

Word Art: Winter Poems

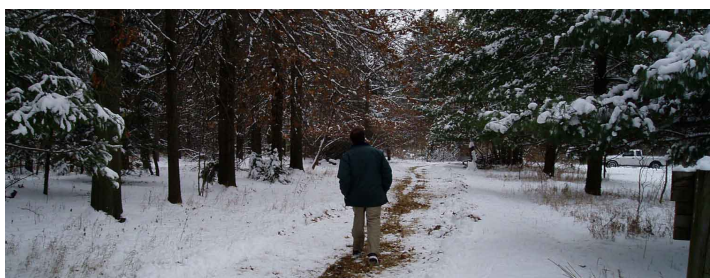
Presented by Prof Stephen Torre BA (Hons) PhD Qld, Arts and Culture Consultant, Reef & Leaf Pty Ltd
E-mail: storre@ozemail.com.au Mob: 0408 770 166

William Shakespeare

Sonnet 97: “How like a winter hath my absence been” (1609)

In this sonnet, the speaker uses winter to personify isolation and contrasts it with the creativity of summer. He addresses the poem to his lover, who is equated with summer. Being absent from his lover is equated with the ‘freezings’, ‘dark days’, and ‘bareness’ of winter compared to the ‘pleasures’ of summer. When summer (the time when he was with his lover) is removed, so is the ‘teeming autumn’ rich with the growth created by summer warmth. The richness of autumn comes about as the result of the ‘wanton’ (meaning ‘unrestrained’) summer. The speaker likens this to women who give birth to a child (‘widow’d wombs’) after their husband has died (‘after their lords’ decease’). But paradoxically, this ‘abundant issue’ is just producing an illusion—the ‘hope’ of ‘orphans’ or outcomes with no origin (‘unfather’d fruit’) rather than something tangible and pleasurable, because real pleasure and creativity can only occur in the presence of summer, that is, in the presence of his lover. In the absence of his lover, the birds sing dully, the ‘leaves look pale’ and everything dreads the approach of winter. While the poem is most often read as a poem about the longing of the speaker for his absent lover, it also has a secondary theme relating to the poet’s separation from his muse (‘thee, the pleasures of the fleeting year’) or periods of writer’s block or artistic anxiety, which seem like winter compared to the creativity of summer.

How like a winter hath my absence been
From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!
What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!
What old December’s bareness every where!
And yet this time remov’d was summer’s time;
The teeming autumn, big with rich increase,
Bearing the wanton burden of the prime,
Like widow’d wombs after their lords’ decease:
Yet this abundant issue seem’d to me
But hope of orphans and unfather’d fruit;
For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
And, thou away, the very birds are mute:
Or, if they sing, ’tis with so dull a cheer,
That leaves look pale, dreading the winter’s near.



Word Art: Winter Poems 2

Robert Frost

“Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (1923)

This is one of American poet Robert Frost’s most celebrated poems. On the surface the story is simple: a man is travelling from one place to another but stops momentarily between ‘woods’ and ‘a frozen lake’. There is no farmhouse to be seen and the owner of the land is absent, living in a village. The woods are ‘lovely, dark and deep’ but the horse senses something unusual about stopping there and urges the traveller to continue his journey. The poem concludes with the speaker stating that he cannot stay in this place but must travel on to fulfil his obligations (‘promises to keep’). Frost’s poems are often referred to as ‘psychological landscapes’, and in this poem there is a tension set up between moving forward in life and fulfilling one’s obligations to society and civilization, or withdrawing into nature and isolation. This withdrawal into a world of ‘easy wind’ and ‘downy flake’ can be ‘lovely’, but also ‘dark’, that is, threatening, and ‘deep’, that is, philosophically complex. The speaker must choose between this complex introverted world, or the more ordinary world of social interactions and interpersonal relations, to which ordinary life points us (symbolized in the horse’s natural instinct to move on). The repetition of the last two lines foregrounds the philosophical depths of the poem: on the one hand we can take the line ‘And miles to go before I sleep’ as a statement of fact about the completion of the speaker’s journey of return to home, after which he can have a good night’s sleep; on the other hand the reiteration of the line suggests the deeper meaning of the poem—that if he chooses the temptation of withdrawal from the world he will be entering a complex realm of solipsism, which at some level is symbolic of the sleep of death. Thus, the deep meaning of the poem points to themes such as nature versus society, social obligation versus personal fulfilment, and hesitation and choice.

