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Different Drummers: Nature, God, and Endings in Two Poems By Robert Frost and Emily
Dickinson

Thesis: Critics simultaneously oversimplify and overthink the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. Although both poets had tragedy in their lives, the poems *They dropped like flakes* and *After Apple-Picking* are not obsessed with grief and loss, but instead reflect their common respect for nature and its rhythms.

They were two authors born nearly a half century apart. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was reclusive and rarely published during her lifetime. Robert Lee Frost was a very public person and published extensively for over 50 years. Dickinson's style was abrupt, torn from her soul; Frost's style was lyrical, connected to the soul. Their styles contradicted the times in which they lived, but they both spent most of their lives in New England and their works reflected its seasons. They also both worked through their life issues in their poetry, particularly their losses. Emily Dickinson's, *They dropped like flakes* and Robert Frost's *After Apple Picking* look at seasons normally associated with beauty, but are these poems necessarily about death? Critics simultaneously oversimplify and overthink their poetry. Although both poets had tragedy in their lives, the poems *They dropped like flakes* and *After Apple-Picking* are not obsessed with grief and loss, but instead reflect their common respect for nature and its rhythms. This paper will look at who these authors were; what they wrote; how to understand their pieces; and why these interpretations are valid to this writer.

Structured biographies are only the starting point for knowing who Dickinson and Frost were; their poems tell the rest of the story. This is particularly true for Emily Dickinson, whose biography masks the enigma of a reclusive woman who wrote with an experienced voice. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830, the middle

child of Edward and Emily Dickinson (ne Norcross). She lived until May 15, 1886. She was a brilliant student but had only eight years of formal education due to being seen as frail by her parents. Being confined to cultural roles for women of her times and the long-term care of her invalid mother, poetry became the expression of her inner life.

Dickinson was most productive in her writing from the late 1850s through the mid-1860s, during which she created small bundles of “fascicles” (nearly 1800 total throughout her lifetime) without her family’s knowledge. She never sent her work out in public, preferring to keep them to herself as little “time capsules” to be opened later, if she wanted them opened at all. Her unusual use of syntax and form were removed from the few poems published in her lifetime. In contrast to other styles of her time, Dickinson’s was choppy, abrupt, and often coarse, unexpected for a young woman of that period. Her writings were greatly influenced by what she referred to as “great sufferings”: premature death, lingering illnesses, and the Civil War. Her themes were reinforced by alliteration, personification, rhyme, symbolism, metaphor, simile, assonance, and consonance (Gido et al). Her poetry was first published in 1890 with unedited versions published in the 1920s, by her niece, Martha Dickinson Bianchi, who wanted an accurate portrayal of her aunt as someone more than a mysterious “woman in white”. It was after this that she began to be recognized as an extraordinary talent, known for her poignant and compressed verse. (Biography) Smithsonian curator and fellow poet David C. Ward said of Dickinson, “Her writing seems to have come from nowhere and her verse was like nothing else both in her own time and in American literature.” (Ward)

Compared to Emily Dickinson, more is known about Robert Frost and who he was because he published extensively during his lifetime and did many interviews and appearances. Robert Lee Frost was born in San Francisco on March 26, 1874, to William Prescott Frost, Jr.

and Isabelle Moodie Frost as their oldest child and lived until January 29, 1963. He published his first book of poetry, *A Boy's Will*, in London in 1913 when he was 38. This was followed a year later with *North of Boston*, where *After Apple Picking* first appeared. As with Dickinson, he spent a majority of his life in New England, starting in 1885 when his family moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts, after his father died of tuberculosis – the first of many losses.

Frost taught in New England colleges for most of his adult life, although he had only three years of college. After marrying fellow high school valedictorian Elinor White, he tried his hand at farming for a time, gaining an understanding of nature and its rhythms. Starting in 1921, he spent almost every summer and fall at Middlebury College, where he taught English on their Ripton, Vermont campus. He served as a poet-in-residence at Harvard from 1939-1943, Dartmouth from 1943-1949, and Amherst from 1949-1963.

While Frost had moved to England to get his first works published, he found more recognition as a poet in America beginning in WWI, which had a profound influence on him and inspired many of his earlier poems. He won many awards for his work as well, consisting of over forty honorary degrees and four Pulitzer Prizes; in 1924 for *New Hampshire*, in 1931 for *Collected Poems*, in 1937 for *A Further Range*, and in 1943 for *A Witness Tree*. He was also awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 1960, and the next year was the inaugural speaker for John F. Kennedy, reading his own poem *The Gift Outright*. In contrast to Dickinson's reluctance to be published, Frost's drive to share his work led him to publish ten collections of his own poetry over a period of 50 years.

