

---

# How Does A Poem Mean?

*John Ciardi*

*"Bitzer," said Thomas Gradgrind, "your definition of a horse."*

*"Quadruped. Gramnivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." Thus (and much more) Bitzer.*

*"Now girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind, "you know what a horse is."*

*—Charles Dickens, Hard Times*

The School of Hard Facts over which Mr. Gradgrind presided was a school of fixed answers. Mr. Gradgrind would have agreed with a recent anthologist who wrote that the inspection of a poem should be as certain as a chemical analysis. Mr. Gradgrind would have assured himself that he was a first-class critic, of poetry as of horses. "Now girl number twenty," he would have said looking up from his analysis, "you know what a poem is."

Today, a century later than Mr. Gradgrind's School of Hard Facts, the idea is still current that the methods of measurement evolved by the physical sciences can be applied to all human processes. And there still lingers the belief that a dictionary definition is a satisfactory description of an idea or of an experience.

There are many grounds on which dictionary definitions can be disputed, but only one need concern us here. Bitzer's definition of a horse was a dictionary definition. Note that it is put almost exclusively in terms of classification. In those terms, it may do as a table of physical characteristics of *Equus caballus*. But what can it possibly say of the experience one has had of the living animal? No horseman ever rode a "gramnivorous quadruped." No gambler ever bet on one. No sculptor ever dreamed one out of a block of stone. For horseman, gambler, and sculptor are involved in a living relation to a living animal, and the kind of relation is expressed in the language each has evolved for his experience. ("A good winded bay," says the horseman, "but he has a mouth like iron and won't answer to the bit. He's had bad schooling." Or the gambler: "A good four-year old. Better than his performance to date. And a good mudder. He's due to win, especially on a wet track. And at nice odds." Or the sculptor: "The set of the stone suggested a rearing posture: the line of force curving down the haunches repeated in the straining line of the neck with the mouth held hard-down by the bit.") Whatever the "gramnivorous quadruped" may be to the biologist, these three ways of speaking are three experiences of the living horse. As Tip O'Neill once wrote in a fine sarcastic line: "There's not a

*John Ciardi*

*How Does a Poem Mean?*

wedding in the world that's worth a running horse." Now try the line revised: "There is not a marriage ceremony in existence worthy of comparison with a omnivorous quadruped of the genus *Equus caballus* in rapid motion."

The point is that *the language of experience is not the language of classification*. A boy burning with ambition to become a jockey does not study a text on zoology. He watches horses, he listens to what is said by those who have spent their lives around horses, he rides them, trains them, feeds them, curries them, pets them. He lives with intense feelings toward them. He may never learn how many incisors a horse has, nor how many yards of intestines. What does it matter? He is concerned with a feel, a response-to, a sense of the character and reaction of the living animal. And zoology cannot give him that. Not all the anatomizing of all the world's horses could teach a man horse-sense.

So for poetry. The concern is not to arrive at a definition and to close the book, but to arrive at an experience. There will never be a complete system for "understanding" or for "judging" poetry. Understanding and critical judgment are admirable goals, but neither can take place until the poem has been experienced, and even then there is always some part of every good work of art that can never be fully explained or categorized. It still remains true that the reader who has experienced most fully will finally be the best judge.

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 the opera. In Milan, on the other hand, no one need go to school in order to learn how to experience an opera: the Milanese do not study opera, they inhale it. They would have to go to school to learn, for example, how to watch a baseball game in an experienceable way. Certainly no one in The Bronx need go to that school: in The Bronx it is baseball that is inhaled as a living thing, and opera and poetry that have to be learned.

If the reader cared enough for poetry, he would have no need to study it. He would live into it. As the Milanese citizen becomes an encyclopedia of opera information, and as even retarded boys in The Bronx are capable of reciting endlessly detailed baseball statistics, so the passionate reader of poetry becomes alive to it by natural process.

