A Critical Analysis of Poetry:
What I Learned, and How I Used It

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Trying to decide on a brief, concise definition of "poetry" is next to impossible, because there are as many conceptions of poetry as there are people. One might say that poetry is a form of language, but it is more than just language; it is a rendering of human experience, but transcends ordinary modes of communicating experience. It comes out of a civilization, but may not reflect the prevailing ideas of that civilization. It does have value, but the value of poetry is contingent upon the quality of the reader. Thus, as one can readily see, poetry is a complex notion that cannot be easily understood.

In the poetry text Sound and Sense, Laurence Perrine summarily describes poetry as "a language that says more, and says it more intensely, than does ordinary language," and also sees poetry as "the form of literature that says the most in the fewest number of words." These ideas, that poetry is intense language and that poetry gives much information in few words, are very important because they are keys to understanding why poetry is such a powerful literary form that is often hard to understand.

Poetry, since it is a form of literature, relies totally on the power of written language to convey ideas and emotions which the poet experiences. It cannot draw upon the senses of touch, hearing, or taste in the direct way a person could do in everyday situations, so indeed, poetry has no recourse but to use the resources of language to the fullest extent. Then, since it achieves its purpose solely through the use of language, it must employ an extremely well-chosen language. Words of poetry are selected to have more than just one meaning because
they must stimulate reactions in various levels of the reader's consciousness. These words must also be more "sensuous" than those used in literature that is not as evocative as poetry, because poetry is attempting to do more than ordinary language. In addition, words chosen by the poet are often tangible, image-bearing \(^4\) words that better suit his aim of making "as vivid and as concrete an effect as possible, in contrast to a purely factual summary of the event."\(^5\)

Poetry is indeed much, much more than just a factual summary because, as Perrine rightly asserts, "... the total meaning of a poem is separate from its prose meaning,"\(^6\) which implies there is more to poetry than paraphrase. When used as a tool in conjunction with other analytical techniques, paraphrase can be a great help in the initial process of understanding poetry, but it is not the only way to approach poetry.

By its very nature, poetry is a form of literature which cannot be grasped immediately. One reason poetry is difficult to comprehend is that its "mode of experiencing the thought... idea... subject or material presented to it is different."\(^7\) This mode of experience is different since it is a synthesis of the significant aspects of life, implying an inherent selection process on the part of the poet. More importantly, "the words in which the experience... (of poetry)... is communicated are different."\(^8\) These words are not the same as the words of prose in several respects: they are fewer in number, but are more essential to the total meaning of the piece; they are often chosen for their musical quality,\(^9\) which may or may not be a
factor in prose selection; they have both a connotation and a denotation, which is characteristic of some, but not all, prose: and lastly, they are carefully chosen to give a fresh quality to poetry, which often uses age-old themes and therefore needs a striking vocabulary to make the verses memorable.

But disregarding momentarily such matters of content and usage, one may feel that poetry is often difficult for the average American to understand, simply because poetry as an art form has been extremely underplayed. In the words of John Ciardi, "poetry has only a remote place in the gross of our culture. As has, for example, the opera. Therefore, Americans generally need to be taught in school how to experience both poetry and opera." He then elaborates, contrasting the experience of young boys with the game of football, or of Milanese children with the opera, in both cases contrasting those in a society with an aspect of culture which had been part of their lives since they were quite small. Since exposure to the game of football or to the opera had been so gradual, the children soon grew to have a fairly acceptable knowledge of football, if they were American, or opera if they were Milanese. This is fantastic for those Americans who love football and are glad to see their offspring learning the sport, but it is indeed sorry news for the lover of poetry.

However, many concerned Americans are somewhat relieved because a program of poetry appreciation and interpretation can be cited in many school systems; this may put their minds at ease, but such programs are not a solution to the problem, since they often approach
poetry in none too adequate ways. The child who comes out of such a class or classes may in fact be misreading poetry in one of several ways.\textsuperscript{12} He may be "message-hunting," searching only for "the statement of an idea which the reader thinks he can apply profitably in his own conduct," and in doing so is paraphrasing only the literal meaning of the poem. The reader is seeking the author's advice and is changing the poetry into his own prose; why indeed is he even looking at poetry, when a plain prose statement would suffice? There must be something compelling in the verse, or he would just need to read tracts on various subjects written by authorities in their fields. Or, if not message-hunting, the reader may see poetry as an "expression of pure emotion,"\textsuperscript{13} which tries to recreate a scene of intense emotion. However, this method of responding to poetry also has its faults, since it is obvious that any collection of poetic words written about envy or fear or joy is but a poor substitute for direct experience of those emotions. One can easily see this, after reading a poem such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "How Do I Love Thee?" which follows:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.

I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.

I love thee freely, as men strive for Right:

I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints,—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! --and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

This sonnet is a beautiful piece of poetry, one which may cause the reader to smile and recall the beauty of romantic life, but indeed it is no substitute for that love itself. The discrepancy between the emotion and its rendering in the poem need not be tragic, however, since the poem is not intended merely to copy the emotion. This poem is like a good painting, which "is neither a photograph nor a blueprint but an interpretation and an intensification." The poem is not meant merely to regurgitate the emotion or to give a brief sketch of it; the poem tries to show the emotion experienced by a human being who carefully selects words and phrases which best imply the depths of her emotion.

