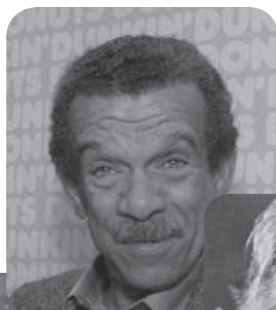




To view biographies of select poets in this chapter, visit your Literature CourseMate, accessed through www.cengagebrain.com.

SYMBOL, ALLEGORY, ALLUSION, MYTH

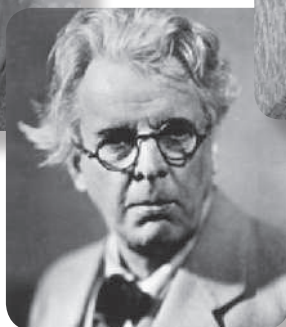
Derek Walcott



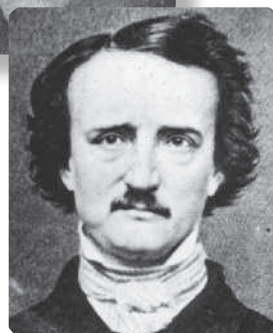
Christina Rossetti



W. H. Auden



William Butler Yeats



Edgar Allan Poe



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WILLIAM BLAKE (1757–1827)

The Sick Rose (1794)

The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
 Of crimson joy: 5
 And his dark secret love
 Does thy life destroy.



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To listen to an audio reading of “The Sick Rose,” visit your Literature CourseMate, accessed through www.cengagebrain.com.



Symbol

A **symbol** is an idea or image that suggests something else—but not in the simple way that a dollar sign stands for money or a flag represents a country. A symbol is an image that transcends its literal, or denotative, meaning in a complex way. For instance, if someone gives a rose to a loved one, it could simply be a sign of love. But in the poem “The Sick Rose,” the rose has a range of contradictory and complementary meanings. What does the rose represent? Beauty? Perfection? Passion? Something else? As this poem illustrates, the distinctive trait of a symbol is that its meaning cannot easily be pinned down or defined.

Such ambiguity can be frustrating, but it is precisely this characteristic of a symbol that enriches a poem by giving it additional layers of meaning. As Robert Frost has said, a symbol is a little thing that touches a larger thing. In the poem of his that follows, the central symbol does just this.

ROBERT FROST (1874–1963)

For Once, Then, Something (1923)

Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
 Deeper down in the well than where the water
 Gives me back in a shining surface picture
 Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike, 5
 Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
 I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
 Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
 Something more of the depths—and then I lost it. 10
 Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
 One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
 Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,

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Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something. 15

The central symbol in this poem is the “something” that the speaker thinks he sees at the bottom of a well. Traditionally, the act of looking down a well suggests a search for truth. In this poem, the speaker says that he always seems to look down the well at the wrong angle, so that all he can see is his own reflection—the surface, not the depths. Once, however, the speaker thought he saw something “beyond the picture,” something “white, uncertain,” but the image remained indistinct, disappearing when a drop of water from a fern caused the water to ripple. The poem ends with the speaker questioning the significance of what he saw. Like a reader encountering a symbol, the speaker is left trying to come to terms with images that cannot be clearly perceived and associations that cannot be readily understood. In light of the elusive nature of truth, all the speaker can do is ask questions that have no definite answers.

Symbols that appear in poetic works can be *conventional* or *universal*. **Conventional symbols** are those recognized by people who share certain cultural and social assumptions. For example, national flags evoke a general and agreed-upon response in most people of a particular country and—for better or for worse—American children have for years perceived the golden arches of McDonald’s as a symbol of food and fun. **Universal symbols** are those likely to be recognized by people regardless of their culture. In 1890, the noted Scottish anthropologist Sir James George Frazer wrote the first version of his work *The Golden Bough*, in which he identified parallels between the rites and beliefs of early pagan cultures and those of Christianity. Fascinated by Frazer’s work, the psychologist Carl Jung sought to explain these parallels by formulating a theory of **archetypes**, which held that certain images or ideas reside in the subconscious of all people. According to Jung, archetypal symbols include water, symbolizing rebirth; spring, symbolizing growth; and winter, symbolizing death.

Sometimes symbols that appear in poems can be obscure or highly idiosyncratic. William Blake is one of many poets (William Butler Yeats is another) whose works combine symbols from different cultural, theological, and philosophical sources to form complex networks of personal symbolic associations. To Blake, for example, the scientist Isaac Newton represents the tendency of scientists to quantify experience while ignoring the beauty and mystery of nature. Readers cannot begin to understand his use of Newton as a symbol until they have read a number of Blake’s more difficult poems.

