

JOHNNY APPLESEED

Selected Poems

by Edgar Lee Masters, 1925.

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When the air of October is sweet and cold as the wine of apples
Hanging ungathered in frosted orchards along the Grand
River,

I take the road that winds by the resting fields and wander
From Eastmanville to Nunica down to the Villa Crossing.

I look for old men to talk with, men as old as the orchards,
Men to tell me of ancient days, of those who built and planted,
Lichen gray, branch broken, bent and sighing,
Hobbling for warmth in the sun and for places to sit and
smoke.

For there is a legend here, a tale of the croaking old ones
That Johnny Appleseed came here, planted some orchards
around here,

SELECTED POEMS

When nothing was here but the pine trees, oaks and the
 beeches,
And nothing was here but the marshes, lake and the river.

Peter Van Zylen is ninety and this he tells me:
My father talked with Johnny Appleseed there on the hillside,
There by the road on the way to Fruitport, saw him
Clearing pines and oaks for a place for an apple orchard.

Peter Van Zylen says: He got that name from the people
For carrying apple-seed with him and planting orchards
All the way from Ohio, through Indiana across here,
Planting orchards, they say, as far as Illinois.

Johnny Appleseed said, so my father told me:
I go to a place forgotten, the orchards will thrive and be here
For children to come, who will gather and eat hereafter.
And few will know who planted, and none will understand.

I laugh, said Johnny Appleseed: Some fellow buys this timber
Five years, perhaps from to-day, begins to clear for barley.
And here in the midst of the timber is hidden an apple orchard.
How did it come here? Lord! Who was it here before me?

Yes, I was here before him, to make these places of worship,
Labor and laughter and gain in the late October.
Why did I do it, eh? Some folks say I am crazy.
Where do my labors end? Far west, God only knows!

Said Johnny Appleseed there on the hillside: Listen!
Beware the deceit of nurseries, sellers of seeds of the apple.
Think! You labor for years in trees not worth the raising.
You planted what you knew not, bitter or sour for sweet.

No luck more bitter than poor seed, but one as bitter:
The planting of perfect seed in soil that feeds and fails,
Nourishes for a little, and then goes spent forever.
Look to your seed, he said, and remember the soil.

And after that is the fight: the foe curled up at the root,
The scale that crumples and deadens, the moth in the blossoms,

MOURNIN' FOR RELIGION

Becoming a life that coils at the core of a thing of beauty:
You bite your apple, a worm is crushed on your tongue!

And it's every bit the truth, said Peter Van Zylén.
So many things love an apple as well as ourselves.
A man must fight for the thing he loves, to possess it:
Apples, freedom, heaven, said Peter Van Zylén.