Much like Emily Dickinson, Frost experienced his own "great sufferings". It's fair to say his parents died when he was young, as did two of his own children when they were young. Mental illness plagued the family, taking his younger sister, a nephew, and one of his daughters.

Elinor Frost died after years as an invalid, much like Emily Dickinson's mother. These personal tragedies, as well as the tragedy of the wars in his lifetime, helped shape much of his work. Unlike Dickinson, Frost was always in the public eye; he did not leave "fascicles" as time capsules to be opened later. Instead, every volume of his published poetry was a modern time capsule of the events of its period.

The second portion of the analysis moves from who the authors were to what the authors wrote. In considering the styles of both poets, the poetic style of Emily Dickinson might have been more acceptable in Robert Frost's time, while the flowing, lyrical style of Frost's poems would have been a more natural fit for the quiet introspection which marked Dickinson's life. Safi Mohmoud Mahfouz is a member of the Department of English Language and Literature at UNRWA, a refugee University based in Jordan, and he contrasts the poet's style. Dickinson's style was described as "coarse, abrupt, and heavily symbolic", while Frost's style was described as "painting with words." (Mahfouz) He creatively used sensory imagery, adding sounds, smells, feelings, taste, and movement to his descriptions. "[I]t is his artistry in the use of imagery that has distinguished him from his contemporary poets." (ibid) His style was as unique in his time as Dickinson's was in hers. Frost's vivid imagery lends itself to being compared to experiences in the natural world. In one of his poems, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, popular by the film adaptation of *The Outsiders*, states, "Nature's first green is gold, her hardest hue to hold" and ends with "Nothing gold can stay" because in nature, nothing is permanent. Some of his poems, like *After Apple Picking* show the natural life of the seasons, while others, like *Fire and Ice*, show a crueler side. His views are hard to define because his body of work is so vast.

The third portion of the analysis moves from what they wrote to how to interpret the pieces. Neither Dickinson nor Frost finished school, so they may not have been influenced by

“rules” in writing poetry or conveying themes.¹ One poem from each author has been analyzed with an attempt to look at it through fresh eyes and not prejudge the meaning of the poem based on other published works. Both works have vivid nature imagery, but that is where the similarities end. While it’s possible to interpret both poems as dealing with death, only one poem unequivocally does so. *They dropped like flakes* was Dickinson’s attempt to deal with the battle of Chancellorsville. In *They dropped like flakes*, death is the gentle feeling contrasting to all the chaos and destruction of the battlefield. The lines “They dropped like Flakes --They dropped like Stars --Like Petals from a Rose --”, describe things that fall slowly and evoke feelings of peace. Ramadhani saw the Dickinson pieces she analyzed (I Heard a Fly Buzz-When I Died, It Was Not Death for I Stood Up) as being “sinister,” but there are no sinister feelings in *They dropped like flakes* at all. It evokes a feeling of comfort – as the soldiers “perish in the seamless grass” they are still under God’s protective sight. At the time of the Civil War, with newspaper accounts and images bringing the war into every home, Americans “turned to poetry as a form of solace” in a time of need (Ward) and Dickinson’s imagery rescued the soldiers from the horrible battle to a peaceful laying down in the grass. Not sinister, but serene.

Dickinson saw death (at least in war) as a sudden event with no time to prepare, and Frost saw death as an event that happens with time to think, prepare, and even choose. A similarity between the two pieces is they both look to the natural world for metaphor (and maybe even comfort), defined through their own experiences. Neither of them fit the mold of their respective times, but while they both “marched to the beat of a different drummer”, they would have been

¹ In the film *Dead Poets Society*, English professor John Keating encouraged his class to ignore conventional ways of looking at poetry, even having them rip out part of their textbook which described the torturous way of looking at a work. He also had students stand on their desks to prove that everyone has a unique viewpoint. This author believes it is possible to respect someone’s opinion about the meaning of a poem without agreeing with it.

comfortable with each other, and if they were alive at the same time, they might have even marched together. They might have talked about their experiences and what they wanted the world to see through their poetry about how they felt.

While both poems may not necessarily deal with death, both poets were aware that endings can be sudden. Inevitably, when writing about life and possibly writing about death, the meaning of life and the existence of God factor into their work. In *They dropped like flakes*, Dickinson treats God as being able to recognize everyone regardless of where they died or who they were as people. She had a very complicated belief system, with many seeing her poems as “expressions of an idiosyncratic, home-made relation to religious belief, a precarious convergence between her inner experience and her religious inheritance.” (Ladin 2) Robert Frost once said he had a “lover’s quarrel with life” (Ladin 8). While Dickinson only had one war, the Civil War, in her lifetime that made her ponder death, Frost had five, with both World Wars, the Korean Conflict, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War. This, combined with the personal losses they both suffered, made them know the seriousness of death firsthand and the evidence of hope occurring in the natural world, and this had a profound impact on their work. Dickinson’s poem *They dropped like flakes* shows that God will find you wherever you are, while Frost’s *After Apple-Picking* makes no reference to God and has no expectations of what happens afterwards. Frost described himself as an Old Testament Christian (NPR) who kept his faith secret—there are not many hints in his poems of his beliefs. His poetry contains images of the metaphysical and “his best poems transcend the immediate realities of their subject matter to illuminate the unique blend of tragic endurance, stoicism, and tenacious affirmation that marked his outlook on life.” (Gerber) We also know from his letters that Frost was a praying man and in a “sermon” given in 1946, Frost described prayer as “the blessing you ask for is some indication that you are