How do you know when an idea or image in a poem is a symbol? At what point do you decide that a particular object or idea goes beyond the literal level and takes on symbolic significance? When is a rose more than a rose or a well more than a well? Frequently you can recognize a symbol by its prominence or repetition. In “For Once, Then, Something,” for example, the well is introduced in the first line of the poem, and it is the poem’s focal point; in “The Sick Rose,” the importance of the rose is emphasized by the title.

It is not enough, however, to identify an image or idea that seems to suggest something else. Your decision that a particular item has symbolic significance must be

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supported by the details of the poem and make sense in light of the ideas the poem develops. In the following poem, the symbolic significance of the volcano helps readers to understand the poem's central theme.



Eruption of Mt. Etna (Sicily), 2001
© Reuters/CORBIS

EMILY DICKINSON (1830–1886)

Volcanoes be in Sicily (1914)

And South America
I judge from my Geography—
Volcanoes nearer here
A Lava step at any time
Am I inclined to climb—
A Crater I may contemplate
Vesuvius at Home.

5

This poem opens with a statement of fact: volcanoes are located in Sicily and South America. In line 3, however, the speaker introduces the improbable idea that volcanoes are located near where she is at the moment. Readers familiar with Dickinson know that her poems are highly autobiographical and that she lived in Amherst, Massachusetts, where there are no volcanoes. This in-

formation leads readers to suspect that they should not take the speaker's observation literally and that in the context of the poem volcanoes may have symbolic significance. But what do volcanoes suggest here?

On the one hand, volcanoes represent the awesome creative power of nature; on the other hand, they suggest its destructiveness. The speaker's contemplation of the crater of Vesuvius—the volcano that buried the ancient Roman city of Pompeii in A.D. 79—is therefore filled with contradictory associations. Because Dickinson was a recluse, volcanoes—active, destructive, unpredictable, and dangerous—may be seen as symbolic of everything she fears in the outside world—and, perhaps, within herself. Volcanoes may even suggest her own creative power, which, like a volcano, is something to be feared as well as contemplated. Dickinson seems to have a voyeur's attraction to danger and power, but she also fears them. For this reason, she (and her speaker) may feel safer contemplating Vesuvius at home—not traveling to exotic lands but simply reading a geography book.

Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to borrow
 From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore— 10
 For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
 Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
 Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
 so that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating 15
 “’Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;—
 Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;
 This it is, and nothing more.”

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
 “Sir,” said I, “or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore; 20
 But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
 And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
 That I scarce was sure I heard you”—here I opened wide the door;—
 Darkness there, and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, 25
 Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
 But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,
 And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore!”
 This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, “Lenore!”—
 Merely this, and nothing more. 30

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
 Soon I heard again a tapping somewhat louder than before.
 “Surely,” said I, “surely that is something at my window lattice;
 Let me see, then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore—
 Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;— 35
 ’Tis the wind and nothing more!”

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
 In there stepped a stately raven of the saintly days of yore;
 Not the least obeisance made he; not an instant stopped or stayed he;
 But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door— 40
 Perched upon a bust of Pallas¹ just above my chamber door—
 Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
 By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
 “Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,” I said, “art sure no craven, 45
 Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the Nightly shore—
 Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian² shore!”
 Quoth the raven, “Nevermore.”

¹*Pallas*: Athena, Greek goddess of wisdom.

²*Plutonian*: Dark; Pluto was the Greek god of the dead and ruler of the underworld.

Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
 Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore, 50
 For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
 Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—
 Bird or beat upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
 With such name as “Nevermore.”

But the raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only 55
 That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
 Nothing farther then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—
 Till I scarcely more than muttered “Other friends have flown before—
 On the morrow *he* will leave me, as my hopes have flown before.”
 Then the bird said “Nevermore.” 60

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
 “Doubtless,” said I, “what it utters is its only stock and store
 Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
 Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—
 Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore 65
 Of ‘Never—nevermore.’”

But the raven still beguiling all my sad soul into smiling,
 Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird and bust and door;
 Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking 70
 Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—
 What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
 Meant in croaking “Nevermore.”

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
 To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom’s core;
 This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining 75
 On the cushion’s velvet lining that the lamplight gloated o’er,
 But whose velvet violet lining with the lamplight gloating o’er,
she shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen
 censer
 Swung by angels whose faint foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor. 80
 “Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he
 hath sent thee
 Respite—respite and nepenthe³ from thy memories of Lenore!
 Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!”
 Quoth the raven, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!— 85
 Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here
 ashore,

³*nepenthe*: A drug mentioned in the *Odyssey* as a remedy for grief.

Desolate, yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
 On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
 Is there—is there balm in Gilead?⁴—tell me—tell me, I implore!”
 Quoth the raven, “Nevermore.”

