivete in the previous decade.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading by the Poet — Listen to Frost performing his poem live. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDPUdK2tcdA)
- More Poems by the Author — A selection of poems by Frost, plus a more detailed biography of the poet.

(https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/robert-frost)

- A Documentary — A 40-minute documentary, featuring live footage of the author and offering some insight into his life and experiences. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9jbV7knSH4)
- Video Biography — A short video biography summarising the poet's life and career highlights. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2stTH-rtq8)
- "The Outsiders" — Listen to a character recite Frost's poem in a scene from the classic 1980s coming-of-age drama, The Outsiders." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_d8FKgrZ1E)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ROBERT FROST POEMS

- Acquainted with the Night
- After Apple-Picking
- Fire and Ice
- Mending Wall
- Out, Out—
- Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
- The Road Not Taken

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Gartside, Cordelia. "*Nothing Gold Can Stay.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Jan 2020. Web. 29 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gartside, Cordelia. "*Nothing Gold Can Stay.*" LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2020. Retrieved April 29, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/robert-frost/nothing-gold-can-stay.