Any teaching of the poem by any other method owes the poem an apology. What greater violence can be done to the poet's experience than to drag it into an early morning classroom and to go after it as an item on its way to a Final Examination? The apology must at least be made. It is the experience, not the Final Examination, that counts. Though one must note with care—as in the case of the baseball fan—that passionate learning is full of very technical stuff.

*John Ciardi*

*How Does a Poem Mean?*

---

Why else would baseball statistics give rise to such heated argument as one can hear throughout the season?

And in poetry there is the step beyond: once one has learned to experience the poem as a poem, there inevitably arrives a sense that one is also experiencing himself as a human being. It must certainly have been this second experience (to put it in another way, the point at which Art for Art's sake becomes Art for Life's sake) that Matthew Arnold had in mind when he wrote: "The grand power of poetry is its interpretative power . . . the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them." But the grand power of a good sermon is also its interpretative power, and a sermon, it must be remembered, is not a poem.

*Paradise Lost* is, in one sense, a rhymed sermon written to "justify God's ways to man. So is Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom*. Wigglesworth was a Puritan clergyman of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and for over two centuries Puritan children memorized large sections of his poem as part of their church training. Wigglesworth's theology is every bit as sound and as comprehensive as Milton's. Yet today *The Day of Doom* is all but unknown except as a scholar's curio. The difference is not in content but in the fact that Milton wrote a poem whereas Wigglesworth wrote only doggerel. Poetry, it follows, is more than simply "something to say." Nor is it simply an elaborate way of saying something or nothing.

W.H. Auden was once asked what advice he would give a young man who wished to become a poet. Auden replied that he would ask the young man why he wanted to write poetry. If the answer was "because I have something important to say," Auden would conclude that there was no hope for that young man as a poet. If on the other hand the answer was something like "because I like to hang around words and overhear them talking to one another," then that young man was at least interested in a fundamental part of the poetic process and there was hope for him.

When one "message-hunts" a poem (i.e., goes through the poem with no interest except in its paraphraseable content) he is approaching the writing as did the young man with "something important to say." He is giving it the Wigglesworth treatment. The common question from which such an approach begins is "WHAT Does the Poem Mean?" His mind closed on that point of view, the reader tends to "interpret" the poem rather than to experience it, seeking only what he can make over from it into a prose statement (or Examination answer) and forgetting in the process that it was originally a poem. Thus, students are too often headed by their teachers in the direction of reciting, almost like Bitzer: "Keats. "When I have fears that I may cease to

*John Ciardi*  
*How Does a Poem Mean?*

---

be.” Sonnet. Irregular. Consisting of three quatrains and a couplet, the third quatrain consisting of very close rhymes, thus: “hour, more, power, shore.” Written on the theme of the vanity of earthly wishes, but given a strong romantic coloration of individualistic aspiration for the good pleasures of the world.”

Poor Keats!

For WHAT DOES THE POEM MEAN? is too often a self-destroying approach to poetry. A more useful way of asking the question is HOW DOES A POEM MEAN? Why does it build itself into a form out of images, ideas, rhythms? How do these elements become the meaning? How are they inseparable from the meaning? As Yeats wrote:

*O body swayed to music, O quickening glance,  
How shall I tell the dancer from the dance?*

What the poem is, is inseparable from its own performance of itself. The dance is in the dancer and the dancer is in the dance. Or put in another way: where is the “dance” when no one is dancing it? And what man is a “dancer” except when he is dancing?

Above all else, poetry is a performance. Keats’ overt subject in his sonnet was his own approaching death. But note this about poetry: Keats took the same self-delighting pains in writing about his death as he took in poems on overtly happy subjects, such as “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” or the “Ode to a Nightingale.” Here is the complete sonnet:

*When I have fears that I may cease to be  
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,  
Before high piled books, in character,  
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;  
When I behold upon the night’s starred face,  
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery power  
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.*