90

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil—prophet still, if bird or devil!
 By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
 Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
 It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
 Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”
 Quoth the raven, “Nevermore.”

95

“Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked upstarting—
 “Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
 Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!
 Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
 Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my
 door!”

100

Quoth the raven, “Nevermore.”

And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
 On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
 And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
 And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
 Shall be lifted—nevermore!

105



Raven

Ivan Bliznetsov/Dreamstime.com

⁴*Gilead*: A region mentioned in the Bible; noted for its soothing ointments.

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To listen to an audio reading of “The Raven,” visit your Literature CourseMate, accessed through www.cengagebrain.com.

Reading and Reacting

1. Who is the speaker in the poem? What is his state of mind? How does the raven mirror the speaker’s mental state?
2. “The Raven” contains a good deal of alliteration. Identify some examples. How does this use of repeated initial consonant sounds help to convey the mood of the poem?
3. The speaker refers to the raven in a number of different ways. At one point, it is simply “an ebony bird” (line 42); at another, it is a “prophet” and “a thing of evil” (85). How else does the speaker characterize the raven?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** What is the symbolic significance of the raven? Of the repeated word “nevermore”? Of the bust of Pallas, the ancient Greek god of wisdom?
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** According to Christoffer Nilsson, who maintains a Web site dedicated to the works of Poe, “The Raven” was composed with almost mathematical precision. When writing the stanza in which the interrogation of the raven reaches its climax (third stanza from the end), Poe wanted to make certain that no preceding stanza would “surpass this in rhythmical effect”:

Poe then worked backwards from this stanza and used the word “Nevermore” in many different ways, so that even with the repetition of this word, it would not prove to be monotonous. Poe builds the tension in this poem up, stanza by stanza, but after the climaxing stanza he tears the whole thing down, and lets the narrator know that there is no meaning in searching for a moral in the raven’s “nevermore.”

Do you agree with Nilsson that it makes no sense to look for a moral in the raven’s “nevermore”? What kind of moral, if any, do you think “Nevermore” implies for the speaker?

Related Works: “A Hunger Artist” (p. 600), “Rooming houses are old women” (p. 764), “Ode to a Nightingale” (p. 789), “The Fish” (p. 968), “The Tyger” (p. 971), *Hamlet* (p. 1334)

**Allegory**

Allegory is a form of narrative that conveys a message or doctrine by using people, places, or things to stand for abstract ideas. **Allegorical figures**, each with a strict equivalent, form an **allegorical framework**, a set of ideas that conveys the allegory’s

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message or lesson. Thus, the allegory takes place on two levels: a **literal level** that tells a story and a **figurative level** on which the allegorical figures in the story stand for ideas, concepts, and other qualities.

Like symbols, allegorical figures suggest other things. But unlike symbols, which have a range of possible meanings, allegorical figures can always be assigned specific meanings. (Because writers use allegory to instruct, they gain nothing by hiding its significance.) Thus, symbols open up possibilities for interpretation, whereas allegories tend to restrict possibilities.

Quite often an allegory involves a journey or an adventure, as in the case of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which traces a journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Within an allegory, everything can have meaning: the road on which the characters walk, the people they encounter, or a phrase that one of them repeats throughout the journey. Once you understand the allegorical framework, your main task is to see how the various elements fit within this system. Some allegorical poems can be relatively straightforward, but others can be so complicated that it takes a great deal of effort to unlock their meaning. In the following poem, a journey is central to the allegory.



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CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830–1894)

Uphill (1861)

Yes, to the very end.
 Will the day's journey take the whole long day?
 From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place? 5
 A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.
 May not the darkness hide it from my face?
 You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?
 Those who have gone before. 10

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?
 They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?
 Of labor you shall find the sum.

Will there be beds for me and all who seek? 15
 Yea, beds for all who come.

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Illustration from 1776 printing of *The Pilgrim's Progress*

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“Uphill” uses a question-and-answer structure to describe a journey along an uphill road. Like the one described in John Bunyan’s seventeenth-century allegory *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, this is a spiritual journey, one that suggests the challenges a person faces throughout life. The day-and-night duration of the journey stands for life and death, and the inn at the end of the road stands for the grave, the final resting place.

FURTHER READING: Allegory

CARL DENNIS (1939–)

At the Border (2004)

No sign on a post warns you that your passport
Won’t let you return to your native land
As a citizen, just as a tourist
Who won’t be allowed to fraternize with the local

5

NOT FOR SALE

No guard steps out of a booth to explain
 You can't bring gifts back, however modest,
 Can't even pass a note to a few friends
 That suggests what worries of theirs are misguided,
 What expectations too ambitious. 10

Are you sure you're ready to leave,
 To cross the bridge that begins
 Under a clear sky and ends in fog?
 But look, you've started across already
 And it's one-lane wide, with no room for U-turns. 15

No time even to pause as drivers behind you
 Lean on their horns, those who've convinced themselves
 Their home awaits them on the other side.