acceptable in His sight. In his poem, *A Prayer in Spring*, Frost talks about the beauty of the world at the beginning of the year and gives his clearest definition in his work of how he views God: “For this is love and nothing else is love, The which it is reserved for God above To sanctify what far ends he will, But which it only needs that we fulfil.”

A part of the risk in attempting to analyze complex things like faith by reading a few poems is the overconfidence that just these readings will provide simple answers to a question that is very complicated. Like most people, Frost’s and Dickinson’s definitions of God developed over the course of their lives. Their common position was that God is inseparable from our images of the world He created and in both *They dropped like flakes* and *After Apple-Picking*, we have a way to understand God through the natural world. For both poets, is death an interruption of our place in the natural world and a reminder to pause and wonder? To quote an 80s philosopher, “Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it.” (Bueller)

Politician and diplomat Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.” This is especially true when a reader experiences poetry. We have the facts of the poets’ lives, but there is no one right way to apply those facts in finding the meaning of a poem. Academics who have reviewed *After Apple Picking* believe that it is a poem about an old man’s regrets. However, Frost wrote it in 1914 when he was in his 40s. When reading the poem, there is no reference to how old the man is, but purely an interpretation of the reader to assume the man was old. Emily Dickinson’s poems are often felt to have reflected a life of loneliness and suffering. None of these scholarly writers got their views from the authors, so it is the academics’ interpretations, not the poets. Each person reading this poetry brings his own experiences to the poetry just like the authors brought their own life experiences to their work. In

the opinion of this author, the poems are about life, which has a beginning, middle, and end. These authors wrote about the natural world their whole lives. Instead of being afraid of death, they see it as natural because of what they went through in their own lives and know that death is nothing to fear. One of the clues on the viewpoints of each piece is in the length of the poem. Dickinson's poem about young soldiers is told in about the same length that a young person would tell a story, and Frost's poem is told the same length an older person would tell a story. This is one possible clue that others may have thought was an indicator of the age of the narrator of that poem. This author chooses to form his own opinion that it could be anyone of any age because images are universal. What do you think?

Every reader is entitled to be a critic because of what they bring to the table in how the piece can be interpreted. That was the original poet's intention in sharing their work. In her article, "Meeting Her Maker: Encountering Emily Dickinson's God", Joy Ladin talks about her experiences in teaching Dickinson's poetry to a class of orthodox Jewish women at Yeshiva University. The teacher learned from her students as they drew their own conclusions about Dickinson's faith through the filter of their own religious beliefs. This shows there is no failure in understanding to disagree with the critics and their interpretations. Emily Dickinson's works viewed God as kind and someone who takes you on a journey to the places you were young while you die, showing you there is nothing to fear on the way to the grave. (Because I Could Not Stop for Death) In her poem *They dropped like flakes*, the experience of death is slower and more peaceful, compared to what a Civil War battle was like. She felt that "death is not something to be feared, but rather be embraced." (McDermott) This does not mean that Dickinson shared every thought she had about the existence of God, in fact, when she was fifteen and attending an evangelical prayer meeting, she displayed "an astonishing degree of courage"

by refusing to confess her belief in God. (Gido et al) However, her poem *I Know That He Exists* has been described as “poetic theme as an expression of confident faith.” (ibid) So although fifteen-year-old Emily seemed to want to keep her faith private, the poems she wrote were sometimes confident proofs of a God who was involved and personally caring. There would be no reason to be afraid of death where that was the personality which Dickinson gave to God.

This author’s favorite Robert Frost poems are *Nothing Gold Can Stay* and *The Road Not Taken* because he feels they apply to himself the most. The former is more closely related to death and how youth and life don’t last forever, and how beauty can easily be corrupted by outside influences. The latter is about not following what everyone else is doing (Thoreau’s “different drummer”) and choosing to follow your own path, even if it’s not the easiest to follow or the one most people like. Frost’s poetry has been described as “some of the bleakest verses ever penned in English” (Ladin 8), and isolationist. While it can be seen as a bit isolating because the poet is often alone with his thoughts, this author does not believe it is bleak, but rather a reminder to value what can be found in nature and appreciate it for what it is without human interference. (“Or you might miss it”) Therefore, he does not see *After Apple-Picking* as specifically about death, but instead about valuing the time you have every day and what you do with it, whether that be picking apples in an orchard or doing something relaxing like fishing at a lake. A lot of people assume that when someone prefers to do things alone, it means that person is lonely. The truth is communing with nature, like communing with God, is as natural as death and even when done alone, is not necessarily frightening or sinister. These poems seem to attempt to send that message.

