

Picking out Irony in Robert Frost's 'After Apple Picking ...'

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The definition of irony since classical times has been to take what is said as opposite to what is meant (Wilson and Sperber 1992). This definition, however, faces many problems, such as: why would a rational speaker say the opposite of what is meant? Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) provides another way of defining irony where irony is taken to be saying more than what is said. Irony requires that the hearer/reader will have to make extra processing effort in order to work out the weaker *implicatures* of the ironic utterance in order to reach a relevant interpretation. The weaker implicatures can, according to Relevance Theory, be inferred from the *actual state of affairs*, to imply a *desired state of affairs*.

In the following analysis of Frost's 'After Apple Picking...', the speaker can be identified as a farmer. The speaker begins by describing an actual *state of affairs* in a farm at the end of a day of a harvesting season. The poem then shifts to the speaker's *desired state of affairs* where there is a description under the same physical setting, but a different condition. Because of the title 'After Apple Picking...', the opening line with the ladder pointing towards heaven, and the repeated mention of the 'fall', the poem provides the ostensive material which invites the reader to infer other possible interpretations such as the very familiar story found in religions of the Book. Even when the initial setting is *ostensibly* suggestive of the apples, heaven and the fall which cannot be ignored, the poem has many other contradictory problems that question the immediate settings and therefore the issue of the fall, life, and death. To start with the same biographical premise, Frost was anything but a believer in any doctrine whatsoever: 'Too long we have adhered to this doctrine of original sin which says, 'I am to blame because Adam fell out of an apple tree'.....It is simply not true' (Thompson 1966: 593).

In the following analysis of the poem, I will explore the potential of the meaning of irony as defined by Sperber and Wilson (1981) and Wilson and Sperber (1992) to include the attitude of the speaker.

After Apple Picking...

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel I did not fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,

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The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
 I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
 I got from looking through a pane of glass
 I skimmed this morning from a drinking trough
 And held against the world of hoary grass.
 It melted, and I let it fall and break.
 But I was well upon my way to sleep before it fell,
 And I could tell what form my dreaming was about to take.
 Magnified apples appear and disappear,
 Stem end and blossom end,
 And every fleck of russet showing clear.
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder round.
 And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
 The rumbling sound
 Of loads on loads of apples coming in.
 For I have had too much
 Of apple-picking: I am overtired
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.
 There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
 Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
 For all
 That struck the earth,
 No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
 Went surely to the cider-apple heap
 As of no worth.
 One can see what will trouble
 This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
 Were he not gone,
 The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
 Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
 Or just some human sleep.

The poem is mainly descriptive of an apple-picker at the end of a day in the harvesting season. The speaker is tired and has made a decision about his work. It is an unfinished task, but he is finished. The speaker, then, is ready to let go of both his apple picking and of his waking state. Before dozing off, he recapitulates his early work at the farm. His task which he decides to bring to an end is reflected on by his own knowledge of what happens next to apples in the barrels and apples falling on the ground. All fallen apples are taken 'to the cider-apple heap/As of no worth'. This description is given before the speaker takes off to sleep expecting that his daily task of apple picking and his decision to bring it to an end and his knowledge of the rest of the process to apple picking, since it is on his mind, will

trouble his sleep. Then the final knowledge regarding the speaker is given to the physically absent, and maybe sleeping, woodchuck.

‘After Apple Picking...’ exhibits this inner and outer process. In the monologue form it is the speaker’s thoughts. It is through the text that the sensual experience and the responses and questions raised are given to reflect upon using knowledge of the world, understanding sensuality, and to infer an understanding of the issue presented in the poem.

Irony in verbal communication

In this poem, the conceptually represented information found in the initial setting are the apples, the heaven, the ladder, and the direction of fall. These activate in the reader’s memory an *assumption schema* of the story of the fall. However, the rest of the poem is not supportive of this assumption. There are other sub-issues that the poem raises and so the information given is to be explained through the logic of the argument that the poem presents. In this case, the linguistic-poetic code of this poem takes into consideration many of the more intense elements of lines, verb tenses, and articles.