Reading and Reacting

1. On one level, this poem is about a trip. What details suggest that the poem is about something more?
2. In this poem, the border separates the past and the future. Why does the speaker call the distance between the past and the future a border?
3. What is the allegorical significance of each of the following items?
 - The passport
 - The bridge
 - The guard
 - The fog
 - The one-lane road
 - The drivers

4. JOURNAL ENTRY How does this poem describe the past? How is the past different from the future?

5. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE In a review of “At the Border,” poet Robert Pinsky makes the following observation:

Dennis gives a dreamy urgency to his compact allegory. . . . The feeling is not gloomy, but a gentle and haunted metaphysical teasing. Unornamented and intimate, the poem's even voice describes the humdrum details of tourism—the passport, the bridge, the guard, the traffic—as emblems of a perpetual journey from one misty idea of home to another—one behind, beyond return and the other envisioned ahead, but receding into the fog.

What is the “perpetual journey” to which Pinsky refers? Do you agree that the poem has “a dreamy urgency”?

Related Works: “The Secret Lion” (p. 183), “Young Goodman Brown” (p. 445), “A Worn Path” (p. 461), “Rooming houses are old women” (p. 764), “Uphill” (p. 867), *Trying to Find Chinatown* (p. 1549)

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Allusion

An **allusion** is a brief reference to a person, place, or event (fictional or actual) that readers are expected to recognize. Like symbols and allegories, allusions enrich a work by introducing associations from another context.

Although most poets expect readers to recognize their references, some use allusions to exclude certain readers from their work. In his 1922 poem “The Waste Land,” for example, T. S. Eliot alludes to historical events, ancient languages, and obscure literary works. He even includes a set of notes to accompany his poem, but they do little more than complicate an already difficult text. (As you might expect, initial critical response to this poem was mixed: some critics said that it was a work of genius, while others thought that it was arcane and pretentious.)

In a sense, allusions favor those readers who have the background or knowledge to recognize them and excludes those who do not. At one time, writers could expect educated readers to recognize allusions to the Bible and to Greek and Roman classics. Today, this assumption is not valid, but with the advent of search engines such as *Google*, interpreting an allusion requires nothing more than entering a keyword (or keywords) into a Web browser. If, when reading a poem, you come across a reference to which you are not familiar, take the time to look it up. Your understanding and appreciation of a poem may depend on your ability to interpret an unfamiliar reference.

Allusions can come from any source: history, the arts, other works of literature, the Bible, current events, or even the personal life of the poet. Notice how the following poem uses allusions to prominent literary figures as well as to myth to develop its theme.

WILLIAM MEREDITH (1919–)

Dreams of Suicide (1980)

(in sorrowful memory of Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman)

I

you, but to feel the metal horn,
furred with the downy membrane of dream.
More surely than the unicorn,
you are the mythical beast.

5

II

Or I am sniffing an oven. On all fours
I am imitating a totemic animal
but she is not my totem or the totem
of my people, this is not my magic oven.



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To complete a tutorial on “Allusion,” visit your Literature CourseMate, accessed through www.cengagebrain.com.

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or pulling on their long woolen socks.
 This is early on, years before the Ark, dawn.
 The profile of an animal is being smeared 15
 on the wall of a cave,
 and you have not yet learned to crawl.
 This is the opening, the gambit,
 a pawn moving forward an inch.
 This is your first night with her, your first night without her 20
 This is the first part
 where the wheels begin to turn,
 where the elevator begins its ascent,
 before the doors lurch apart.

This is the middle. 25
 Things have had time to get complicated,
 messy, really. Nothing is simple anymore.
 Cities have sprouted up along the rivers
 teeming with people at cross-purposes—
 a million schemes, a million wild looks. 30
 Disappointment unsolders his knapsack
 here and pitches his ragged tent.
 This is the sticky part where the plot congeals,
 where the action suddenly reverses
 or swerves off in an outrageous direction. 35
 Here the narrator devotes a long paragraph
 to why Miriam does not want Edward's child.
 Someone hides a letter under a pillow.
 Here the aria⁴ rises to a pitch,
 a song of betrayal, salted with revenge, 40
 And the climbing party is stuck on a ledge
 halfway up the mountain.
 This is the bridge, the painful modulation.
 This is the thick of things.
 So much is crowded into the middle— 45
 the guitars of Spain, piles of ripe avocados,
 Russian uniforms, noisy parties,
 lakeside kisses, arguments heard through a wall
 too much to name, too much to think about.

And this is the end, 50
 the car running out of road,
 the river losing its name in an ocean,
 the long nose of the photographed horse
 touching the white electronic line.