Like Dickinson’s emotional connection to the seasons, Frost is more thoughtful about Fall and Winter, when life is slower, and the changes are a chance to look back and evaluate.

That does not mean Frost is bleak – perhaps just introspective. In their article *Questioning Nature: A Study of Death and Isolation in Selected Nature Poems by Robert Frost*, authors AlKrisheh et al even suggest that his poems were revealing of “psychic exhaustion and traumas” presenting a “challenging gloomy picture of nature”. (AlKrisheh et al) This type of analysis where the patient is not present is about as revealing as determining what cartoon character a person is most like by looking at the design on their lunchbox. John McDermott suggests that Emily Dickinson was less active in the winter months because of a bipolar personality. It is equally possible that she wrote less in the winter because her fingers were merely affected by the cold. As the thesis of this paper suggests, this is why the dangers of overanalysis is a disservice to these authors who can no longer explain their own works.

There were many poems by Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost from which this author could have picked, but even when the articles are not specifically about *They dropped like flakes* or *After Apple Picking*, journal writers and other writers excitedly say that they “understand” the poets and what their poems are about. Mahfouz spends almost five pages of his journal article reading into *After Apple-Picking* and concludes, among other things, that the narrator is an old man; that the apple tree is a symbol of the Garden of Eden; and that the three apples left on the branch are “indicative of human’s incompleteness and the imperfection of their work.” (Mahfouz) However, even Mahfouz states “symbol is the most difficult figure of speech to understand and interpret because it might represent a variety of meanings.” (ibid) Dozens of articles are devoted to these deep meanings. “Is that really the purpose of poetry?”, ponders this author. Maybe poetry does not need to be understood at all, but instead, should be valued and experienced, and that is a personal thing. The real time capsule is the work of the poet, and the viewpoint of the reader is of today, not from the time of the poet.

Many writers who wrote about these two poets say that Dickinson was likely bipolar or a depressive personality or even on the autism spectrum (Pellegrino), and that Frost was brooding in his writing. This is hubris. Poetry is intended to be an expression of feelings, or an attempt to evoke a feeling in the reader, but unless the author is explicit about those feelings (such as calling a poem “The Death of the Hired Man” or putting an abstract at the front of the poem), the reader can only guess. Sigmund Freud once said when he found out his theory of the meanings of dreams was being misunderstood by people who concluded everything was a symbol, he remarked “sometimes a cigar is just a cigar”.²

What is real about Dickinson’s poetry is in the clues the poems themselves contain. These clues are a treasure map to discover the author. “[D]espite her apparent physical and cultural isolation, careful study has found the tracings of the wider society threaded through her mysterious and elliptical poems.” (Ward) In a similar way, Frost was influenced “by his personal experiences with the loss of loved ones and his lack of appreciation from his society.” (AlKhrisheh et al.) Lack of appreciation seems to be a strange term to use when describing a writer who won four Pulitzer’s, had a distinguished lecturing career at universities, and was the speaker at the Kennedy inauguration, but maybe he had a sad-looking lunchbox.

At its heart, these two poems are about seeing the beauty in nature: even when nature is bleak and when life has violently ended, there is always the peace in nature and the rest that feels so good after a day of working hard outside. So, whether it is a permanent sleep or a good night’s rest, there is a comforting element that the God who made the world and made us is still there

² It is very tempting and even an exercise of ego for someone to believe they know everything, especially about poetry. Just like poets, we bring our own life experiences. In the politically symbolic animated series, *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, a trio of senators are discussing a recent theft of paintings and one of them declares it a Communist plot, prompting the narrator to ask him why and he said he thought everything was a Communist plot.

and is still a comforter and protector. This is the element of poetry Dickinson and Frost bring in to explain the role of God and life's end. As Yeshiva University's Professor Ladin phrased it, "religious belief is not a static answer but a lifelong pursuit of the most difficult existential questions, a pursuit that makes them supremely sensitive to the nuances and contradictions of the human effort to engage with that which is beyond us." Dickinson and Frost did not give us the answers to great questions in their poetry, but they did give us the questions in reliance on their connection to nature and the rhythm of the seasons. Their life experiences, their use of literary elements, and their unique personal visions give evidence that grief is not the focus of life but is instead the natural response to the end of life's beauty.

Nothing gold can stay.

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