

Chapter eight

Allusion

The famous English diplomat and letter writer Lord Chesterfield was once invited to a great dinner given by the Spanish ambassador. At the conclusion of the meal the host rose and proposed a toast to his master, the king of Spain, whom he compared to the sun. The French ambassador followed with a health to the king of France, whom he likened to the moon. It was then Lord Chesterfield's turn. "Your excellencies have taken from me," he said, "all the greatest luminaries of heaven, and the stars are too small for me to make a comparison of my royal master; I therefore beg leave to give your excellencies—Joshua!"*

For a reader familiar with the Bible—that is, for one who recognizes the Biblical allusion—Lord Chesterfield's story will come as a stunning revelation of his wit. For an **allusion**—a reference to something in history or previous literature—is, like a richly connotative word or a symbol, a means of suggesting far more than it says. The one word "Joshua," in the context of Chesterfield's toast, calls up in the reader's mind the whole Biblical story of how the Israelite captain stopped the sun and the moon in order that the Israelites might finish a battle and conquer their enemies before nightfall.† The force of the toast lies in its extreme economy; it says so much in so little, and it exercises the mind of the reader to make the connection for himself.

*Samuel Shellabarger, *Lord Chesterfield and His World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), p. 132.

†Joshua 10:12–14.

The effect of Chesterfield's allusion is chiefly humorous or witty, but allusions may also have a powerful emotional effect. The essayist William Hazlitt writes of addressing a fashionable audience about the lexicographer Samuel Johnson. Speaking of Johnson's great heart and of his charity to the unfortunate, Hazlitt recounted how, finding a drunken prostitute lying in Fleet Street late at night, Johnson carried her on his broad back to the address she managed to give him. The audience, unable to face the picture of the famous dictionary-maker doing such a thing, broke out in titters and expostulations. Whereupon Hazlitt simply said: "I remind you, ladies and gentlemen, of the parable of the Good Samaritan." The audience was promptly silenced.*

Allusions are a means of reinforcing the emotion or the ideas of one's own work with the emotion or ideas of another work or occasion. Because they are capable of saying so much in so little, they are extremely useful to the poet.

84. "OUT, OUT—"

The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
 And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
 Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
 And from there those that lifted eyes could count
 Five mountain ranges one behind the other 5
 Under the sunset far into Vermont.
 And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
 As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
 And nothing happened: day was all but done.
 Call it a day, I wish they might have said 10
 To please the boy by giving him the half hour
 That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
 His sister stood beside them in her apron
 To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,
 As if to prove saws knew what supper meant, 15
 Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap—
 He must have given the hand. However it was,
 Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
 The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,
 As he swung toward them holding up the hand 20
 Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
 The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
 Since he was old enough to know, big boy

* Jacques Barzun, *Teacher in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1945), p. 160.

Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
 He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off—
 The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!" 25
 So. But the hand was gone already.
 The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
 He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
 And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
 No one believed. They listened at his heart. 30
 Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
 No more to build on there. And they, since they
 Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

Robert Frost (1874–1963)

QUESTIONS

1. How does this poem differ from a newspaper account that might have dealt with the same incident?
2. To whom does "they" (33) refer? The boy's family? The doctor and medical attendants? Casual onlookers? Need we assume that all these people— whoever they are—turned immediately "to their affairs"? Does the ending of this poem seem to you callous or merely realistic? Would a more tearful and sentimental ending have made the poem better or worse?
3. What figure of speech is used in lines 21–22?

Allusions vary widely in the burden put on them by the poet to convey his meaning. Lord Chesterfield risked his whole meaning on his hearers' recognizing his allusion. Robert Frost in "Out, Out—" makes his meaning entirely clear even for the reader who does not recognize the allusion contained in his title. His theme is the uncertainty and unpredictability of life, which may be accidentally ended at any moment, and the tragic waste of human potentiality which takes place when such premature deaths occur. A boy who is already "doing a man's work" and gives every promise of having a useful life ahead of him is suddenly wiped out. There seems no rational explanation for either the accident or the death. The only comment to be made is, "No more to build on there."

Frost's title, however, is an allusion to one of the most famous passages in all English literature, and it offers a good illustration of how a poet may use allusion not only to reinforce emotion but also to help define his theme. The passage is that in *Macbeth* in which Macbeth has just been informed of his wife's death. A good many readers will recall the key phrase, "Out, out, brief candle!" with its underscoring of the

87. ON HIS BLINDNESS

When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait."

John Milton (1608-1674)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *spent* (1), *fondly* (8), *prevent* (8), *post* (13).
2. What two meanings has "talent" (3)? What is Milton's "one talent"?
3. The poem is unified and expanded in its dimensions by a Biblical allusion that Milton's original readers would have recognized immediately. What is it? If you do not know, look up Matthew 25:14-30. In what ways is the situation in the poem similar to that in the parable? In what ways is it different?
4. What is the point of the poem?

88. HERO AND LEANDER

Both robbed of air, we both lie in one ground,
Both whom one fire had burnt, one water drowned.

John Donne (1572-1631)

QUESTIONS

1. After looking up the story of Hero and Leander (if necessary), explain each of the four parts into which this epigram is divided by its punctuation. Which parts are literal? Which are metaphorical?
2. The subject of the poem is taken from Greek legend; its structure is based on Greek science. Explain.

89. LAST STAND

When the alarm came
He saddled up his fence,
Took the bit in his teeth
And mounted.
Closing his eyes
He put his ear to the ground
And waited, trembling, for the sound
Of the approaching windmills.