Another equally misleading approach to understanding poetry arises from the attempt to combine in a mechanical fashion the two false approaches just discussed. This third method concerns itself with both the meaning and the emotions of poetry, since it recognizes poetry as "the beautiful statement of some high truth." Here the reader is doubly mistaken, because either he is convinced that rhythm, allusion, and other poetic devices are merely ways of making this unpalatable truth easier to swallow, or he is falsely assuming that poetry is but
a group of carefully selected, inherently poetic words with some all-powerful Truth tucked in beside the imagery. Obviously, poetic devices do not just make the poem easier to understand; in fact, if complex imagery is used, one may need much explication to help unravel the central theme. And, as critics have said countless times, in texts such as Sound and Sense, How Does a Poem Mean? and others, harmonious word combinations do not a good poem always make. As an example of this, consider the following excerpt from the war poems written by Wilfred Owen; this one is titled "Anthem for Doomed Youth:"

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells,

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, --

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

This poem does not fit into the typically prejudiced view of poetry as merely a pleasing pattern of sounds, because although it is very
skillfully written, the imagery it contains does not describe a pleasant subject. Phrases such as "for these who die as cattle" (line 1) and "the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle" (line 3) could very well be included in a prose account of the battle, but here they are contained in poetry; then, poetry must be more than just a beautiful statement of some high truth. Otherwise, war or a dull existence could not be considered fit subjects for poetry, which they must be, or poems such as "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" could never have been allowed to be.

Poetry should not be seen as merely an effective cluster of words or as a distillation of truth. It should just be seen as what it is, "a language that says more and says it more intensely than does other language." And in order to better see what poetry is and to better comprehend how poetry achieves this intense effect, certain critical approaches can be employed.

But before any large-scale criticism is undertaken, one should first review the general suggestions major poetry critics offer about reading and interpreting poetry. These very somewhat from critic to critic, but most of the suggestions implore the reader to read carefully and slowly, to use a dictionary as a matter of course, and to keep in mind that poetry is a form of literature one can enjoy without necessarily having to agree with its message.

Under the heading of reading, the advice critics have to offer abounds. Laurence Perrine and Elizabeth Drew both stress that state of mind is an important factor, and each bids the reader to "keep
mentally alert" while reading the poem, because nothing much can be gained from quickly, halfheartedly skimming the poem. Perrine also urges the reader to read the poem more than once, reading "so as to hear the sounds of the words in your mind," paying attention to every word and, if necessary, reading the poem aloud. Hugh Kenner feels that the best way is to "read it aloud and trust the rhythm," because reading aloud is an aid to better understanding the poem, that is, if one does not overexaggerate rhythm patterns.

Critics also feel that the expert use of a dictionary is a skill which must be emphasized as much as careful reading is. Perrine and Seymour Chatman both stress the use of a dictionary to look up unfamiliar terms, but Chatman is by far the most adamant about its necessity. Chatman says the reader may very well have to look up five to ten per cent of words because words often have more than one sense, and can be easily misinterpreted. He also stresses that "it is not the 'difficult' word that's likely to block . . . , that is, the word . . . never seen before, but rather the 'simple' word, the word . . . (known) . . . very well, but unfortunately in the wrong sense." Often the sense of the word can be grasped from context, but due to the changes in vocabulary throughout the history of the English language, this grasped sense can be totally opposite to that which the poet intended; and it is this misinterpretation that Chatman hopes the reader will avoid.

But in addition to reading carefully and using a good dictionary, the reader must also be able to project himself mentally to the time when the poet wrote, and to be able to accept the poet's philosophy, (although one need not finally agree with the poet's opinion) at least while reading the poem. Kenner stresses that poetry comes "not out of
nowhere, but out of a civilization... surrounded by stable and orderly attitudes to events" which may not be the same as those of the reader. Drew also makes this point when she discusses the problem in interpreting poetry which professes different moral and religious codes than those of the reader: "Inevitably we shall always respond more flexibly to certain stimuli than to others, but this does not mean that the scope of deliberate self-training in catholicity of experience is not enormous." Thus, in a motherly fashion, Drew has pointed out the difficulties in reading poetry contrary to personal moral codes, but realistically remarks that the scope of experience can be expanded through poetry if one is open-minded enough to try.

Then, the critics say, after learning to read carefully, to use the dictionary, and to be open-minded about ideas expressed in the poetry, the reader may begin to truly understand poetry by employing various critical techniques. Although the types of criticism are as many as the critics, the reader may approach the various methods systematically by first dealing with the word itself, then the word as part of a larger word unit, and concluding with the word units grouped together, forming the poem as a whole.

When first looking at poetry, it may be easiest for the reader to see that poetry is but a carefully chosen and arranged group of words in which each word has individual meaning and contributes to the work as a whole. This is a logical way to approach poetry, because it is the words themselves, in everyday prose such as newspapers and magazines, with which the reader is most familiar; he may not know as much about the deeper implications of words as part of an overall pattern of imagery
or symbolism. It may then be best to deal first with the various qualities of words in general, and then to move on to their special use in poetry as indicators of connotation as well as denotation.

In his extremely helpful poetry text *How Does a Poem Mean?*, John Ciardi is unique in being the only critic taking the time to explain several important characteristics of words in general. He starts out by asserting that "a word is a feeling," implying that one perceives a positive or negative reaction, commonly called connotation, as well as a literal description, or denotation, when perceiving the word. In discussing connotation versus denotation he is not alone among critics, but he is indeed alone in asserting that "a word involves the whole body," that it takes some exertion involving breath and muscle movement. By way of illustration, the reader can easily see that it takes much more exertion to pronounce the initial line of Walt Whitman's poem "Beat! Beat! Drums!" which reads, "Beat! beat! drums!——-blow! bugles! blow!" than it does to trill off the opening lines of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's mystic "Kubla Khan," where:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea. (lines 1-5)

In the first line, the explosive "b" and "d" sounds produce a feeling of energy, expressed in much more concentrated vocal action than would occur when reciting the second example of verse. But Ciardi does not limit his discussion of words-involving-the-whole-body to just examples of light and heavy sounds, such as these; he goes on to explain that
certain words may be labelled mimetic if they suggest their denotation simply through pronunciation, as in a word such as "oily." Further explaining how the word involves the whole body, he explains that words labeled onomatopoetic imitate the sound of what the words denote, in cases of words such as "buzz," "rip," and "squeak." He is not the only critic who discusses mimetic and onomatopoetic sounds, but he seems to do the best job of all who attempt to explain them.

