Nothing Gold Can Stay

Robert Frost

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold,
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.
NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY

Robert Frost

BEFORE READING

Why I Admire This Poem

I enjoy sharing this poem with students because it does a lot of things well and therefore is a good model for readers who aren't quite sure what makes a good poem. For one thing, “Nothing Gold Can Stay” is only eight lines long, a few sentences. It is an apt example of the economic use of words. Each word, each sound, is important.

Yet in that short space, Frost conveys a theme that is a staple of many works of literature: the inevitability of change. Nothing gold can stay, he tells us. And this is a theme students can relate to. They see change all around them, in their families, in their friends. They study it in science, social studies, and literature.

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” is also a good example of how a poet uses the sound of language to tell a truth. Frost’s use of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance (see page 183) is marvelous and helps hold the poem together.

Companion Poems

Other poems in this book dealing with change or impermanence that can be used in conjunction with “Nothing Gold Can Stay” are:

- “Spring Storm,” by Jim Wayne Miller
- “Junkyards,” by Julian Lee Rayford
- “Abandoned Farmhouse,” by Ted Kooser
- “Deserted Farm,” by Mark Vinz

Special Words to Work Through

As he does in many of his poems, Frost keeps his language simple. However, there are a few words and references in “Nothing Gold Can Stay” that might need explanation. Students will need know the meaning of hue and subsides. In addition, they'll need to understand the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, particularly the part where Adam and Eve are expelled. Even the peace and plenty of paradise didn't last.
FIRST READING: MEETING THE POEM

Write the title of the poem on the board and ask the students what they make of it as a title of a poem. What do they think it means? You might draw their attention to the apparent contradiction: doesn’t gold stay gold forever? How can it be that gold cannot/do not stay the same?

After students have suggested some possible explanations, break the class into groups of three or four students and give each group a copy of the Change organizer. Have them use it to map out some of their thoughts about cycles and change, which is the theme of Frost’s poem.

When the groups have completed their organizers, ask them to give examples of things people do to avoid change. For example, to stay healthy, some people exercise, others take vitamins and supplements. Others choose to have cosmetic surgery in order to remain young looking. Do these practices stop change? Slow it down? Can they think of things that groups—families, teams, nations—do to avoid change?

CLOSE READING: GETTING TO KNOW THE POEM

Theme is one of the more elusive literary terms to define. Consequently, many young readers have difficulty understanding it and knowing its role in a poem. Some students have been taught that theme is the “meaning” of a poem, “what the poet is trying to say.” The problem is that explanations like these often distract readers from the words of the poem, send them on a detour from experiencing the poem. I’ve always believed that poetry readers should focus on what the poet is saying rather than on what we think he or she is “trying to say.”

How then to define theme? Most reference works call it the abstract idea made concrete in a poem or work of prose fiction. I like to think of it as a larger truth that an author conveys in a particular work. Looking at the metaphors in “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” we see the larger truth that Frost is stating, which is the certainty of impermanence.

An important thing to remember about theme in a work of literature is that it is how one person sees the world or a portion of the world. No theme should be taken as a moral certitude. You students should feel free to disagree with how a poet sees the world.

Noticing Figurative Language

We can understand the theme of this short poem by examining its metaphors, especially in the first stanza, where Frost lays out one of his beliefs about life. The metaphors in this poem may be challenging for your more literal-minded students, but you can help them by looking at the stanza line by line and asking some leading questions:
• **Nature’s first green is gold.** How can green be gold? It helps if your students understand that gold is a symbol of something precious and valuable. Those first shoots and leaves symbolize rebirth and new life and are equally precious, and therefore gold.

• **Her hardest hue to hold.** Frost is not speaking literally, of course. He means that the first green is the stage of growth that goes by the most quickly.

• **Her early leaf’s a flower;/But only so an hour.** These two lines reinforce what Frost has stated in the title and the opening lines: the quick passing of time, the impermanence of the fresh green shoots and leaves of spring. Again only an hour isn’t literal; Frost is using hyperbole to make his point.