⁴*aria*: A musical piece for one voice, often performed in the context of an opera.

This is the colophon,⁵ the last elephant in the parade, 55
 the empty wheelchair, and pigeons floating down in the evening.
 Here the stage is littered with bodies,
 the narrator leads the characters to their cells,
 and the climbers are in their graves.
 It is me hitting the period 60
 and you closing the book.
 It is Sylvia Plath⁶ in the kitchen
 and St. Clement⁷ with an anchor around his neck.
 This is the final bit
 thinning away to nothing. 65
 This is the end, according to Aristotle,
 what we have all been waiting for,
 what everything comes down to,
 the destination we cannot help imagining,
 a streak of light in the sky, 70
 a hat on a peg, and outside the cabin, falling leaves.

Reading and Reacting

1. According to Aristotle, the plot of a tragedy must be “whole”—it must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Do you think the poem’s title is appropriate? Explain.
2. In what sense is this poem a tragedy? In what sense is it not?
3. What allusions does the speaker make in the last stanza? What is the significance of these allusions?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Does Collins expect readers to be familiar with his allusions? Do you think he expects too much of readers? Or, do you think the effort is worth the gain?
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Critic John Taylor praises the work of Billy Collins in the following terms

Rarely has anyone written poems that appear so transparent on the surface yet become so ambiguous, thought-provoking or simply wise once the reader has peered into the depths. Collins’s pellucid style greatly facilitates this kind of meditative peering into the unknown, yet this clarity is hard-won. It takes a sure hand indeed to guide readers so often and respectfully into an unobstructed communion with reverie, drollery, gentle mischievousness, or a subdued but genuine joy.

Do you think this description applies to the poem “Aristotle”? For example, is “Aristotle” “transparent on the surface”? Is it in any way “ambiguous”? Which aspects of the poem might be considered “wise” or “thought-provoking”?

Related Works: “Love and Other Catastrophes: A Mix Tape” (p. 138), “Araby” (p. 358), “The Things They Carried” (p. 388), “My Last Duchess” (p. 682), *Trying to Find Chinatown* (p. 1549)

⁵*colophon*: The finishing touch.

⁶*Sylvia Plath*: American poet (1932–1963) who committed suicide by inhaling the gas from her oven.

⁷*St. Clement*: First of the Apostolic Fathers and Pope of Rome from 88 to 97 AD or from 92 to 101 AD, Clement was supposedly martyred by being tied to an anchor and thrown into the sea.

R. S. GWYNN (1948–)

Shakespearean Sonnet (2005)*(With a first line taken from the TV listings)*

A man is haunted by his father's ghost.
 A boy and girl love while their families fight.
 A Scottish king is murdered by his host.
 Two couples get lost on a summer night.
 A hunchback murders all who block his way. 5
 A ruler's rivals plot against his life.
 A fat man and a prince make rebels pay.
 A noble Moor has doubts about his wife.
 An English king decides to conquer France.
 A duke learns that his best friend is a she, 10
 A forest sets the scene for this romance.
 An old man and his daughters disagree.
 A Roman leader makes a big mistake.
 A sexy queen is bitten by a snake.

Reading and Reacting

1. Why does Gwynn write his poem in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet?
2. Each line of the poem summarizes the plot of a Shakespeare play in the form of a TV listing. What do you think Gwynn hopes to accomplish with these summaries?
3. Where does Gwynn use alliteration? At what point does he use irony?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Try to identify all the plays Gwynn alludes to in his poem.
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** According to critic Bruce Bawer, R. S. Gwynn's recurrent theme is "the decay of Western civilization—trash culture, fashionable politics, education made E-Z—and the enduring faults, frailties, fallacies, foibles, and fraudulencies of the human comedy." In what sense, if any, do you think "Shakespearean Sonnet" is about "the decay of Western civilization"?

Related Works: "Cathedral" (p. 432), "The English Canon" (p. 726), "An Apology" (p. 746), "When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes" (p. 825), *Hamlet* (p. 1334)

**Myth**

A **myth** is a narrative that embodies—and in some cases helps to explain—the religious, philosophical, moral, and political values of a culture. Using gods and

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supernatural beings, myths try to make sense of occurrences in the natural world. (The term *myth* can also refer to a private belief system devised by an individual poet as well as to any fully realized fictitious setting in which a literary work takes place, such as the myths of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or of novelist Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria.) Contrary to popular usage, *myth* does not mean "falsehood." In the broadest sense, myths are stories—usually whole groups of stories—that can be true or partly true as well as false; regardless of their degree of accuracy, however, myths frequently express the deepest beliefs of a culture. According to this definition, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Koran, and the Old and New Testaments can all be referred to as myths.