However, he is alone in asserting that "a word is a history," as well as "a picture," making each point through interesting examples. When discussing the word as history, he makes a point that is often stressed in studying the history of the English language, namely that language is a constantly changing, organic entity, but that the very nature of its words points back to developments early in the language. Words such as "brother," "mother," "house," and "dish," which are quite basic and elementary, date back to the age in Britain when the English language was a primarily Saxon tongue, but added words from the conquering Latin tribes, a time when life was simple and the vocabulary reflected this. Then as the culture began to grow and change, the language grew from borrowings such as "egg," "she," and "skirt" from the Scandinavian tongues. In fact, Ciardi also goes on to stress that for the student who views the language as a group of words with history, it may be interesting to note how the various words came into the English language or were borrowed from other languages.

But Ciardi also asserts that "a word is a picture" which conveys a distinct meaning which cannot be duplicated by any other word in the language. In explaining the picture that words create, Ciardi.
describes the word "daisy" as not just a flower, but a shortened form of the lovely phrase "day's eye." One could also consider words such as the phrase "ten-gallon hat," which originally recalled visions of a hat with ten rows of braid, or galons, to the Mexican, but now is conceived by the average American as a huge, huge hat. According to Ciardi, words are much more than explanations in the denotative sense, for each has its own little story to tell, if the reader cares enough ---like the poet---to find out what exactly it has to say.

Returning to Ciardi's first assertion that "a word is a feeling," the reader will find that Ciardi is not alone in explaining that all words have a dual sense of connotation and denotation; in fact, here he is but one critic eager to show how this duality of meaning in language is an aid to the poet. After all, as Perrine says, "poetry must be more sensuous than... language... (of other literature)," because the poet is attempting to convey a feeling as well as to capture a prosaic description in words. He cannot rely on information gathered through the senses directly, but only through the medium of the word-picture he paints. His only resort is to use words such as "childish" instead of "childlike," when he wants to suggest pettiness, willfulness, and temper tantrums, and to describe a girl as "cute" when she is young, and "truly beautiful" when she has attained the peak of her attractiveness in young womanhood. He must extract every nuance of meaning possible in order to best explain the ideas he is trying to depict.

Then, in order that he might comprehend this multiplicity of meaning which the poet is trying to convey, the reader must realize that
besides showing a feeling, history, or a picture, or involving the whole body, words used must go beyond the area of connotation and denotation, since words are indeed "the storehouse of innumerable traditional and individual associations, which awaken to life at their sight and sound, and which give them their beauty and their power." Individual associations can be recalled through the word in its connotative sense, but traditional associations are realized solely through use of imagery and figurative language, which apply to words in descriptive units.

The role of imagery through figurative language in poetry becomes quite apparent after the reader realizes that poetry is but a special, heightened form of the everyday language, which uses imagery also. For example, phrases such as "it's raining cats and dogs" or "he's sowing his wild oats" are images because they are ways of relating a statement in a sense other than the literal. They are ways to explain that rain is coming down very hard, and that a young man is having a good time dating before he decides to date only one girl, but they are much more evocative ways of relating these thoughts. Indeed, they are attempts to describe life in terms high enough to be used in actual poetry; the only difference between these phrases and poetry is that these phrases are worn and trite, whereas the images chosen by the poet are usually fresh and original. The reader is speaking a kind of poetry when he uses such figurative speech, but he does not use his imagery in as many varied ways as does the poet.

The poet uses imagery in numerous ways ranging from simple to complex, the first being that figurative language affords the reader
imaginative pleasure.\textsuperscript{32} As was said before, figurative language affords a way of communicating in a non-literal sense. Figures of speech can mean more than what they mean literally, or can compare two utterly dissimilar images, and thus create a striking comparison. Such a striking image is evident in Oliver Wendell Holmes' "The Chambered Nautilus:"

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign
Sails the unshadowed main,---
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl!
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
Before thee lies revealed,--
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave the low-vaulted past!
Let each new temples, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea! (lines 1-14; 29-35)
Indeed this image is more merely of a nautilus, but is a description of the stage in life in which a man has not yet found himself and is still at odds with his soul. The persona beseeches his soul to "build . . . more stately mansions" like those he sees, and does not just admire the perfection of the nautilus; indeed, if he were just admiring, he would not need to make elaborate comparisons entwining man and the nautilus.

However, imagery does do more than just facilitate imaginative pleasure, as in the example above, because figures of speech are also a way of bringing additional imagery into the poem. In the passage quoted above, the descriptions of the pearl, purpled wings and sea all are sights the reader can identify with, but might not normally come to his mind. Only through the poet's skillful use of imagery are these sights and sounds able to appear: It is thus the poet's job to bring additional imagery into his work for the edification of the reader.

Imagery also has a third function, that being to add emotional intensity "to otherwise merely informative statements" and to convey attitudes along with information. In daily conversation the reader uses phrases similar to the resigned "I'm so sick of studying I'm ready to burst," which conveys boredom and overexertion; in poetry, the reader finds poems which serve much the same purposes of relating emotional attitudes. This emotional aspect of poetry is unique, because such emotion is not normally conveyed in prose writings but is usually reserved for poetry. It is just one more way that poetry can mean more
in less words.