*John Ciardi*

*How Does a Poem Mean?*

---

If this sonnet means “the vanity of human wishes given a strong romantic coloration, etc.,” why did Keats take the trouble to bring his rhythms to a stop at the end of the fourth and eighth lines and in the middle of the twelfth? Sonnets normally divide into “octet” (the first eight lines) and “sestet” (the final six lines). Note that Keats’ divisions occur in a very nearly symmetrical pattern. Why did Keats spend so much care on symmetry? What has symmetry to do with “the vanity of earthly wishes”? Why, too, did Keats bother to compare his mind to a field of grain, and the books he felt himself able to write, to storage bins? An elaborate figure. Why did Keats bother to construct it? Why did he search out such striking phrases as “the magic hand of chance”? If Keats were really convinced that all human wishes are vain, why did he wish to phrase his idea with such earthly care? If nothingness is all, why bother to make the something a poem is?

Robert Frost provided a valuable clue when he spoke of “the pleasure of taking pains.” The paradox here is simply verbal. Frost meant precisely what the German critic Baumgarten meant when he spoke of the central impulse toward poetry (and toward all art) as the *Spieltrieb*, the play impulse.

An excellent native example of the play impulse in poetry is the child clapping its hands in response to a Mother Goose rhyme. What does a child care for “meaning”? What on “earth is the “meaning” of the following poem?

*High Diddle diddle  
The cat and the fiddle  
The cow jumped over the moon;  
The little dog laughed  
To see such craft  
And the dish ran away with the spoon.*

“Preposterous,” says Mr. Gradgrind. But the child is wiser: he is busy having a good time with the poem. The poem pleases and involves him. He responds to it in an immediate muscular way. He recognizes its performance at once and wants to act with it.

This is the first level of play. As rhythm is the first element of music. The child claps hands, has fun, and the play involves practically no thoughtful activity. Beyond this level of response, there begins the kind of play whose pleasure lies for the poet in overcoming meaningful and thoughtful (and “feelingful”) difficulties, and for the reader in identifying with the poet in that activity.

*John Ciardi  
How Does a Poem Mean?*

Nor is the word “difficulty” one to be afraid of. Chess is a play-activity, yet it is play only because the players deliberately make the game difficult in order to overcome the difficulties. The equation is simple: no difficulty, no fun. No chess player finds any real pleasure in playing an obviously inferior opponent. Every game ever invented by mankind is a way of making things hard for the fun of it. The great fun, of course, is in making the hard look easy. Too much difficulty is painful. The Freshman football coach does not send his squad to play last year’s Rose Bowl winner. Neither does he send it to play grammar school teams. He tries to find opponents who will give his players a real chance to extend themselves, win or lose, and he hopes bit by bit to develop them for harder play.

Learning to experience poetry is not a radically different process from that of learning any other kind of play. The way to develop a poetic sense is by using it. And one of the real joys of the play-impulse is in the sudden discovery that one is getting better at it than he had thought he would be.

It is this self-delighting play impulse that the literalist and message hunter overlooks, just as Mr. Gradgrind overlooked the living fun it is to ride a horse, even an undefined horse.

To summarize these same points in more formal terms: no matter how serious the overt message of a poem, the unparaphraseable and undiminishable life of the poem lies in the way it performs itself through the difficulties it imposes upon itself. *The way it means is what it means.*

What for example does a dance “mean”? Or what does music “mean”? Or what does a juggler “mean” when we watch him with such admiration of his skill? All of these forms—and poetry with them—have meaning only as they succeed in being good performances.

One sees a wizard of a poet tossing his words in the air and catching them and tossing them again—what a grand stunt! Then suddenly one may be astonished to find that the poet is not simply juggling cups, saucers roses, rhymes and other random objects, but the very stuff of life. And discovering that, one discovers that seeing the poet’s ideas flash so in the air, seeing them performed under such control, is not only a reward in itself, but a living experience that deepens every man’s sense of life. One finds himself more, alert to life, surer of his own emotions, wiser than he would have been without that experience. And he thought he was just watching a show

But only a poem can illustrate how a poem works. One of the purposes of this volume is to provide beginning students with a reasonable bulk of poems from the great tradition of English

*John Ciardi*

*How Does a Poem Mean?*

---

and American poetry. But great as are the virtues of wide reading, they amount to nothing unless the reading goes deep as well as wide. It is good to read much. It is even more important to read a little in greater depth, for every poem one reads closely will teach him something about how to read another poem.