The mythologist Joseph Campbell observed that myths contain truths that link people together, whether they live today or lived 2,500 years ago. Myths attempt to explain phenomena that human beings care about, regardless of when and where they live. It is not surprising, then, that myths frequently contain **archetypal images**—images that cut across cultural and racial boundaries and touch us at a very deep level. Many Greek myths illustrate this power. For example, when Orpheus descends into Hades to rescue his wife, Eurydice, he acts out the universal human desire to transcend death; and when Telemachus sets out in search of his father, Odysseus, he reminds readers that we are all lost children searching for parents. When Icarus ignores his father and flies too near the sun and when Pandora cannot resist looking into a box that she has been told not to open, we are reminded of the human weaknesses we all share.

When poets use myths, they are making allusions. They expect readers to bring to the poem the cultural, emotional, and ethical context of the myths to which they are alluding. At one time, when all educated individuals studied the Greek and Latin classics as well as the Bible and other religious texts, poets could safely assume that readers would recognize the mythological allusions they made. Today, many readers are unable to understand the full significance of an allusion or its application within a poem. Many of the poems in this anthology are accompanied by notes, but these may not provide all the information you will need to understand the full significance of each mythological allusion. Occasionally, you may have to look elsewhere for answers, turning to dictionaries, encyclopedias, online information sites such as <<http://www.answers.com>>, or collections of myths such as the *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* or *Bulfinch's Mythology*.

Sometimes a poet alludes to a myth in a title; sometimes references to various myths appear throughout a poem; at other times, an entire poem focuses on a single myth. In each case, as in the following poem, the use of myth helps to develop the poem's theme.

COUNTEE CULLEN (1903–1946)

Yet Do I Marvel (1925)

And did He stoop to quibble could tell why
The little buried mole continues blind,
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,

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Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
 Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare 5
 If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
 To struggle up a never-ending stair.
 Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
 To catechism by a mind too strewn 10
 With petty cares to slightly understand
 What awful brain compels His awful hand.
 Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
 To make a poet black, and bid him sing!



E18P5014455 "Tantalus", 18th century, (1827), Colored printing for Queen Maria of Hungary. A print from "Elden Paintings and Drawings", introduction by Hans Tietze. Prosdian Press, Vienna, 1937. (C) The Print Collector / HIP / The Image Works. NOTE: The copyright notice must include "The Image Works" DO NOT QUOTE IN THE NAME OF THE COMPANY.

Engraving of Tantalus reaching for fruit

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The speaker begins by affirming his belief in the benevolence of God but then questions why God engages in what appear to be capricious acts. As part of his catalog of questions, the speaker alludes to Tantalus and Sisyphus, two figures from Greek mythology. Tantalus was a king who was condemned to Hades for his crimes. There, he was forced to stand in a pool of water up to his chin. Overhead hung a tree branch laden with fruit. When Tantalus got thirsty and tried to drink, the level of the water dropped, and when he got hungry and reached for fruit, it moved just out of reach. Thus, Tantalus was doomed to be near what he most desired but forever unable to obtain it. Sisyphus also

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- 4. JOURNAL ENTRY** What is the significance of the poem's title?
- 5. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Critic Helen Vendler sees Charles Simic's philosophy as essentially tragic and pessimistic:

Life is a vulgar joke; life is tragedy. Perhaps for one who as a child saw World War II in Yugoslavia, life will always be overcast by horror; yet for one who escaped destruction, life will also seem charmed, lucky, privileged. Simic is not unaware of appetite, relish, and gusto. Yet it is in the coercive nature of his writing, as I have described it, that I find the deepest truth about him: "I have you trapped and you can't get out."

Is "Charon's Cosmology" a good example of the type of worldview that Vendler describes? Explain.

Related Works: "The Cask of Amontillado" (p. 325), "The World Is Too Much With Us" (p. 695), "'Hope' is the thing with feathers—" (p. 710), "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (p. 772), "The Raven" (p. 862), "Do not go gentle into that good night" (p. 895), "Because I could not stop for Death—" (p. 983), "Death Be Not Proud" (p. 986)



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WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS (1865–1939)

Leda and the Swan (1924)

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push 5
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower 10
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop? 15



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Peter Paul Rubens, *Leda and the Swan*, 1598
bpk, Berlin / Art Resource, NY

Reading and Reacting

1. What event is described in this poem? What is the mythological significance of this event?
2. How is Leda portrayed? Why is the swan described as a “feathered glory” (line 6)? Why in the poem’s last line is Leda dropped by his “indifferent beak”?
3. The third stanza refers to the Trojan War, which was indirectly caused by the event described in the poem. How does the allusion to the Trojan War help develop the theme of the poem?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Does the poem answer the question asked in its last two lines? Explain.
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** According to Richard Ellmann, this poem deals with “transcendence of opposites.” The bird’s “rape of the human, the coupling of god and woman, the moment at which one epoch ended and another began . . . in the act which included all these Yeats had the violent symbol for the transcendence of opposites which he needed.”
What opposite or contrary forces exist in the myth of Leda and the swan? Do you think the poem implies that these forces can be reconciled?