And most importantly, poetry does have the ability through use of
imagery to be multidimensional and say "much in brief compass." This
is perhaps the most important aspect of all, since this is what makes
poetry so markedly different from prose. Prose takes the time to
waddle through much more description and phrasing than does poetry,
because the poet is not satisfied until he finds exactly the right
word to convey his meaning. After he chooses such a word, he will not
need to elaborate because he has already said all he has to say. As a
way of illustration, the reader may be familiar with the following lines
from Edgar Allen Poe's "To Helen:"

Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece
And the grandeur that was Rome. (lines 8-10)

In these lines Poe has thus summarized all the first impressions one
might have about Greece and Rome, namely that Greece was a culture of
intellectual and social refinement, eons ahead of the Roman culture
which was to emulate the Grecian ideals but never quite achieve them.
Therefore, Rome is described as possessing "grandeur," a sort of showy,
material appeal to the senses, while Greece is a land of "glory" which
carries with it notions of intellectual immortality. Poe has indeed
shown the reader much more in less, through use of the key words "glory"
and "grandeur."

Then imagery does perform several tasks--providing imaginative
pleasure, bringing in additional imagery, conveying emotion and attitudes,
as well as saying much in very little space, and accomplishes these
aims by using figurative language. The figurative language thus used could easily fill countless volumes if sufficiently explicated, but when taking a brief glance at imagery, it may suffice to concentrate on the devices of metaphor and symbolism, since these are the most recognizable forms.

When confronting metaphors and symbolism, the reader may at first be somewhat confused as to what constitutes a metaphor and what constitutes symbolism since the two are somewhat related. Both have a denotative sense differing markedly from the actual meaning they convey, and in this sense they are alike; however, they are unlike because a metaphor compares two components of the poem directly, while a symbol alludes to another more general idea not explicitly stated in the poem.

A metaphor is a direct comparison which does not use the telltale "like" or "as" which constitutes a simile, another form of comparison not used as often as the metaphor. Practically every poem uses some form of metaphor because it is a less pointed way of making a comparison than a simile. Metaphors may be easy to understand, in phrases such as those contained in Robert Frost's "Fire and Ice," where he speculates that the destruction of a man by coldness, or ice, would be more effective than by the fire of hatred. Then again, metaphors may be very difficult to understand and may require a more intense critical technique.

Such a technique may be found in Edward L. Hancock's text, Techniques for Understanding Literature, where he focuses on literature in general, but does have some excellent ideas for explicating difficult metaphors. He suggests a type of diagramming in which one compares the subject to another entity, and then lists the attributes which the subject
and the other entity share, all in a basic diagram. This may be a bit of extra work for the reader, but can be extremely helpful in explicating difficult poetry, such as Randall Jarrell's "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," which reads:

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

To help the reader better understand the poem, the series of metaphors may be diagrammed as follows:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>THING LIKED TO</th>
<th>ATTRIBUTES</th>
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<tr>
<td>mother's sleep</td>
<td>life before military service</td>
<td>peaceful, satisfying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belly of State</td>
<td>belly of mother</td>
<td>sustains him like mother did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>airplane</td>
<td>fur</td>
<td>animal, nonfeeling, noncaring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>six miles from earth</td>
<td>six feet under ground</td>
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Then, when re-reading the poem aided by the diagrams, the reader sees the comparisons much more clearly. He sees the gunner was jolted out of his peaceful existence by the draft, or demands of the State, whose airplane becomes his new mother in dictating his life. His fur coat helps the reader see that the gunner is like a furry animal without real feeling, an idea which is reinforced by the last line of the poem, where the gunner calmly recounts, "When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose." This last note of calm, pristine
efficiency effectively emphasizes the horrors of war by its utter lack of feeling. Indeed, the young gunner seems to have been well programmed by his State to kill, and not to worry too much about the mental consequences of his action.

Then, in addition to using the diagramming technique shown above the reader may wish to ask the question "is the attribution literally possible or not?" Chatman emphasizes this, because if the assertion is indeed possible, it cannot be a metaphor. For example, in this famous line by Wordsworth, "A slumber did my spirit steal," the subject of the comparison, slumber, is a type of metaphor called personification because it is impossible for a nonhuman idea such as slumber to take the persona's spirit. In contrast to this, line four in Shakespeare's sonnet XXIV (the example Chatman uses), where the speaker is "wishing me like to one more rich in hope," is indeed possible; in fact, people are envious of others for various reasons. This line of the sonnet is therefore a beautiful idea captured in words, but it is not a metaphor, nor is it symbolic.

None of the passages quoted above have been good examples of symbolism because the metaphoric quality of meaning was already present in each example and simply needed explication to bring it out. Had they been truly symbolic, it would have been much harder for them to be explicated, for the symbol is simply a part of speech that stands for something else. A symbolic passage is more difficult to understand than a passage containing chiefly metaphor, because the deeper meaning of symbolism is not spelled out like a metaphor; the reader must take time to discover it himself.
When attempting to understand a passage he hypothesizes as symbolic, the reader will find that there are two parts to symbolism, one being a literal force and one a symbolic force. Ciardi uses these epithets as a matter of convenience, to show the reader that there are indeed two aspects of the comparison to be considered. He then suggests a series of questions, which seem most helpful when compared to techniques suggested by other critics. These questions are:

1. What is the symbol if taken literally?
2. How is the symbol transformed into a symbolic force?
3. Does it have its symbolic force at the beginning, or does it enter strictly as its literal self?
4. Does the symbolic force seem to expand as the poem progresses, and if so, how? by what devices?
5. Are such symbolic elements simply embellishments or do they have an essential part in the narrative performance?
6. In what ways does the main symbol set up counter-symbols? Has the poet thrust these symbols into the poem for a specific purpose, or are they just tied to the main symbol?

