Initially, the speaker of Robert Frost’s “After Apple-Picking” appears to be a lazy worker exhausted after a long day of harvesting apples. However, when the poem is read more closely, it becomes apparent that this is not the case. Who is the speaker, then, and what is the significance of his apple-picking? According to Robert Penn Warren, the speaker of the poem represents all of mankind, and through the apple-picking experience, the speaker comes to the realization that “man must seek his reward in his fulfillment through effort and must not expect reward as something coming at the end of effort” (116). Samuel Coale also infers that the speaker is a representation of mankind, but he argues that the speaker of the poem describes what Coale vaguely terms as a “suspended state” (238). Mike O’Connell offers yet another idea, claiming that the speaker of the said poem is Frost himself. Says O’Connell, “One who would attempt to separate the egocentric ‘speaker’ in a Frost poem from the egocentric Robert Frost labors in vain” (97). While each of these critics provides a valid argument, I believe that they neglect to adequately consider the religious symbolism within the poem. I suggest that when these symbols are closely examined, the speaker of the poem emerges as a figure of Jesus Christ, and through the careful use of imagery, Frost creates a parallel of the redemption that Christ makes available.

The first prominent image Frost uses in his poem is that of a tree with a ladder “sticking through” (1). The narrator travels up and down this ladder countless times throughout the day as he harvests apples. The images of the tree, the ladder, and the narrator all work together to create a singular image of great significance. According to J.E. Cirlot’s A Dictionary of Symbols, the tree represents “inexhaustible life,” or immortality (347). This idea of “inexhaustible life” is fundamental to Christianity. Jesus Christ, the central figure in the Christian religion, rose again after His death on the cross, and according to Christian belief, His doing so made resurrection possible for all others; through Him, immortality can be realized. The ladder is a significant aspect in this image as well. Often, when a ladder is presented in literature, it symbolizes the “connecting link between Heaven and Earth” (“Ladder”). The narrator - the Christ figure in the poem - passes from the Earth below to the tree above. Together, these images symbolize the way in which Christ acts as a connecting link between Heaven and Earth, for Christianity maintains that He is the only means whereby mankind can return to Heaven after this life on Earth is complete (Holy Bible 1362).

A more prevailing image that reoccurs throughout the poem is that of the apple. The apples described in the poem are not perfect red beauties. Instead, they are imperfect fruits with “flecks of russet” marring their surfaces (20). Again referencing Cirlot, apples represent earthly desires and the indulgence of those desires, and in accordance with Christian belief, this indulgence epitomizes the Fallen Man. Because man is fallen, he is imperfect, with weaknesses and blemishes of his own. Thus, the imperfect apples described in the poem are symbolic of the imperfect human race.

Despite the imperfections of the apples, the speaker of the poem diligently harvests “ten thousand thousand” of this fruit, and he is keenly aware of every “fleck of russet” from the “stem end” to the “blossom end” of each one (19-20). He strives to “cherish” each apple in his hand as he “lift[s them] down” from their boughs (31). His desire is to harvest as many as possible and safely gather them into the cellar. This speaker is not the “egocentric” individual proposed by O’Connell. His harvest is a careful and a selfless one. According to Christian doctrine, the imperfect Fallen Man can likewise be saved through Jesus Christ, for “as in Adam all die, even
so in Christ shall all be made alive” (Holy Bible 1457). Christianity teaches that salvation because Christ “[laid] on him the iniquity of us all,” as well as our “infirmities, and … our sicknesses” (Holy Bible 926, 1200). Having done so, Christ surely knows every blemish or “fleck of russet” borne by every individual, and He must be aware of each success and joy – the “blossom end” of a life – as well as each handicap and sorrow, or the “stem end” of an existence. Furthermore, the desire of the speaker to gather the apples into the cellar symbolizes the desire of Jesus Christ to save all of mankind. Interestingly, “cellar” is defined as an “upper room” and can thus be equated to Heaven above (“Cellar”). In this way, the speaker’s goal parallels the goal of Jesus Christ, which is to have all mankind “come unto [him] … and [their] soul[s] shall live” (Holy Bible 928). Indeed, such souls will live in Heaven.

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Works Cited


