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"Spring and Fall" (1880)

Complete Text

To a young child

Margaret, are you grieving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leaves, like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?  
Ah! as the heart grows older  
It will come to such sights colder  
By and by, nor spare a sigh  
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie:  
And yet you will weep know why.  
Now no matter, child, the name:  
Sorrow's springs are the same:  
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed  
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:  
It is the blight man was born for,  
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Summary

The poem opens with a question to a child: "Margaret, are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?" "Goldengrove," a place whose name suggests an idyllic play-world, is "unleaving," or losing its leaves as winter approaches. And the child, with her "fresh thoughts," cares about the leaves as much as about "the things of man." The speaker reflects that age will alter this innocent response, and that later whole "worlds" of forest will lie in leafless disarray ("leafmeal," like "piecemeal") without arousing Margaret's sympathy. The child will weep then, too, but for a more conscious reason. However, the source of this knowing sadness will be the same as that of her childish grief—for "sorrow's springs are the same." That is, though neither her mouth nor her mind can yet articulate the fact as clearly as her adult self will, Margaret is already mourning over her own mortality.

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