What should such a close reading take into consideration?

Here is a poem, one of the master lyrics of American poetry, perhaps the best known poem by an American poet:

*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*  
Robert Frost

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

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

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

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

Note that the poem begins as a simple description of events, but that it ends in a way that suggests meanings far beyond the specific description. This movement from the specific to the general is one of the basic formulas of poetry. Such a poem, as Yvor Winters's "Before Disaster," and Holmes's "The Chambered Nautilus" follow exactly this progression from the specific to the general, but the generalization in these poems is, in a sense, divided from the

*John Ciardi*  
*How Does a Poem Mean?*

specific description or narration, and even seems additional to the specific action rather than intrinsically part of it. It is this sense of division that is signified when one speaks of “a tacked-on moral.” Frost, however, is painstakingly careful to avoid the tacked-on moral. Everything in the poem pretends, on one level, to be part of the incident narrated. Yet one cannot miss the feeling that by the end of the poem, Frost has referred to something much more far-reaching than stopping by woods or than driving home to go to bed. There can be little doubt, in fact, that part of Frost’s own pleasure in this poem was in making the larger intent grow out of the poem rather than in tacking it on. It is in the poem’s own performance of itself that the larger meaning is made to emerge from the specific incident. A careful look at that performance will teach a great deal about the nature of poetry.

The poem begins with a situation. A man—knowing Robert Frost, we know it is a Vermont or New Hampshire man—is on his way somewhere at nightfall. It is snowing and as he passes a patch of woods he stops to watch the easy down-drift of the snow into the dark woods. We are told two other things: first that the man is familiar with these parts (he knows who owns these woods and where he lives) and second that no one sees him stop. More could be read into this opening (for example: why doesn’t he say what errand he is on? Why does he say he knows whose woods these are? What is the significance of watching another man’s woods in this way?) Such questions can be multiplied almost endlessly without losing the real point, but for present purposes let us assume that we have identified scene one of the poem’s performance without raising these questions.

Note that the scene is set in the simplest possible terms. We have no trouble sensing that the man stopped because the scene moved him, but he neither tells us that it is beautiful nor that it moved him. A student writer, always ready to overdo, might have said that he was moved to stop and “to fill his soul with the slow steady stately sinking of that crystalline loveliness into the glimmerless profundities of the hushed primeval wood.” Frost prefers to avoid such a spate of words, and to speak the incident in the simplest terms.

His choice illustrates two basic principles of writing of which every sensitive reader should be aware. Frost stated the first principle himself in “The Mowing”; when he wrote “Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak.” Understatement is one of the principal sources of power in English poetry.

The second principle here illustrated is to let the action speak for itself. A good novelist who wishes us to know a character does not tell us that character is good or bad and leave it at that. Rather, he introduces the character, shows him in action, and lets his actions speak for him. This

*John Ciardi*

*How Does a Poem Mean?*

---

process is spoken of as characterization. in action. One of the skills of a good poet is to enact his experiences rather than to talk about having had them. “*Show it, don’t tell it,*” he says. “*Make it happen, don’t talk about its happening.*”

One part of this poem’s performance, in fact, is to act out (and thereby to make us act out—i.e., feel out—i.e., identify with) just why the speaker did stop. The man is the principal actor of this little “drama of why” and in scene one he is the only character. In scene two (starting with the beginning of stanza two), however, a “foil” is introduced. In drama, a “foil” is a character who “plays against” a more important character; by presenting a different point of view or an opposed set of motives, the foil moves the more important character to react in ways that might not have found expression without such opposition. The more important character is thus more fully revealed, to the reader and to himself. The foil here is the horse.