The first stanza introduces the theme of this poem: things of life change very quickly. Frost continues in this vein in the second stanza with references to Eden ending sadly—it sank to grief—and every day passing quickly—So dawn goes down to day—and finally his repetition of the title in the final line—Nothing gold can stay.

### Noticing Sound

Frost does a number of interesting things with sound in this poem. Your students are likely to recognize that the poem is written in couplets—pairs of lines with end rhymes—with the rhyme scheme aabb ccdd. These end rhymes help hold the poem together. You should also point out that the final couplet brings the poem to a firm conclusion.

Have your students find the alliteration (repetition of initial consonant sounds) that Frost uses:

- Line 1: green/gold
- Line 2: her/hardest/hue/hold, continued to line 3: her
- Line 7: dawn, down, day

He also repeats other sounds skillfully:

- Line 3: er in her early
- Line 4: o in only so
- Line 7: o in so/goes

A master like Frost uses sound to give heft to a poem; we mustn’t overlook this as we focus our attention on the meaning of the words.

### AFTER READING: KNOWING THE POEM FOREVER

**Say It Out Loud**

Too many visuals can distract an audience from the performance of a poem, especially a quiet poem like “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” However, I think a subdued slide show can be an effective backdrop, especially given the theme of
impermanence. A handful of photos that show the change of seasons, for example, would do nicely.

As far as performing the poem, I see the even-numbered lines as responses to the odd-numbered lines; it can therefore be performed by two voices:

Nature’s first green is gold, 
Her hardest hue to hold,

Her early leaf’s a flower; 
But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf. 
So Eden sank to grief,

So dawn goes down to day. 
Nothing gold can stay.

It can also be performed by two small choruses, say eight students in each, each group reciting one line.

**Write About It**

Have students explore one of these ideas in their writer’s notebook:

1. Write about something you thought would never change but did, in fact, change. Was it a change for the better? Or did it make you feel sad, angry, betrayed?

2. If you live in a part of the country that experiences a change of seasons, write a short personal narrative that shows the change you like the most or the least and why.

3. If you live in a place that does not experience significant seasonal changes, write about your reasons for liking/disliking that. If you wish you could experience a significant change of seasons, write about why.

4. Make a list of things you wish would never change.

**Issues/Themes/Topics for Discussion**

- Change
- Impermanence
- Trying to hold on to something/someone
- Changing friendships

**Related Poems**

“I Still Have Everything You Gave Me,” by Naomi Shihab Nye

“Enchantment,” by Joanne Ryder

“The Poem That Got Away,” by Felice Holman
“The Changeling,” by Siv Cedering
“The Christmas Cactus,” by Liz Rosenberg

Book Bridges

I Found a Dead Bird: The Kids’ Guide to the Cycle of Life and Death by Jan Thornhill. A book that explores the cycle of life and death in nature, while exploring how death affects all of us and offering some strategies for coping with a death.

Each Little Bird that Sings by Deborah Wiles. Comfort Snowberger’s family runs a funeral home in their small southern town. Even though Comfort has been around death, she is unprepared for the sudden death of her beloved uncle.

Online Resources

• You will have no trouble finding information about Robert Frost, who is an American icon. A great place to start is at the Frost page on the website of the Academy of American Poets (www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/192). Not only does the page contain biographical information about Frost, there is also a good introductory selection of his poems. One of the external links is to “A Frost Bouquet,” which includes many illustrations and photographs related to the poet and his family.

• Another worthwhile link is www.frostfriends.org, which includes a chronology, a reading list, a biography, and The Robert Frost Tutorial “for students with questions.”
Change

Make a list of things that change—big things or little things. The change can be a quick change—your friend suddenly isn’t your friend—or a gradual change—a change of season.

Once you have a list of between fifteen and twenty things that change, organize them into categories. For instance, you might have a group of items that relate to the physical body or sports. Use a different box for each category.
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