‘After Apple Picking...’ contains 42 lines of various lengths, and 14 sentences ending in a full stop. The full stop is used to mark interior divisions of 14 sentences. These divisions are shifts of the speaker’s sense of direction as felt by his sense experiences. These human senses are of sight, smell, hearing, and touch, which are the points where the speaker connects with the outside world. When the condition of the speaker changes from the fully awake and farming to the seizing of work and of being drowsy, these senses still keep the speaker in contact with the world. There is no problem in taking the logical form of the poem literally first. It is only when the meaning of the poem is in question that the weaker implications in the poem become demanding and thus lead the reader to interpret it at the figurative level, irony. The initial visual description and the concluding rhetorical question produce conflicting issues for the interpretation of ‘After Apple Picking...’.

The linguistic form of an utterance can underdetermine the interpretation of its interpretation (Wilson and Sperber 1992), and therefore decoding alone needs to be taken further. For example, the lexical items pointing towards Frost’s own skepticism about the visual and the dominance of this sense over the other senses – though not to dismiss them, but to explain the visual’s dominance and control – is made explicit by the way he used definite and indefinite articles. The indefinite article ‘a’ is used five times: a tree, a barrel, a pane of glass, a drinking trough, and a ladder round; the definite article ‘the’, however, is used twelve times: the night, the scent, the world, the ache, the pressure, the cellar, the rumbling, the great harvest, the earth, the cider apple-heap, the woodchuck and the strangeness. There are also some with ‘in between’ articles such as: some bough, and every

fleck of russet, or no article, e.g. magnified apples. The definite articles bring in all the senses of sight, smell, feeling of pain, and hearing which convey the equal importance of the other senses in relation to the sight which is blocked at night. In the indefinite or undecided articles used, the visual is dominant and at the same time is indefinite.

The mixing of verb tenses from the present continuous to the past and simple present are also blurring the distinctive line between the two stages. However, this blurring is necessary for the speaker's intention that is in itself not clear like the senses operating under different conditions. In a way, the speaker's own intentions are not stated directly, nor can they even be easily configured from the poem. It is the subjective presentation of the sense experience that indicates the direction and focus of this poetic intention.

Presentation and representation

To start with there are two modes of presenting the same sensation, therefore, sensing is presented twice over: it is the question of the difference in, for example, seeing in both states the actual world and desired; the imaginative embodied by the dream. Thus the division in the poem depends on the speaker's perception in connection with the outside world in either mode. The setting of the poem is, of course, a very familiar apple farm. The speaker in both states sees, hears, and feels in the other state prior to sleeping, which is also described. There is no shift of setting or style of representing the logical form of the poem; the language remains the same. The description given refers to the early sensations and experiences in the farm. The poem, then, concludes with reflection on the meaning of the states of sensing of the speaker that resembles the content of the original and, nevertheless is interpretative of it. The poem, then, ends with a rhetorical question that brings animal, nature and man under the same scrutiny in relation to this sensual experience(s).

The break between each stage of description is not easy to locate. The use of the full stop to mark the shift becomes the only way to make that division: for example, in the first five lines there is the setting; a visual description of the apple tree during the fall season. This is disrupted by 'but' in the next line to indicate a counter-shift and thus the change to another sense. The following table shows the division of the two states of the speaker:

The awakening state

Line numbers and sentences	Description	Sense involved
Lines 1-5 Sentence 1	The setting of the poem	Sight

This description is the opening lines in the poem. It presents a static visual image. Also, it is made of one sentence ending in a full stop. The issue of what makes a sentence, the grammar and the markers, and how to make sense out of the linguistic rule was a concept that Frost challenged. In his view, these linguistic markers are not visible or even present when we speak.

The second division is of a different physical and mental state of the speaker, that of the awakening and the sleeping:

The desired/dream pre-sleeping state

Line number(s) and sentences	Description	Sense involved
Line 6 sentence 2	The gradual shift from one state to another	
Lines 7-8 sentence 3	Introducing the state prior to sleep	Smell, sight is off
Lines 9-12 sentence 4	The pre-sleep/dream/the desired state	Sight
Lines 18-20 sentence 7	The pre-sleep/dream/the desired state	Sight
Lines 21-23 sentence 8	Description within the pre-sleep/dream/desired state	Feeling of pain
Lines 24-26 sentence 9	Description within the pre-sleep/dream/desired state	Sense of hearing
Lines 30-31 sentence 11	Description within the pre-sleep/dream/desired state	Sight
Lines 32-36 sentence 12	Description within the pre-sleep/dream/desired state	Sight and hearing

The poem is, at least at this stage, presenting the condition of when one is numbed, and is aware of the feeling, by the urge of sleep and allowing the physical body to submit to a kind of rest. Nevertheless, the speaker is not completely detached from the physical world outside. These physical conditions are suggestive and are associated with the sensual experiences and their functionality under different conditions. Yet, there is another very fine ambiguous state that the poem explicitly includes.