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Word Art: Winter Poems 3

Les Murray

“Once In A Lifetime, Snow” (1969)

This is one of Australian poet Les Murray’s most loved poems. It tells of a farmer who awakes to find his land covered in snow, a unique event. Accustomed to the ordinary life of ‘farm and fact’ he suddenly finds himself knee deep in an extraordinary occurrence. The gleaming whiteness and softness of the snow and its ability to shape its light substance to his touch suggest it is something almost sacred. Indeed as he ‘scoops a handful to eat’ the snow takes on a Eucharistic dimension, symbolizing that the spiritual can sometimes enter into the mundanity of life. With this experience he realizes ‘that even he / might not have seen the end / of reality’. The poem concludes as he wakes the children so they too can experience this miraculous event.

Winters at home brought wind,
black frost and raw
grey rain in barbed-wire fields,
but never more

until the day my uncle
rose at dawn
and stepped outside—to find
his paddocks gone,

his cattle to their hocks
in ghostly ground
and unaccustomed light
for miles around.

And he stopped short, and gazed
lit from below,
and half his wrinkles vanished
murmuring *Snow*.

A man of farm and fact
he stared to see
the facts of weather raised
to a mystery

white on the world he knew
and all he owned.
Snow? Here? he mused. I see.
High time I learned.

Here, guessing what he meant
had much to do

with that black earth dread old men
are given to,

he stooped to break the sheer
crust with delight
at finding the cold unknown
so deeply bright,

at feeling it take his prints
so softly deep,
as if it thought he knew
enough to sleep,

or else so little he
might seek to shift
its weight of wintry light
by a single drift,

perceiving this much, he scuffed
his slippered feet
and scooped a handful up
to taste, and eat


in memory of the fact
that even he
might not have seen the end
of reality...

Then, turning, he tiptoed in
to a bedroom, smiled,
and wakened a murmuring child
and another child.

Word Art: Winter Poems 4

Michael Leunig's work often satirizes the modern world, particularly the materialistic and spiritually hollow world that results from the politicisation, corporatisation, and systematisation of everyday life. His archetypal cartoon often depicts a man walking away—an innocent figure trying to escape the sadness, confusion and even horrors of urban and suburban life. In "Winter Poem" he presents a world where we are all hoping to glide smoothly forward into the future on our skateboards but are frustrated by the 'tragedy and strife' of modern life, irrespective of whether we are ordinary citizens or Prime Ministers. In the second poem, "Winter", although the season is uncomfortable, it serves to ease the pain of existence, by allowing one to escape the 'dismay' and 'hell' of the everyday world.

WINTER POEM.
I saw a man of middle age
Go limping through the rain
A skateboard underneath his arm
His face in awful pain
I saw the vision splendid there
The tragedy and strife
The vanity, the fall of man,
The skateboard which is life.
I saw the great Prime ministers
And presidents galore
Go limping through the wind and rain
Bedraggled, sad and sore
The generals and professors
The critics and their charms
All limping through the cold and rain
With skate boards in their arms.



Winter's come and I am glum
And that's a lovely thing.
It sweeps away the sheer dismay
That human beings bring.

Winter please, just make me freeze
And cool my burning brain:
My overheated, much repeated
Existential pain.

Make me feel intensely real
And lash me as you choose
So I won't dwell, upon the hell
Of people in the news.