Keith Jennison (b. 1911)

QUESTIONS

1. This poem is full of trite phrases, either used entire or alluded to. Identify them. Do they add up to a trite poem? Explain.
2. Is the image created by these trite metaphors visually consistent? Poetically valid? Explain.
3. Behind two of the trite phrases are respectively a historical allusion and a literary allusion. How does the subject of the poem resemble and how does it differ from the subject of the literary allusion? Are these allusions used directly or ironically?

90. MINIVER CHEEVY

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
He wept that he was ever born,
And he had reasons.

Miniver loved the days of old 5
When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
Would set him dancing.

Miniver sighed for what was not, 10
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,
And Priam's neighbors.

Miniver mourned the ripe renown 15
That made so many a name so fragrant;
He mourned Romance, now on the town,
And Art, a vagrant.

Miniver loved the Medici,
Albeit he had never seen one;
He would have sinned incessantly
Could he have been one.

20

Miniver cursed the commonplace
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;
He missed the medieval grace
Of iron clothing.

Miniver scorned the gold he sought,
But sore annoyed was he without it;
Miniver thought, and thought, and thought,
And thought about it.

25

Miniver Cheevy, born too late,
Scratched his head and kept on thinking;
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
And kept on drinking.

30

Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *khaki* (22). The phrase “on the town” (15) means “on charity” or “down and out.”
2. Identify Thebes, Camelot (11), Priam (12), and the Medici (17). What names and what sort of life does each call up? What does Miniver’s love of these names tell about him?
3. Discuss the phrase “child of scorn” (1). What does it mean? In how many ways is it applicable to Miniver?
4. What is Miniver’s attitude toward material wealth?
5. Identify a Biblical allusion *and* an allusion to Greek mythology in the phrase “rested from his labors” (10). What is the effect of comparing Miniver to the Creator (Genesis 2:2)? To Hercules? Point out other examples of irony in the poem, and discuss their importance.
6. Can we call this a poem about a man whose “fate” was to be “born too late”? Explain your answer.

91. LEDA AND THE SWAN

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
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 10
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
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?

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

QUESTIONS

1. What is the connection between Leda and “the broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead”? If you do not know, look up the myth of Leda, and, if necessary, the story of Agamemnon.
2. What is the significance of the question asked in the last two lines?

92. JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

“A cold coming we had of it,
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

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 trees on the low sky,
 And an old white horse 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,
 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.

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)

QUESTIONS

1. The Biblical account of the journey of the Magi, or wise men, to Bethlehem is given in Matthew 2:1–12 and has since been elaborated by numerous legendary accretions. It has been made familiar through countless pageants and Christmas cards. How does this account differ from the familiar one? Compare it with the Biblical account. What has been added? What has been left out? What is the poet doing? (Lines 1–5 are in quotation marks because they are taken, with very slight modification, from a Christmas sermon [1622] by the Anglican bishop Lancelot Andrewes.)
2. Who is the speaker? Where and when is he speaking? What is the “old dispensation” (41) to which he refers, and why are the people “alien” (42)? Why does he speak of the “Birth” as being “like Death” (39)? Of whose “Birth” and “Death” is he speaking? How does his life differ from the life he lived before his journey? What does he mean by saying that he would be “glad of another death”(43)?
3. This poem was written while the poet was undergoing religious conversion. (Eliot published it in 1927, the year he was confirmed in the Anglican Church.) Could the poem be considered a parable of the conversion experi-

- ence? If so, how does this account differ from popular conceptions of this experience?
4. How do the images in the second section differ from those of the first? Do any of them suggest connections with the life of Christ?

93. ABRAHAM TO KILL HIM

Abraham to kill him
 Was distinctly told.
 Isaac was an urchin,
 Abraham was old.

Not a hesitation— 5
 Abraham complied.
 Flattered by obeisance,
 Tyranny demurred.

Isaac, to his children 10
 Lived to tell the tale.
 Moral: with a mastiff
 Manners may prevail.

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

QUESTIONS

1. Vocabulary: *obeisance* (7), *demurred* (8).
2. To whom or to what do “Tyranny” (8) and “mastiff” (11) refer? What figure of speech is each?
3. Who are Abraham and Isaac? What, in the context of the original story, does “demurred” mean? If you cannot answer these questions, read Genesis 22:1–18.
4. What is the reaction of the poet toward this Bible story?

94. BELSHAZZAR HAD A LETTER

Belshazzar had a letter.
 He never had but one.
 Belshazzar’s correspondent
 Concluded and begun
 In that immortal copy
 The conscience of us all
 Can read without its glasses
 On revelation’s wall.

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

QUESTIONS

1. Who was Belshazzar? Who was his correspondent? What was the nature of his letter, and where did it appear? If you need help, read Daniel 5.
2. What does the poem say about conscience and revelation?
3. Compare or contrast the tone of this poem with that of the preceding one.

95. IN THE GARDEN

In the garden there strayed
A beautiful maid
As fair as the flowers of the morn;
The first hour of her life
She was made a man's wife,
And was buried before she was born.

Anonymous

QUESTION

Resolve the paradox by identifying the allusion.

EXERCISE

An allusion may be offered as a comparison or parallel, or it may be used as an ironic contrast. In the following examples, is the poet using allusion positively, to extend and enrich the theme, or ironically, to undercut the speaker's ideas?

1. Evans, "When in Rome," No. 14 (allusion to the maxim, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do").
2. Larkin, "A Study of Reading Habits," No. 18 (allusions to the types of cheap fiction read by the speaker).
3. Hardy, "Channel Firing," No. 212 (lines 35–36, allusions identified in the footnote).
4. Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," No. 219 (line 66, allusion to the Book of Ruth).
5. Ammons, "Providence," No. 190 (allusion to Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay," No. 131).