The 'in-between state'

Line 13 sentence 5	The melting ice, describing action that took place before falling asleep/the dreamy or desired state	Touch
Lines 14-17 sentence 6	Description	Feeling
Lines 27-29 Sentence 10	Statement	Feeling tired
Lines 37-38 sentence 13	Statement	Reflection
Lines 39-42 sentence 14	Rhetorical question bringing man and animal and the issue of sleep	Reflection on state of nature, animal and the speaker

The last classification refers to the awakening in-between state because the action takes place early in the day but is described afterwards, before the speaker falls asleep. The speech act performed in this case is one of affirmation and control of action, implying that the speaker is not dreaming, but is still awake.

The poem sets off in a very simple tone: the apple farm and an 'overtired' farmer. The description given is visual and is static. The view, however, is problematic. It is not clear

whether the speaker is viewing the farm from a horizontal field or from a vertical field. To see 'a ladder sticking through a tree' would position the speaker either very far from the scene or with a view from above. If the speaker is viewing it horizontally and is very far from the scene, then there is a problem with his view of the barrel. The speaker describes 'And there is a barrel I did not fill/Beside it, and there may be two or three/Apples I did not pick upon some bough'. These details require that the speaker is at a very close distance if not on the ladder in the middle of the tree. This is the initial problem that can easily be overlooked because of the simple familiar setting of apples and the farm. Another is that there are very many missing details in the description. Where are the other natural elements found in the same setting? For example, what has happened to the sky and the stars? The vertical view will be another dimension for possible interpretation of the poem. The speaker is concerned with earthly elements and cycles rather than any other heavenly or vague element.

Another problematic issue is the title. The immediate attention is drawn towards the title that begins with 'after'. 'After' suggests two things. The first is time: before, now and after; the second is an existing state 'before' this one, and consequently after this one. The apples also have their historical allusions that are suggestive of many different interpretations. An immediate one is the story of the picking of the fruit and, consequently, the fall. This adds to the implications of the poem by the ladder pointing towards 'heaven' and the repetition of 'fall' to have Edenic resonances. Then, the speaker moves telescopically into various sections of the farm that are not systematic but brought at random, then he turns towards himself. In this movement inward, the senses involved are dissected individually to involve each at a time or combine at others. The very obvious thing is that the poem brings in contradictory elements: heavenly or earthly, sensual or senseless into a 42-line poem that begins with 'after' and leaves the before and the now and renders or even entangles more than one issue and the meaning of it.

To articulate this problem, the description in the poem can be divided into a state of affairs and a desired a state of affairs in a monologue (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 232). To take this poem literally to refer to Man's labor or to Frost creates many contradictions. The poem does present a state of affairs that is *actual* and at the same time a state of affairs that is desired by the speaker that, at least, in the poem, does not take place. The apple picker by the end of the day's labor reflects on his accomplishments, and describes how his desires to have things differently have not come about and thus things are not in their actual or real size — magnified apples appear and disappear (L19). It is the work of visual imagination since the speaker is not asleep yet. The speaker goes on to describe the subsequent processing of apples that he apparently resents and which is not presented in the poem; this is reported information – real or imaginative. At this point the real and the imaginative are treated as the same. What is described in the poem forms the 'axiom' to the interpretation of the poem, on the literal level. The problematic initial setting, the missing details, and the concluding lines suggest in many ways the figurative sense and the speaker needs to search

for weaker *implicatures* in order for the communication process between him and his environment to be achieved. The problem in the poem is that it gives *ostensive information* that does not *explicitly* offer resolution of the relationship of the poem to its concluding lines. It requires a more complex processing effort to interpret initially the literal level of lines 42-47.