These questions cover almost every aspect of the symbolism, and are few enough in number so that they can be easily employed when the reader suspects there is a deeper meaning in the poetry he is reading and simply wants to make sure. They can be aptly put to use in a poem such as Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," which reads:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could.
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden back.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

After carefully reviewing the poem in light of the six questions, the reader may find its symbolism easier to understand. He will see that the divergent road is the main image in the poem. He will also see that in the literal sense, a young man has reached a fork in a wooded road, has scrutinized both possibilities, and has then decided to take the less used path. However, after glancing long enough at the poem, the reader may see it transformed symbolically in his eyes by several clues. The figure in the poem seems very pensive; surely he is making a decision more monumental than just choosing a path in the woods, because such a decision would not be so well meditated.
Obviously the young traveler has thought out the consequences very carefully, since he has "looked down as far as (he) could" (line 4) and took the road "having perhaps the better claim," (line 7), which suggest again that this is a poem about no ordinary road. Lastly, his later remark, that his choice "has made all the difference," (line 20), describes an experience more lasting than just a pleasant trek in the wood, which again reminds the reader that this is no common, everyday road.

When looking at the development of the poem, the reader finds it does indeed begin literally with the prosaic statement, "two roads diverged in a yellow wood," but that the poem gains a more than ordinary view of the road by the speaker's thoughtfulness, by his doubts, and by his recount of his feelings at the end. The road is obviously essential to the meaning of the poem, since it is included in the title, and since it is the main focus of the imagery of the poem.

The reader finally realizes that the road's divergence represents choice, and the choice involves his following a relatively unused path of leadership in contrast to the well-worn path of conformity, when he considers the other elements in the poem. The woods setting implies a world that is dark, somewhat menacing and mysterious. The "leaves no step had trodden back" (line 12), which the traveler carefully ponders, show that the way of leadership and the way of conformity may seem equally confusing to a person who is undecided as to which way he should go. But most importantly, the reader should realize if nothing else that the analogy of life as a journey with the living as its traveler is a motif which dates back to Dante's Divine Comedy, if not
earlier. When he recalls this theme, he may then find it less
difficult to see that the young man is traveling on the road of life,
the obstacle in his way being the choice that all must someday make.
This choice is that of being a leader and following one's own heart, or
of being a conformist and letting others decide for him.

By explicating poems such as "The Road Not Taken," the reader than
may begin to see the important role of symbolism as well as metaphoric
comparison in making the imagery of a poem meaningful. But important
though this may be, imagery is not the only aspect of poetry which may
be difficult to understand; indeed, there are other aspects of poetry
which are equally important and equally difficult. Many of these the
reader might consider, but those most elemental to comprehending poetry
are structure, rhythm, and rhyme.

Structure, which implies its definition by its name, is simply
described as "the arrangement of the larger parts of a literary work."40
This arrangement is very important, since it provides a key to
understanding the interaction of various elements in the poem which unite
to form a complete whole. Structure of a poem may be varied, but the
three basic forms are: thematic, in which an abstract idea is the
dominant force underlying the poem, in a work such as Dylan Thomas'
"Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night;" logical, in which a series
of statements holds the various parts together, in poems such as
the "To be or Not to Be" soliloquy from Shakespeare's Hamlet; and
lastly, emotional, in which the pattern of emotions determines the
arrangement of the poem, one example being Percy Bysshe Shelley's
powerful "Ode to the West Wind."41
Perrine looks at structure a little differently, as he also asserts that there are three different types of structure, but he defines a structure which is less concerned with the content of the poem than with its external appearance. First, he introduces what he calls continuous form, in which the lines of the poem do not follow a set grouping, but are divided by meaning alone. By way of illustration, an example of a poem with continuous form is T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, where no pattern can be immediately discerned. Perrine also mentions poetry in stanzatic form, which is symmetrically divided up into a series of stanzas. This form is the one which traditionally has been used most often by poets; examples of it include William Butler Yeats' "Among School Children," Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," and William Blake's "The Tiger." Then, the last of the three types Perrine mentions is fixed form, a traditional form with a prescribed number of lines and syllables. Examples of this form include any one of Shakespeare's numerous sonnets or Ogden Nash's limericks.

But whether or not the reader looks at structure from a thematic/logical/emotional view or from a consideration of continuity, stanza and fixed form, he must also study smaller components of the structure line by line, and see how the various word units unite to form a whole. One way in which the lines are united is by content, which has already been discussed; the other is by appearance, which takes into account structure, but more importantly, also involves rhythm and rhyme.

No criticism of poetry is ever complete without a discussion of rhythm and rhyme since besides being integral parts of poetry, they are as much a part of everyday existence as they are of poetry. Rhythm can
be heard in the ticking of a clock, in the motion of windshield wipers, or in the gait of a determined jogger; it is also evident in spoken language, when a speaker varies his accent to underscore the importance of what he has to say. It is then a natural development in poetry, since poetry is but a carefully chosen, written form of everyday language. But the rhyme is also present in everyday life, in forms varying from children's nursery school rhymes to classical, folk, and rock music.

In fact, Perrine starts his discussion of rhythm and rhyme by comparing poetry to music since he realizes "the poet ... chooses his words for sound as well for meaning," and groups words by arrangement of sounds, which is rhyme, or by arrangement of accents, which is rhythm. Perrine emphasizes repetition of sounds in giving poetry structure; here he is supported by Brooks and Warren, who quietly claim that "rhyme is the most emphatic binder used in English verse." Then he reiterates the importance of rhythm and rhyme to the total effect of a poem, and remarks that the value in analyzing these techniques is to help increase full awareness of them.

Perrine has some general suggestions which the reader should consider before analyzing, or scanning, the rhythm and rhyme patterns in poetry. First he states that scanning is not normally done when a reader is reading a poem; it takes time to do, and the lines must be exaggerated in order to scan properly, but it may be an aid occasionally. Next, he says that scansion "is at best a gross way of describing ... rhythmical quality," since all accents are not purely present or absent, for poetry contains various degrees of subtle
emphasis which cannot be discerned by a method such as this. Indeed, as he asserts in point number three, "scansion is not an altogether exact science." There can be more than one way of scanning a poem if a line or lines are confusing, and any of the interpretations are equally correct.

