

ANALYSIS

“The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples” (1950)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“By placing ‘The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples’ last in *The Women on the Wall*, Stegner reminded his readers of Anderson’s pivotal role in the new freedom Anderson had pioneered for the American short story and the possibilities for books of linked short stories that used distinctiveness as a device, collections that created a unity other than progressive narration. Stegner’s title echoes a key line from Anderson’s story ‘Paper Pills’ from *Winesburg*. ‘The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples’ portrays a lovable ‘grotesque’ who, like the Alice Hindman of Anderson’s ‘Adventure,’ has learned that many must live and die alone, be it in Winesburg or the remote Vermont setting of Stegner’s story....

That glow, that sense of Vermont as a special place that both writers shared, is reflected in a Stegner story, ‘The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples,’ that more directly than most other of his fictions illustrates the extent to which Frost influenced his language and perceptions. He wrote the story nearly 10 years after he first met the poet, after he had an opportunity to become familiar with the Vermont countryside and its people firsthand. He and Mary often took off on walks or got in the car and drove around, exploring, more or less aimlessly, in an effort to learn about the area. The story is about such a couple, also summer people, who drive down a track, hardly a road any more, on a voyage of discovery, although their ostensible purpose is to find suitable landscapes for the husband’s painting. He is the artist, but it is his wife, Margaret, who is sensitive and open to experience. As they travel further and further away from the paved road, it seems as if they are also traveling back in time.

Margaret spots an old stone wall that ‘within a few feet bent off to the right and was swallowed in an impenetrable brush... “It doesn’t seem as if anything in America could be this old,” she said.’ ‘It doesn’t seem as if’ is typical Frost syntax, and the passage as a whole, with its perception of nature reclaiming what man has built, may remind us of Frost poems like ‘The Last Mowing,’ where the trees, in a shadowy march, threaten to take over a meadow that will no longer be mowed, or ‘The Wood-Pile,’ where vines and decay threaten to obliterate a cord of firewood left by someone in the woods—both are traces of man-created order, like the wall spotted by the woman in the story, that will gradually fail and disappear in the inevitable processes of nature: ‘Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,’ to cite another poem.

The couple in the story go along the road and encounter a mother and daughter—strange country people isolated from the world who may remind us of such Frost characters as the mother and son in ‘The Witch of Coos,’ also isolated by place and time, whom he calls ‘two old believers.’ The daughter’s, Sary’s, sad tale of love lost in the passage of time is reminiscent of the recitation of love and youthful hope remembered by the woman in Frost’s ‘The Pauper Witch of Grafton.’ But Sary’s tale is not just sad—she shows considerable day-to-day courage to endure despite her fate. The one beau that she had (she is gnome-like with a pinched face) dropped her to marry someone else and then came to live with his wife just down the road, her only neighbors. Her equanimity in the face of what she calls ‘her disappointment,’ her unwillingness to whine or complain—these were traits that both Frost and Stegner admired....

While her husband paints, the wife strolls up the road through a deserted village to a burying ground where she stops and sits on a gravestone. She thinks about the gradual abandonment of the area over the years so that at last ‘there would be a day when you would come to your door and see nothing alive, hear no human sound, in your whole village.’ Unlike her unseeing husband—ironically, the painter—she is attuned to the vibrations behind appearances.... In Stegner’s ‘The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples’ joy comes to the wife when she discovers the deformed apples left hanging from the trees in an abandoned orchard. She picks one, tries it, and exclaims with delight at her discovery—they’re absolutely delicious. Her husband dismisses her enthusiasm and jokes about the Garden of Eden, but she decides to gather as many apples as she can to fill the whole back of their car and take them home for cider. The metaphor

here, so similar to Frost's in 'After Apple-Picking,' of apples gathered as tokens of experience, suggests once again that the woman is open, able to get beyond surface appearances, and, unlike her husband, can gather experience unto herself and savor it."

Jackson J. Benson
"The Influence of Robert Frost and the Stories Set in Vermont"
Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1998) 126-27, 51-54

"In Wallace Stegner's short story 'The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples,' published in his 1990 *Collected Stories*, he offers a compelling metaphor for the despoiled Eden that is inherent in much of his writing.... This description points clearly to Stegner's alignment with the *preservationist* rather than the *conservationist* position, his evolving concern that, as Americans, we have been led to exploit the free land of our heritage in an effort to fulfill out notions of the American Dream. The farmer in the story, representative of mankind's effort to civilize and control (conserve) nature, has created an order in the orchard that, now left to decay, serves as a backdrop for the lost hope of an ungainly Vermont woman who visits it. The theme of a depraved Eden, so clearly delineated in as late a work as *Crossing to Safety* (1987), is a strong thread running through the *Collected Stories*.

A paradox lies in the notion that while the 'serpent' is present in and, in fact, 'valid[ates]' the garden even in its most primal and perfect form, man engulfed in 'civilization' and its effects is more severely threatened by depravity. As I see it, the stories illustrate three versions of this paradoxical theme: the innocent characters' initiation into man's perverted efforts to order nature; the effects of the absence of primal nature in a 'civilized' context; and the validation of untouched nature, which, while it may threaten and tax man's survival, provides him with a 'naturalness...in nature,' a more desirable state of being, while justly maintaining its inherent purity....

"'The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples' ...involves Margaret and her artist husband Ross's discovery of an old, deserted apple orchard in Vermont. Here, where man once lived, the vestiges of civilization involve such images as a 'barely-traveled road,' 'a stone wall...swallowed in impenetrable brush,' and a 'dead-windowed house.' The only farm folk remaining are a woman and her 'wizened, dark-featured' daughter, whose possibilities have been tragically limited by the desertion of a young man who often courted her at the apple orchard. In this story Stegner draws a clear picture of the depravity of Eden in what is left from man's efforts toward order.

Near the orchard Margaret sits in a deserted graveyard with 'pretentious monuments' dating back to 1778. She reflects on an old grandmother 'watching the hill farms go dead like lights going out, watching the decay spread.' She finds the road 'blighted,' with houses and buildings reflecting 'failure and death... like contagion warnings.' Margaret becomes Eve when she tastes the sweet tang of the apples, offering one to her husband. Against this backdrop, the girl, whom Margaret sees as 'herself a part of the general decay,' tells the story of a young man's courting, then her 'disappointment' when he married someone else. Like the bittersweet taste of the apples, the girl's tale and man's former efforts to order nature have gone to depravation."

Nancy Owen Nelson
Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction
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(Twayne 1998) 131-32, 134

Michael Hollister (2015)