The tables above dissect the poem according to the sense experience of the two states of the speaker. The first five lines are the only sense, visual, that is experienced before the speaker's condition changes. The tenses in the poem are a mix of past, present and present continuous. In the first sentence the ladder is 'still sticking', giving a sense of continuity between present and future, and then the sentence ends with the past tense 'did not pick'. This is the first and the last description of the setting before the condition of the speaker shifts into another state. The poem then moves on to the pre-sleeping state, which still contains the first descriptions: 'apples', 'barrel', 'tree', 'ladder', etc. The verb tenses in the rest of the poem are mixed to have present, present continuous and past, not different from the initial five lines. By this tense mixing and unclear marked division, Frost questions the relationship between the *actual world* and the *imaginative world* where there is no borderline and the point of contact between the two worlds is the sensing of objects and experiencing what information these sensations deliver to the reader.

On a relevance-theoretic approach, the poem describes an actual state of affairs of a farmer who has worked and has decided to stop. However, he is not fully content with the situation. This leads him to envision what he believes is deserved: the great harvest which has not been accomplished and which is 'desired'. Early in the poem, he describes the tree as having two or three apples left and a task not finished, but in the desired state of things he sees 'ten thousand thousand fruits to touch/cherish in hand and not let fall'. The in-between state, after work and before slipping into the troubled sleep, then, is a *manifestation* of the speaker's desires, making clear his dissatisfaction with the process that takes place within the harvesting season as well. It is also a manifestation of a dream – actual or imagined, which is inflated or inflates objects to larger than the *actual state* of things.

The dream's *manifestations* are brought in through the speaker's visual sensation. He is not asleep, but in control of himself and fully aware of the shift in his state of sensing which he is approaching: 'But I was well/upon my way to sleep before it fell'. The next description in the poem recounts the incident that took place in the morning coming from earlier memory, stored *encyclopedic knowledge*. This account, all set in the past, is of an incident that actually took place early in the morning when he was working. It is not the *desired state* but it is the actual state that is presented later focusing on the distortion, similar to the magnified apples in the dream: 'And held against the world of hoary grass'. Time, here, is a crucial element: early in the poem the speaker announces the end of the day and the approaching of the night. Now the description brings the slipping into sleep from morning, awakening. This same variance is the emblem of tension between the *actual state of affairs*

and *desired state of affairs* that bonds the farmer and his relationship with his daily task in the farm. However, the presentation is entirely based on the speaker's sense experience rather than giving an exact or true account of the world.

From the *encyclopedic entry* of the setting two things are immediately suggested: one is the antiquity of labour, connecting heaven and earth; second, humans' communication is basically accomplished through their sense experiences – which includes all senses. What the speaker suggests by the visual setting is a questioning of the primacy of and dependence on the sense of sight. The speaker is not sure how many apples are left upon some bough, nor the number of unfilled barrels. This dubiousness is exactly the point of the visual static description. However, I think this is not the only issue. The other issue is where the other senses fit into the context of the sense of sight. The other senses, in addition to sight, are involved in the poem because they are the speaker's contact with the world. It is not only seeing, but all the other senses too that are vital judgmental tools that guide the speaker. In the state of sleep, the senses of touch and seeing are not continuous; they take a different form. Here, the five human senses are functioning and the speaker is not hallucinating. A large part of it is *memory*, but as the poem moves gradually towards the end, there is an act of affirmation that the speaker realizes his awakening state; that he is going to sleep; and that his sleep will be troubled. His dissatisfaction with the situation reflects his *attitude*, and his thinking of it is in his mind before he submits to sleep, but this is not the only thing that will trouble his sleep: there is something more.

The speaker's troubled sleep reflects his relationship with the world in the two physical and mental states described in the poem: awake, and drowsy or pre-sleep, the issue of expectation as in dream or desired states is also included but embedded in the sleep making a sub-state. Does our sensuality in each state differ? How do we relate to the actual world or the dream world through our senses? It is disturbing and unsatisfying, at least to the speaker, to think of the states of existence in these terms of difference or similarity and not figuring their dynamics and relation to the speaker. Because the speaker, of course, has no hearers, there is no dialogue; instead it is a monologue where the speaker and the hearer are one. The condition of the reader/hearer in turn takes the text/reader dynamism. The monologue does turn to the other creatures outside the speaker, to the woodchuck who is gone, in the absence of other humans. It also stresses the isolation of the speaker, but more importantly it points distinctly towards the issue of sensing that animals also possess. The final note would not suggest death or an end but a temporality of the sleeping state. In the monologue the speaker reports incidents that took place earlier as well as what he expects will take place when asleep. In the absence of 'he said that', which would make explicit the speaker's dissociation from the content of the reports, these reports are ironic (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 237-43). Because the poem is a monologue and the speaker is uttering his thoughts to himself, the assumption that these utterances are echoic of his thoughts makes these utterances ironic. The two different states of the speaker, then, take different

positions in relation to the speaker. When echoic utterances are not quoted – and in this case there is no reason to believe they should – they are a form of irony.