Then, lastly and most importantly, Perrine feels that "perfect regularity of meter is no criterion of merit." According to Perrine, Kenner, and other critics, fledgling poetry critics often forget that perfect meter does not a good poem always make. For as Ciardi states, there will be monotony if there is no change of metrical pace; the reader will lose interest in the poem because of its rhythmical sameness. Then again, most critics agree that the verbal sense of the poetry should coincide with its rhythm pattern; at points being different from the rest of the poem, or meter does not truly serve its purpose to unify the poem.

Now, after understanding the basic ideas behind scansion of poetry, the reader may decide to try scanning a poem by marking unaccented syllables with a short curved line, marking the accented syllables with a horizontal bar, and marking the division between feet, or units in rhythm, with a vertical bar. He will soon see that the lines will follow one of the prescribed patterns of accented and unaccented syllables:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
<th>NAME OF FOOT</th>
<th>NAME OF METER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>dē sign</td>
<td>Iamb</td>
<td>Iambic 2 feet= duple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>care less</td>
<td>Trochee</td>
<td>Trochaic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Then, after considering how many feet are in each line, the reader will classify the lines according to one of the following ways: monometer, if it contains one accented foot; dimeter if it contains two; trimeter if it contains three; tetrameter if it contains four; pentameter if it contains five; hexameter if it contains six; heptameter if it contains seven; and lastly, octameter if it contains eight accented feet.

Then, after scanning and finding, for example, that the poem's basic pattern is iambic pentameter, the reader will better understand the emphasis of certain words and phrases which prove to be exceptions to the pattern established throughout. He may also see how attention may be drawn away from a passage by using unstressed syllables, or how attention may be focused on a particular section by employing caesuras, (or pauses), and stressed syllables. After all, as most critics agree, the more unstressed syllables there are, the faster the poem will read; the more caesuras and stressed syllables there are, the slower the poem will read. Witness the difference in two short excerpts from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, the first two lines moving easily due to fewer accented syllables, while the second two lines drag on seemingly without hope of ending:

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learned to dance

\[...\]
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,

The line too labors, and the words move slow.

Thus the reader can see that meter is indeed an effective way of drawing attention to certain ideas by using heavy accent patterns for emphasis. In addition, he may wisely adopt a good rule of thumb Ciardi points out, namely that whenever a part changes his tone or attitude, some technical change will occur. The reader may then find it easier to see changes in the thought pattern of the poem since they would be backed up by metrical changes.

In short, as Brooks and Warren attest, the significance of meter in any given poem hinges on its ability to control the use of language in various ways: when giving it a feeling of unity through stanzas and sounds; when allowing variations from the accepted norm for purposes of emphasis, and lastly when serving as a method of unifying the content and form of the poem. Rhythm and rhyme, which may also be called meter, verse, or poetic form though best understood simply as rhythm and rhyme, are then devices instrumental to achieving the unity in form which reflects the poem's unity of thought.

But rhythm and rhyme are not the only devices with which a poet achieves a unified work, for there are indeed many others. Some devices, such as irony and tone, help achieve unity of feeling, while point of view is a device which promotes unity of thought. There are also two devices which help the reader perceive unity in form, those being the poem's structural patterns, which aid in achieving outward unity, and the poetic language and theme, which contribute to an inner unity.
Irony, a poetic device often confused with sarcasm and satire,\textsuperscript{52} is an effective tool in achieving unity of feeling because it helps create the mood of the piece through paradox. It differs from sarcasm, which is simply a bitter way of speaking intended to hurt someone, since irony is not necessarily bitter or hurtful. It differs from satire, a form of literature which ridicules in hopes of reforming behavior, because irony does not depend on ridicule either. Irony may be used in conjunction with sarcasm and satire, but not necessarily so. In fact, irony may be simply described as saying the opposite of what was intended, but this is only partly true because it defines only one form of irony.

Irony helps create the mood of a poem in any one of three distinct ways, through verbal, situational, or dramatic irony.\textsuperscript{53} Verbal irony, saying the opposite of what one means, helps to create the mood of the piece by insinuating that the poet is not being serious about what he is saying. It may add a lighter note to the poem, or it may have the opposite effect, as in a poem such as Sir John Suckling's "The Constant Lover:"

\begin{quote}
Out upon it! I have loved
Three whole days together;
And am like to love three more,
If it prove fair weather.

Time shall moult away his wings
Ere he shall discover
\end{quote}
In the whole wide world again
Such a constant lover.

But the spite on 't is, no praise
Is due at all to me;
Love with me had made no stays
Had it any been but she.

Had it any been but she,
And that very face,
There had been at least ere this
A dozen dozen in her place.

Here Suckling is speaking ironically. After glancing at the title, the reader may expect a discourse on the lengthy duration of the lover's devotion; instead, he learns that this period of adoration has lasted a mere three days. However, this bit of irony does prove effective in underscoring what seems to be an unusual form of flattery, when judging from the extent of the poem's last five lines. These last five lines are indeed ironic when contrasted with the sarcastic first two stanzas.

But in addition to such verbal irony, situational and dramatic ironies also help establish the mood of the piece. Situational irony, which occurs when there is a discrepancy between actual circumstances and those that would seem appropriate, also creates a feeling contrary to that which one might expect. Such irony is best demonstrated in poems such as Shelley's "Ozymandias," where the
reader learns that an ancient Egyptian tyrant boasted once of his mighty works, but years later his mighty burial monument lies in ruins. In contrast, dramatic irony possesses a "discrepancy between...knowledge possessed by the audience or reader and that possessed by the character." It also helps establish the mood of the piece when showing the discrepancy between what is happening and what could be happening. However, it differs from verbal or situational irony, because it is much more complex than the other forms, and may thus require the reader to do closer study. A good example of dramatic irony in literature is the last few chapters of Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus is disguised as a poor beggar while attempting to revenge his neighbors' mistreatment of his home and family.