Related Works: “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (p. 505), “Greasy Lake” (p. 573), “Easter Wings” (p. 853), “The Second Coming” (p. 1048)



Source: ©AP Photo/Paula Aylee Scully

DEREK WALCOTT (1930–)

*Sea Grapes*¹ (1971)

tired of islands,
a schooner beating up the Caribbean

¹*Sea Grapes*: Small trees found on tropical sandy beaches.

for home, could be Odysseus,
 home-bound on the Aegean; 5
 that father and husband's
 longing, under gnarled sour grapes, is
 like the adulterer hearing Nausicaa's name²
 in every gull's outcry.

This brings nobody peace. The ancient war 10
 between obsession and responsibility
 will never finish and has been the same
 for the sea-wanderer or the one on shore
 now wriggling on his sandals to walk home,
 since Troy sighed its last flame, 15
 and the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough
 from whose ground-swell the great hexameters come
 to the conclusions of exhausted surf.

The classics can console. But not enough.

Reading and Reacting

1. Read a plot summary of the *Odyssey*. In the context of the myth of Odysseus, what is the “ancient war / between obsession and responsibility” (lines 10–11) to which the speaker refers? Does this conflict have a wider application in the context of the poem? Explain.
2. Consider the following lines from the poem: “and the blind giant's boulder heaved the trough / from whose ground-swell the great hexameters come / to the conclusions of exhausted surf” (lines 16–18). In what sense does the blind giant's boulder create the “great hexameters”? In what way does the trough end up as “exhausted surf”?
3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** This poem includes many references to Homer's *Odyssey*. Could you have appreciated it if you had not read a plot summary of the *Odyssey*?
4. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** Asked in an interview about the final line of “Sea Grapes,” Derek Walcott made the following comments:

All of us have been to the point where, in extreme agony and distress, you turn to a book, and look for parallels, and you look for a greater grief than maybe your own. . . . But the truth of human agony is that a book does not assuage a toothache. It isn't that things don't pass and heal. Perhaps the only privilege that a poet has is that, in that agony, whatever chafes and hurts, if the person survives, [he] produces something that is hopefully lasting and moral from the experience.

How do Walcott's remarks help to explain his poem's last line?

Related Works: “Gryphon” (p. 245), “Gretel in Darkness” (p. 680), “My Father in the Navy: A Childhood Memory” (p. 892), “Dover Beach” (p. 966), “Ulysses” (p. 1035)

²*Nausicaa's name:* Nausicaa was a young princess who befriended the shipwrecked Odysseus.



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W. H. AUDEN (1907–1973)

Musée des Beaux Arts (1940)

The Old Masters: how well they understood
 Its human position; how it takes place
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
 walking dully along
 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting 5
 For the miraculous birth, there always must be
 Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
 On a pond at the edge of the wood:
 They never forgot
 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course 10
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
 Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's
 horse
 Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
 In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may 15
 Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
 But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
 As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
 Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, 20
 Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.



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Reading and Reacting

1. Reread the summary of the myth of Icarus on page 874. What does Auden's interpretation of this myth contributed to the poem?
2. What point does the poet make by referring to the "Old Masters" (line 2)?
3. **JOURNAL ENTRY** Brueghel's painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is shown on the next page. How does looking at this painting help you to understand the poem? To what specific details in the painting does the poet refer?

Related Works: "The Lottery" (p. 416), "One day I wrote her name upon the strand" (p. 735), "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" (p. 760), "Not Waving but Drowning" (p. 1032), "The Second Coming" (p. 1048)

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Bruegel, Pieter the Elder (1525?–1569). *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*

Scala / Art Resource, NY



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T. S. ELIOT (1888–1965)

Journey of the Magi¹ (1927)

Just the worst time of the year
 For a journey, and such a long journey:
 The ways deep and the weather sharp,
 The very dead of winter.”* 5

And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
 Lying down in the melting snow.
 There were times we regretted
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet. 10

Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
 And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
 And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices: 15

A hard time we had of it.
 At the end we preferred to travel all night,
 Sleeping in snatches,
 With the voices singing in our ears, saying
 That this was all folly. 20

¹*Magi*: The three wise men who ventured east to pay tribute to the infant Jesus (see Matthew 12.1–12)

*The five quoted lines are adapted from a passage in a 1622 Christmas Day sermon by Bishop Lancelot Andrewes.