To consider the poem as ironical implicates that the speaker means something else by his utterances. The speaker is questioning his own sensuality in relation to the outside world, and the poem is thus a monologue. Here, the communicative process is between the world and the 'I' through the senses, which identifies this person, the speaker. The world is on one side, the 'I' on the other, and the senses are the medium that connects the world and the 'I'. It is also the speaker's different modes that do not change the sense experience. In retrieving the experiences of the speaker in the morning, the descriptions are not distorted; the pane of frozen water distorts the vision in real life experience as much as the dream distorts the apples. In this respect, there is no difference; however, the intensity of the sensual experience varies and the question of the dominance of one over the other is an issue that deserves attention.

The poem, then, communicates different messages depending on the perceptions and efforts of readers. In this poem, which is largely a description of a situation, each description relates to one of the five human senses released gradually. These senses are allocated attention according to the *principle of relevance*, so are relevant to the process of interpretation. It is, then, dependent on how the reader develops these given *stimuli* to comprehend what is written in the absence of other communicative factors such as paralinguistic elements. When the monologue is transformed into a dialogue by taking the verse form of a poem, the readers' own *context* and *mutual knowledge* form another working dynamism. Since readers can contextualize the poem into their own historical moments, which in turn influences their understanding and interpretation of the poem, the mutual knowledge between text and reader produces more assumption schemas and sub schemas. With the passage of time and advances in technology, human perception and understanding of the world changes and adapts to these changes accordingly. This in part is disclosed by the way we interpret written scripts (Ong 1977; Finnegan 1988).

In dividing up the poem, I have used the full stop as a grammatical marker of a sentence. By this method, the division in the poem fell into the basic classification of the senses, sometimes singly and other times compounded with another one. The division also isolated descriptive sentences from the performative ones. The results were that nine sentences in the poem: 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, and 12 are descriptive of the sensual experience under the given conditions. The other classification given to sentences 2, 6, 10, 13, and 14 is that they are performing assertions regarding the different sensualities. In two places two different senses were combined: sentence 3 which brings smell and sight; and sentence 12 which brings sight and hearing.

The descriptive sentences are basically related to what is being seen, heard, touched, smelled, and felt that provide the *outer stimuli* for the speaker and readers. These stimuli are used as a source of information. On the literal level, it is not plausible that Frost meant

to tell his readers about apples, trees and barrels; of farmers' work; or of the going to sleep or even to give an account of this process and implying death, although these are the material that he worked with and *inferences* will have to be made in order to access the speaker's, or Frost's, communicative intentions. To be able to make inferences from the linguistic utterance is the initial stage of the communicative process between speaker/hearer and text/reader, made more complex by ironical implications and expressions of attitudes to what is reported.

Conclusion

To take irony as saying the opposite of what one means seems irrational, and in verbal communication it does not explain how it is that what is communicated by an utterance can go even further than what one says. Various interpretations of linguistic utterances are evidence that an utterance, a text, or a conversation can mean more than what the logical form of an utterance suggests, due to the problem of referentiality of language, and in configuring the communicative intentions which are dependent on contextual effects and the processing effort involved. The context, then, is another issue that is pertinent to the understanding of irony, its definitions, and its applications to what is being said or written. In 'After Apple Picking...' the irony lies in the *states of affairs* presented that have the same contents, but one is interpretive, in the pre-dream state, of the original picking of apples. By the differing states of affairs, the speaker's *attitude* is *manifested* to reflect the problem of the sensual experiences at differing states, where the process of sensing is problematic and is even distorted in each. It is here that the reader's *cognitive environment* is to be brought into this problematic issue of sensations. The poem offers no final resolution to what it means, but can only offer ways for more interpretive processing effort that depends on context.

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