Thus the reader may see that irony indeed promotes unity of feeling throughout a poem, but it is not the only poetic device which contributes to this unity; he must also consider the role of tone. Tone, which reflects "the writer's or speaker's attitude toward his subject, his audience, or himself," is not usually stated in the poetry but must be figured out by the reader. It is necessary before the reader can fully interpret the poem, since he must know whether the poet is being playful or solemn, mocking or reverent, or calm or excited before he can fully understand the poem.

However, recognizing the tone a poem presents is not easy, for it has not been explicitly stated, and there are no foolproof methods of accomplishing the task. The only suggestions the reader may find really helpful have been suggested by Edward Hancock, who advises the reader to look at connotations rather than denotations, and concentrate on
"sound as a clue to the author's attitude." For example, consider the anonymous poem "Love:"

There's the wonderful love of a beautiful maid,
   And the love of a staunch true man,
And the love of a baby that's unafraid--
   All have existed since time began.
But the most wonderful love, the Love of all loves,
   Even greater than the love for Mother,
Is the infinite, tenderest, passionate love
   Of one dead drunk for another.

In this poem, trite words such as "wonderful" and "beautiful" combine with the repetition of "love" to shape a tedious, unoriginal tone in the first seven lines. In fact were it not for the striking image of the drunk in the last line, an image which dramatically reverses the tone, this poem would not be as effective. Tone, or rather change of tone, unifies this short poem.

Then, as the reader can see by a careful study of tone in various poems, tone is indeed important in promoting unity of feeling in poetry, but it does not aid in promoting unity of thought in the way that a study of the poet's point of view may. Point of view describes the relation of the poet to the poem and the poem to the reader, and uses the ideas of persona, the person speaking the poem, and addressee, the dramatic or poetic audience. A discussion of persona inevitably confuses the reader, who may often assume the poet is directly speaking to the reader, when this is not the case.
In fact, the best advice to the beginning poetry reader has been suggested by Seymour Chatman, who emphasizes that persona comes from a Latin word meaning "mask," thus implying that the poet, though he seems to speak so directly, has really donned a mask, like a character in a play; Chatman then urges the reader to assume that in most poetry it is not the author who is speaking. By doing this, the reader will learn to identify the persona and addressee, and will learn that there are several ways the persona-addressee relationship is used. These ways include: a pure dramatic situation, where characters speak to one another in a poem like the balcony scene in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet; a situation where the personal and addressee are both characters in the poem, as in William Butler Yeats' "After Long Silence;" an instance where the persona is not the poet, and the addressee is the reader, one example being Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess;" a situation where the persona can be identified with the poet, but the addressee is not the reader, as in John Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning;" and lastly, a case where neither the persona or addressee can be clearly identified as poet or reader, as in Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem "Pied Beauty." Although some of these initially may be confusing for the reader to distinguish, they are basically sound guidelines for deciding who exactly is the persona and the addressee. Then, after deciding who these are, the reader will better understand the train of thought in the poem, since he now knows who is speaking, and to whom the ideas are being directed.

Then, after the reader better comprehends the ideas of persona
and addressee which help him see the unity of thought in the poem, he can concern himself with the unity of form in the poem. As was said before, unity of form involves an outward unity which is best demonstrated by the various patterns the poem may take; however, it also involves the inner unity of form which is partly decided by the poet's choice or language, and partly decided by his choice of theme.

The patterns which poetry can take are many and varied, but each serves the same basic purpose; namely, each pattern serves as a guide to how the poem should be organized internally. For example, poems preserved as folk ballads would not exist today if the poet did not add a larger-than-life kind of action to the work. If this were not the case, balladeers might not have considered the ballad interesting enough to sing, and it would not have been passed down through oral transmission. Therefore, the poet of old was practically forced to create exciting, varied poems if he wished them to survive.

Other poetic patterns are called conventions, because they involve "use of a traditional situation or set of human relationships as a framework" for the poem to be written. In a way, the content of these conventional poems has dictated what the pattern shall be, so the fledgling critic may find a clue to the content of the poem if he is familiar with its conventional form. He is indeed working in reverse, when the reader compares his research to the way the poet constructed the poem, but this does not make this effort any less valid. Conventions which the reader may approach in this manner include the pastoral and the narrative, poetic patterns which largely depend on pre-planned ideas. If the reader is familiar with these two poetic conventions, he may find many of his questions about the poem's content answered.
Since he is now familiar with the outward form of the poem, having studied its pattern, the reader should then analyze its inner: unity of form, and should realize that this is greatly simplified if he will but review the poet's choice of language. Language choice is crucial to poetry criticism, because the way "words are skillfully put together . . . (is how they) . . . generate potentials of comparison." The language used may be simple or complex, amusing or serious, antique or modern; but regardless of what type it is, the reader needs to study the poem's language to better understand its form.

Types of language used in poetry are indeed unlimited, but they are all classed as one of two general types, language or diction. Ciardi differentiates the two, stating that a poet's "poetic "language" welcomes any experience, and believes that "any word in the language could find a place in . . . poetry," listing as an example of such as poet the metaphysical poet John Donne. Such openmindedness about word choice is directly in opposition to the tastes of poets which use "diction," for these poets exclude all that is not "dignified and important," in the manner of a poet such as William Wordsworth. To them, certain words in the language are not suitable for use in poetry. However, neither those who use "diction" nor those who use "language" are necessarily right or wrong, but certain poets may be easier to understand if the reader knows whether or not their poems are organized freely or selectively in terms of vocabulary.

Following a discussion of the poet's choice of language as opposed to diction, the reader may then undertake an area most crucial to the understanding of the poem as a whole, namely, concentrating on the
poem's theme. Studying the theme is indeed essential to a complete knowledge of the poem, for it is only when the reader grasps the central idea that he can fully appreciate the poem. After all, as Brooks and Warren attest, "the theme embodies the attitude toward life that grows out of the... (poem);" without this embodiment of attitude, the poem would not be nearly the same—in fact, it would have no reason for unity of any sort.

