

# Twelve River RIPPLES

## Favourite Poem



### **The Sheaves**

By Edwin Arlington Robinson

Where long the shadows of the wind had rolled,  
Green wheat was yielding to the change assigned;  
And as by some vast magic undivined  
The world was turning slowly into gold.  
Like nothing that was ever bought or sold  
It waited there, the body and the mind;  
And with a mighty meaning of a kind  
That tells the more the more it is not told.  
So in a land where all days are not fair,  
Fair days went on till on another day  
A thousand golden sheaves were lying there,  
Shining and still, but not for long to stay—  
As if a thousand girls with golden hair  
Might rise from where they slept and go away.

*About this poem (Quoted from Poem-a-day)  
'The Sheaves' first appeared in Robinson's  
Dionysus in Doubt (The Macmillan  
Company, 1925). The poem is one of several  
Petrarchan sonnets (a form frequently  
employed by Robinson) included in the book.*

*In Edwin Arlington Robinson (New  
Directions, 1946), Yvor Winters wrote that  
the poem "[e]mploys a descriptive technique  
to symbolize the impenetrable mystery of the  
physical universe as seen at any moment and  
the mystery of the fact of change."*

## Favourite Poem cont.

I came across this poem fairly recently in the *Poem-a-Day* forum to which I belong. Every so often they produce a gem, along with some incomprehensible (to me) stuff and/or words that could not be justly described as poetry. A feature of these daily poems is the 'About this poem' addition (shown above with Winters's excellent summary) which I find valuable; I wish all poems, whether from this age or from an earlier one, had this extra explanatory item, whether written by the poet or by someone else sympathetic!

I choose this poem as fitting to autumn while I write. There is something haunting and mysterious about it. Take the words *the change assigned*, with *assigned* in the passive. By whom or by what was the change assigned – God, gods, fate? We are not told.

Then there is the strange negativity in *not* used thrice, in lines 8, 9 and 12; and *nothing* in line 5.

There is great beauty and mystery in *And as by some vast magic undivined / The world was turning slowly into gold*. And in the image in the final two lines of *...a thousand girls with golden hair / Might rise from where*

*they slept and go away*, enhanced by the alliteration of *girls/golden/go* and the rhyme/assonance of *golden/go*.

The first line *Where long the shadows of the wind had rolled* is masterful in its compression, mix of ideas, suggestivity and mystery, illumined by assonance and alliteration.

More mystery and ambiguity (and alliteration) in *...a mighty meaning of a kind / That tells the more the more it is not told*.

'The sheaves' of the title are a metaphor for the inevitability of change in the physical world, whether, as here, in the seasons or in birth, fulfilment, death and decay in creatures, land, planets, worlds, galaxies.

Time is an inescapable companion to such change.

Finally, what a marvel is the form of the fourteen rhyming (as here) lines of the sonnet, as a vehicle: whether this form is used for compressing something mighty, as in 'The Sheaves', or for expanding something tiny, as in the brilliant 'Girl with coffee tray' by John Fuller, where those lines describe a single moment.

Stewart Francis