

Mordecai Marcus: On "Nothing Gold Can Stay"

"Nothing Gold Can Stay" combines condensed metaphor and vivid description. "Nature's first green is gold" because the pale green leaves of early spring are goldlike in their light-reflecting tints, as well as in their preciousness and promise. It is the "hardest hue to hold" because its appearance soon changes and its ideal beauty flees the mind. The green-gold leaves darken quickly, a change that symbolizes the brevity of all ideal heights. As John R. Doyle points out, the word "subsides" provides the poem's point of balance. It is a gentle replacement for an expected term of expansion or growth, and suggests a sigh of disappointment as leaf turns out to be not flower but more leaf--that is, as immature leaves are replaced by advancing ones. The fall of humanity in Eden came by such a process. Starting from a height, it plunged the race into knowledge of natural decay. Frost's view resembles Emerson's idea that being born into this world is the fall implying that the suffering and decay brought by natural processes are what we know of evil. Dawn's going "down to day" is another touch of the unexpected, for day should be life at its height, but Frost implies that at the moment when sunrise ushers in day, diminishment begins. The "Nothing" of the last line, repeated from the title, receives special emphasis; the gold that cannot stay comes to represent all perfections. Like W. B. Yeats, Frost thinks that "Man is in love and loves what vanishes."

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