The horse forces the first question in the drama of why. Why did the man stop? Until he comes to realize that his “little horse must think it queer” to stop this way, he has not asked himself why he stopped; he simply did. But he senses that the horse is confused by the stop. He imagines how the horse must feel about it—what is there to stop for out here in the cold, away from bin and stall and all that any self-respecting horse would value on such a night?

In imagining the horse’s question, the man is, of course, led to examine his own reasons. In stanza two this question arises only as a feeling within the man. In stanza three, however, the horse acts definitely. He gives his harness bells a shake. “What’s wrong,” he seems to say, “what are we doing here?”

By now, obviously, the horse, without losing its identity as a horse has also become a symbol. A symbol is something that stands for something else. That something else may, perhaps, be taken as the “order of life that does not understand why a man stops in the wintry middle of nowhere to watch snow come down. (Could the dark and the snowfall symbolize a death wish? that hunger for the last rest that man may feel, but not a beast?) So there is the man, there is that other order of life, and there is the third presence—the movement of the inanimate wind and snow (the all-engulfing?) across both their lives—with the difference that the man knows the second darkness of the dark while the horse does not.

The man has no ready answer to this combination of forces. They exist and he feels them—all three of them, himself included. We sense that he would like to remain here longer to ponder these forces, perhaps to yield to their total. But a fourth force prompts him. That fourth force can be given many names. It is almost certainly better, in fact, to give it many names than

*John Ciardi*  
*How Does a Poem Mean?*

attempt to limit it to one. Social obligation, responsibility, personal commitment, duty, or just the realization that a man cannot indulge a mood forever—all of these things and more. He has a long way to go and it is time to be getting there (so there's something to be said for the horse, too). We find the man's inner conflict dramatized to this point by the end of scene two (which coincides with the end of stanza three).

Then and only then—his feelings dramatized in the cross tug of motives he has given form to—does the poet, a little sadly, venture on the comment of his final scene. “The woods are lovely, dark and deep.” The very sound of the syllables lingers over the thought. But there is something to do yet before he can yield to the lovely dark-and-deep. “Not yet,” he seems to say, “not yet.” He has a long way to go—miles to go before he can sleep. Yes, miles to go. He repeats the line and the performance ends.

But why the repetition? The first time Frost writes “And miles to go before I sleep” there can be little doubt that he means, “I have a long way to go yet before I can get to bed tonight.” The second time he says it, however, “miles to go” and “sleep” are suddenly transformed into symbols. What is the “something else” these symbols stand for? Hundreds of people have asked Mr. Frost that question in one form or another, and Mr. Frost has always turned the question away with a joke. He has turned it away primarily because he cannot answer it. He could answer some part of it. But some part is not enough.

For a symbol is like a rock dropped into a pool: it sends out ripples in all directions, and the ripples are in motion. Who can say where the last ripple disappears? One may have a sense that he at least knows approximately the center point of all those ripples, the point at which the stone struck the water. Yet even then he has trouble marking it precisely. How does one make a mark on water? Oh, very well—the center point of “miles to go” is probably approximately in the neighborhood of being close to meaning, perhaps, “the road of life.” And “before I sleep” is maybe that close to meaning “before I take my final rest.” (That rest-in-darkness that seemed so temptingly “lovely dark-and-deep” for the moment of the mood.) But the ripples continue to move and the light to change on the water and the longer one watches the more changes he sees. And such shifting-and-being-at-the-same-instant is of the very sparkle and life of poetry. Of poetry and of life itself. For the poem is a dynamic and living thing. One experiences it as one experiences life—as everybody but Mr. Gradgrind experiences life. One is never done with it: every time he looks he sees something new and it changes even as he watches. And that very sense of continuity in fluidity is one of the kinds of knowledge, one of the ways of knowing, that only the arts can teach, poetry foremost among them.

*John Ciardi*

*How Does a Poem Mean?*

---

Frost himself certainly did not ask what the lines “meant.” They came to him and he received them; he “felt right,” about them. And what he “felt right about” may perhaps be called their “meaning,” but it is far more to the point to describe it as “their long possibility of meaning.” For the poem is not a statement but a performance of forces, not an essay on life but a reenactment, and just as men must search their lives over and over again for the meaning of their deepest experiences, so the performance of a true poem is endless in being not a meaning but an act of existence.