This theme, a comment on human values and an interpretation of life, may vary from happy to sad or from simple to complex, but despite its flexibility, it remains the one item in an individual poem which is the same. Imagery of the poem may vary, its stanzaic form may be interrupted, its rhythm may change, but its theme will remain constant. Then, knowing that the theme is relatively constant aids the reader, for he is assured that one aspect of poetry may not be as difficult to understand as the others.

Locating the theme in any given poem does present some problems, however. In trying to come as close as is possible to the central idea or theme, the reader may begin paraphrasing, and as has been said before, paraphrase is often misused, and is best used only as a last resort. A statement of sorts about the poem must be made, but it should never be a blanket statement of paraphrase.

One example of how a poem may be criticized in looking for its theme follows this account of Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night:"

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day
Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deed might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

This poem is concerned with death. It describes death not as a
merciful blessing, but death as a cruel "dying of the light." This
idea that death is unwelcome is demonstrated by the two alternate
refrains, "Do not go gentle into that good night," where the young
man beseeches his father not to accept death without a struggle, as
well as points where he urges his father to "rage, rage against the
dying of the light."

The young man tries to tell how death should be resisted by various
arguments throughout the poem. He first logically assumes that since his
father has lived long, he should not wish to see his life end, so in
line two he says, "Old age should burn and rave at close of day."
Seeing that this does not work, he then says that wise men "do not
go gentle into that good night" because their words have not been
controversial enough to stir up the "lightning" (line five) of mass
recognition, but this attempt also fails. The young man next tells
how wild men "learn too late" (line 11) that they should have resisted
death, and he also says that "grave men . . (who) . . near death . . . see
with blinding sight" (line 13) realize that they do not welcome death
when they are too ill to recover. When all these logical attempts
fail, the young man loses control, and emotionally begs his father to
"curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray," (line 17), hoping
that his father will find the strength to oppose death. His last words
to his father then gain a new meaning, for as the young man protests,
he once again beseeches, "Do not go gentle into that good night./Rage,
rage against the dying of the light," (lines 18-19). His words are
further emphasized by an extra line added to the last stanza.

Then, after concluding a discussion of theme such as the one above,
the reader has generally finished his analysis of the parts of a poem.
Having started with the qualities of individual words, as words and as
units of poetry, he has then discussed their role in imagery and
figurative language, has seen their use in structure and form, and has
seen their relation to each other in rhythm and rhyme. He has seen how tone and internal forms, or conventions, help unify the words in a poem; he has also decided whether the poet has used language or diction to express the theme of his piece. Thus, he has advanced far enough to criticize the poem as a whole, and to evaluate whether the poem is good, bad, or great poetry.

When beginning to criticize the entire poem and evaluate it as a whole, the reader may find Perrine's brief suggestions quite helpful. He urges all readers to evaluate a poem by the same methods that a professor would use in judging an English theme; that is, to judge by its unity, coherence, and its proper placing of emphasis. In a well-constructed poem there is neither too little nor too much; every part of the poem belongs where it is and could be placed nowhere else; any interchanging of two stanzas, two lines, two words, or even two accents, would to some extent damage the poem and make it less effective. We come to feel, with a truly first-rate poem, that the choice and placement of every word is inevitable, that it could not be otherwise.68

He then continues with excellent suggestions which should help the reader determine whether the poetry he has just read is bad, good, or great poetry. Perrine suggests that the reader ask three simple questions:

1. What is the poem's central purpose?
2. How fully has this purpose been achieved?
3. How important is this purpose?

Then, on the basis of the answers to these questions, it will be evident
whether or not the poetry is good or bad. Poetry is "good" if it passes questions one and two, which would say that the poem has a central purpose or theme, and has successfully achieved this central purpose throughout the poem. Poetry is "great" if it is good poetry, and if it achieves the extra dimension of question number three, that the poem does have a universal purpose which many readers will identify with. In the words of Brooks and Warren, the poem can only be classified as great if "we can recapture, and then only by imagination, the old urgency only if the verbal relations (and their implications) are properly controlled and if the human drama is adequately hinted at."70 For only if the poem has been skillfully written and does appeal to the reader as a human being capable of sharing the poet's experience, will it have accomplished what poetry sets out to do, that is "to say more, and say it more intensely, than does other language."71
ENDNOTES


3 Perrine, p. 9.

4 Perrine, p. 51.


6 Perrine, p. 129.

7 Drew, p. 17.

8 Drew, p. 17.

9 Perrine, p. 166.

10 Brooks and Warren, p. 90.


14 Ciardi, p. 110.


17 Perrine, p. 19.


20 Chatman, p. 8.
NOTE: I have decided to use the all-encompassing term "imagery" as does Ciardi and others, for purposes of simplification.

44 Brooks and Warren, p. 169--paraphrase.
45 Perrine, p. 186.
46 Perrine, p. 186.
47 Perrine, p. 187.
48 Ciardi, p. 34-5--paraphrase.
49 Kenner, p. 184.
50 Ciardi, p. 365.
51 Brooks and Warren, p. 165, present these IDEAS
52 Perrine, p. 103.
53 Hancock, p. 60.
54 Perrine, p. 107.
55 Hancock, p. 63.
56 Perrine, p. 152.
57 Perrine, p. 152.
58 Hancock, p. 59.
59 Hancock, p. 34.
61 Ciardi, p. 21.
62 Kenner, p. 296.
63 Kenner, p. 38.
64 Ciardi, p. 119.
65 Ciardi, p. 120.
68 Perrine, p. 221.
69 Perrine, p. 240.
71 Perrine, p. 3.
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