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Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
 Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
 With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
 And three trees² on the low sky,
 And an old white horse³ galloped away in the meadow. 25
 Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
 Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,⁴
 And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
 But there was no information, and so we continued
 And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon 30
 Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
 All this was a long time ago, I remember,
 And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down
 This: were we led all that way for 35
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, 40
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.



Adoration of the Magi by Lavinia

Private Collection /The Bridgeman Art Library International

²*three trees*: The three crosses at Calvary (see Luke 23.32–33).

³*white horse*: The horse ridden by the conquering Christ in Revelation 19.11–16.

⁴*dicing . . . silver*: Echoes the soldiers dicing for Christ's garments, as well as his betrayal by Judas Iscariot for thirty pieces of silver (see Matthew 27.35 and 26.14–16).

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Reading and Reacting

1. The speaker in this poem is one of the three wise men who came to pay tribute to the infant Jesus. In what way are his recollections unexpected? How would you have expected him to react to the birth of Jesus?
2. In what way do the mythical references in the poem allude to future events? Do you need to understand these allusions in order to appreciate the poem?
3. What does the speaker mean in line 41 when he says that the three wise men were “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation”? What has changed for them? Why does the speaker say that he would be glad for “another death” (line 43)?
4. **JOURNAL ENTRY** How is this poem similar to and different from the story of the three wise men told in the New Testament (Matthew 2.1–18)?
5. **CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE** In an analysis of “Journey of the Magi,” poet and critic Anthony Hecht discusses the most common interpretation of the poem, pointing to “a consensus of critical feeling about the tone of the conclusion of this poem, which, it is said, appears to border on despair and exhaustion of hope.” Hecht, however, suspects that something more subtle is going on—namely, that Eliot is using the speaker of the poem to express his own imperfect acceptance of Christianity:

Again, if I am right, about this, the poem might have a deeply personal meaning for Eliot himself, and might represent a kind of “confession,” an acknowledgment that he had not yet perfectly embraced the fate to which he nominally adhered, that his imperfect spiritual status was, like the Magus’s, that of a person whose faith was incomplete. . . .

Which of the two interpretations given above seems more plausible to you? Is the speaker of the poem wrestling with an incomplete faith, or is he experiencing “despair and exhaustion of hope”?

Related Works: “Araby” (p. 358), “Cathedral” (p. 432), “The World Is Too Much with Us” (p. 695), “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (p. 826), “Do not go gentle into that good night” (p. 895), “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (p. 989)

✓ CHECKLIST Writing about Symbol, Allegory, Allusion, Myth

Symbol

- Are there any symbols in the poem? What leads you to believe they are symbols?
- Are these symbols conventional?
- Are they universal or archetypal?
- Are any symbols obscure or highly idiosyncratic?
- What is the literal meaning of each symbol in the context of the poem?
- Beyond its literal meaning, what else could each symbol suggest?
- How does your interpretation of each symbol enhance your understanding of the poem?

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Allegory

- Is the poem an allegory?
- Are there any allegorical figures within the poem? How can you tell?
- What do the allegorical figures signify on a literal level?
- What lesson does the allegory illustrate?

Allusion

- Are there any allusions in the poem?
- Do you recognize the names, places, historical events, or literary works to which the poet alludes?
- In what way does each allusion deepen the poem's meaning? Does any allusion interfere with your understanding or enjoyment of the poem? If so, how?
- Would the poem be more effective without a particular allusion?

Myth

- What myths or mythological figures are alluded to?
- How does the poem use myth to convey its meaning?
- How faithful is the poem to the myth? Does the poet add material to the myth? Are any details from the original myth omitted? Is any information distorted? Why?

WRITING SUGGESTIONS: Symbol, Allegory, Allusion, Myth

1. Read "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (p. 804), "A Woman Mourned by Daughters" (p. 894), and "Living in Sin" (p. 716) by Adrienne Rich. Then, write an essay in which you discuss the similarities and differences in Rich's use of symbols in these poems.
2. Many popular songs make use of allusion. Choose one or two popular songs that you know well, and analyze their use of allusion, paying particular attention to whether the allusions expand the impact and meaning of the song or create barriers to listeners' understanding.
3. Read the Emily Dickinson poem "Because I could not stop for Death—" (p. 983), and then write an interpretation of the poem, identifying its allegorical figures.
4. What applications do the lessons of myth have for life today? Analyze a poem in which myth is central, and then discuss how you might use myth to make generalizations about your own life.
5. Both Judith Ortiz Cofer's "My Father in the Navy: A Childhood Memory" (p. 892) and Derek Walcott's "Sea Grapes" (p. 879) allude to Homer's *Odyssey*. Read a summary of the *Odyssey*, and then write an essay in which you compare the poets' treatment of Homer's tale.

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