Now look at the poem in another way. Did Frost know what he was going to do when he began? Considering the poem simply as a piece of juggling, one cannot fail to respond to the magnificent turn at the end where, with one flip, seven of the simplest words in the language suddenly dazzle full of never-ending waves of thought and feeling; or more precisely—of felt-thought. Certainly an equivalent stunt by a juggler—could there be such an equivalent—would bring the house down. Was it to cap his performance with that grand stunt that Frost wrote the poem?

Far from it: the fact that must not be overlooked is that Frost did not know he was going to write those lines until he wrote them. Then a second fact must be registered: he wrote them because, for the fun of it, he had got himself into trouble.

Let us start by saying that Frost began by playing a game with himself. The most usual way of writing a four line stanza with four feet to the line is to rhyme the third line with the first, and the fourth line with the second. Even that much rhyme is so difficult that many poets and almost all the anonymous ballad makers do not bother to rhyme the first and third lines at all, settling for two rhymes in four lines. For the fact is that English is a rhyme-poor language. In Italian and in French, for example, so many words end with the same sounds that rhyming is relatively easy. English, being a more agglomerate language, has far more final sounds, hence fewer of them rhyme. When an Italian poet writes a line ending with “vita” (life) he has literally hundreds of possible rhyme words available. When an English poet writes “fe” at the end of a line, he can summon “strife, wife, knife, fife, rife” and then he is in trouble. Now “life-strife,” and “life-rife” and “life-wife” seem to offer a combination of ideas that are possibly related by more than rhyme. Inevitably, therefore, the poets have had to work, re-work, and over-work those combinations until the sparkle has gone out of them. Readers are normally tired of these combinations. When one encounters “life-strife” he is certainly entitled to suspect that the poet did not really want to say strife” —that if there had been in English such a word as, say, “hife” meaning “infinite peace and harmony,” he would gladly have used that word instead of “strife.”

*John Ciardi*  
*How Does a Poem Mean?*

So one feels that the writing is haphazard: that the rhyme is making the poet say things he doesn't really feel, and which, therefore, the reader does not feel. One likes to see the rhymes fall into place, but he must end up with the belief that it is the poet who is deciding what is said and not the rhyme scheme.

So rhyme is a kind of game and an especially difficult one in English. As in every game, the fun of rhyme is to set one's difficulties high and then to meet them skillfully. As Frost himself once defined freedom, it consists of "moving easy in harness."

In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" Frost took a long chance. He decided to rhyme not two lines, but three in each stanza. Not even Frost could have sustained that much rhyme in a long poem (as Dante, for example, with the advantage of writing in Italian sustained triple rhyme for thousands of lines in *The Divine Comedy*). He would have known instantly, therefore, when he took that first chance, that he was going to write a short poem. He would have had that much foretaste of it. So the first stanza emerged rhymed a a b a. And with the certain sense that this was to be a short poem, Frost decided to take a chance and redouble: in English three rhymes in four lines is enough—there is no need to rhyme the fourth line. For the fun of it, however, Frost set himself to pick up that loose rhyme and weave it into the pattern—thereby accepting the all but impossible burden of quadruple rhyme.

The miracle is that it worked. Despite that enormous freight of rhyme, the poem not only came out as a neat pattern, but managed to do so with no sense of strain. It is this unstrained fulfillment of one's difficulties Frost means by "moving easy in harness." Despite all his self-imposed restrictions the poem seems to go effortlessly. Every word falls into place as naturally as if there were no rhyme restricting the choice.

That ease is part of the success of the performance. One watches the skill-man juggle two balls, then three, then four—and every addition makes the trick more wonderful, but unless he makes the hard trick seem as easy as the easy one, then all is lost.

The real point, however, is not only that Frost took on a hard rhyme-trick and made it look easy. It is rather as if a juggler, carried away, had tossed up one more ball than he could really handle—and then amazed himself by actually handling it. So with the real triumph of this poem. Frost could not have known what a stunning effect his repetition of the last line was going to produce. He could not even have known he was going to repeat the line. He simply found himself up against a difficulty he probably had not foreseen: in picking up the rhyme from the third line of stanza one and carrying it over into stanza two, he had created an endless chain-link form. Each

*John Ciardi*

*How Does a Poem Mean?*

---

stanza left a hook sticking out for the next stanza to catch. So by stanza four, feeling the poem rounding to its end, Frost had to do, something about his third-line rhyme.

He might have tucked it back in a third line rhyming with “know/ though/snow” of stanza one. That would have worked out to the mathematical symmetry of using each rhyme four times. But though such a device might be defensible in theory, a rhyme repeated after eleven lines is so far from its original rhyme sound that its feeling as rhyme must certainly be lost, and what good is theory if the reader is not moved by the writing?

It must have been in some such quandary that the final repetition suggested itself—a suggestion born of the very difficulty of what the poet had set out to do. So the point beyond mere ease in handling a hard thing: that the very difficulty of the restrictions the poet imposed upon himself offered the opportunity to do better than he had imagined. What—aside from having that happen to oneself—could be more self-delighting than to participate in its happening by one’s reader-identification with the poem?

You will observe one further point: that the human-insight of the poem, and the technicalities of the poetic devices are inseparable. Each feeds the other. This interplay is the poem’s meaning, a matter, not of WHAT IT MEANS (nobody can say entirely what a good poem means) but HOW IT MEANS—a process one can come much closer to discussing.”

Is it too frivolous to have compared this process to the act of juggling? Consider the following parable based on a short story by Anatole France, “The Juggler of Notre Dame.”

The juggler wandered France from fair to fair and whenever he saw a chance to earn a few pennies he unrolled his rug, lay on his back, and juggled his paraphernalia with his hands and feet. It was all he knew how to do, he did it well, and he was happy in the doing.

As he grew older, however, misfortunes crowded him. One winter’s day, ill and tired, he took refuge in a monastery and by the time he had recovered he decided to remain there. It was a pleasant monastery dedicated to the Virgin and each of the monks and brothers set himself a special task in her honor. One illuminated manuscripts to offer her, another decorated her altar, another raised flowers. Only the juggler had no productive art, only he produced nothing that could be set in place before her and stay tangibly in place. (This rendering takes a few liberties with the original for the sake of making a point.)

*John Ciardi*  
*How Does a Poem Mean?*

Finally, in despair, the juggler took to stealing into the chapel when no one else was about. There he would unroll his rug and juggle before the Virgin's statue. It was all he had to offer, the one thing he could do well.

One day a passing brother discovered the juggler at work before the statue and summoned the other monks in horror to witness the profanation of the chapel. Soon all the window-sills were lined with the heads of outraged monks come to verify the horrible report. They were just about to rush in and put an end to the sacrilege, when before their eyes the Virgin descended smiling from her pedestal and wiped the sweat from the juggler's brow. The offering was acceptable.

A note to residual Gradgrinds: This parable is not a religious excursion. It is an allegory. An allegory is a story in which each character and element is more important as a symbol (as something else) than as its presumably-literal self. Then all these symbols-put-together acquire further meanings by their interaction upon one another—what does the Virgin stand for in poetic terms? What do the monks stand for? The juggler? How does juggling relate to Frost's definition of freedom (in poetry)? Why should juggling produce the miracle? How does the parable mean what it means?

After English Class

I used to like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."  
I liked the coming darkness,  
The jingle of harness bells, breaking—and adding to—the  
stillness,  
The gentle drift of snow . . .

But today, the teacher told us what everything stood for.  
The woods, the horse, the miles to go, the sleep—  
They all have "hidden meanings."

It's grown so complicated now that,  
Next time I drive by,  
I don't think I'll bother to stop.

*John Ciardi*  
*How Does a Poem Mean?*