I, I, I Study Guide

I, I, I by Hayden Carruth

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

In 1996, American poet Hayden Carruth published his poem “I, I, I” in his collection, *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1995*. At that time, Carruth was already an established and popular poet who had published many collections of poetry since 1959. While he is viewed as a proponent of twentieth-century modernism, he defies categorization and, indeed, has consciously resisted it. In his poetry, Carruth moves easily between free verse and verse written in rhyme and meter.

Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1996 was generally well received by critics and won a National Book Award in poetry for the poet in the year 1996. “I, I, I” is written in non-rhyming free verse. Thematically, the poem is a poetic version of the *bildungsroman* (a novel dealing with the development or coming-of-age of a young protagonist). It raises and, to some extent answers, questions about self-identity through a memorable boyhood experience of the speaker. The poet’s treatment of the experience is highly personal but shows the influence of existentialism and Eastern mysticism. The poem appears to be autobiographical, in that it is written in the first person and the speaker’s physical appearance matches that of Carruth himself.

Author Biography

Hayden Carruth was born on August 3, 1921, in Waterbury, Connecticut, to Gorton Veeder Carruth, a newspaper editor, and Margery Barrow Carruth. He received a B.A. in journalism from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1943 and an M.A. in English from the University of Chicago in 1947. During World War II, Carruth served for two years in the United States Army Air Corps. From 1949 to 1950, he was the editor of *Poetry* magazine. He was associate editor at the University of Chicago Press from 1950 to 1951, and project administrator for Intercultural Publications, the publishing project of the Ford Foundation, from 1952 to 1953.

In 1953, Carruth suffered an emotional breakdown and was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in White Plains, New York. His doctors encouraged him to write as a means of therapy, and he kept journals and wrote poetry.

He left the hospital in 1955, and for the next five years, Carruth lived a life apart from the mainstream of society in his parents' house in Pleasantville, New York. He subsequently lived for two years in Norfolk, Connecticut. From 1962 on for a period of eighteen years, he and his third wife, Rose Marie Dorn, lived in seclusion in the woods of northern Vermont, mixing with the local farmhands and writing about the rural poor. This was not an ideologically motivated move; Carruth's chronic psychiatric disorders had made life in a city and work in an office or classroom intolerable.

In 1970, Carruth was appointed advisory editor for *Hudson Review*, a position he held for twenty-five years. From 1977 to 1981, he was the poetry editor of *Harper's* magazine. In 1979, Carruth accepted a professorship at Syracuse University, where he worked until his retirement in 1991.

Carruth's failed suicide attempt in 1988 paradoxically heralded a positive phase in his life. He notes in his essay "Suicide" (cited by Eric Murphy Selinger in his article on Carruth, "The Importance of a Small Floy Floy") that since childhood, he had been struck by a sense of "the purposelessness of it all, of existence as such." Even the most beautiful or compelling things, he writes, "were pointless." In contrast, after his suicide attempt, he reflected, "I discovered in suicide a way to unify my sense of self, the sense which had formerly been so refracted and broken up."

Politically, Carruth described himself as an anarchist. He publicly opposed the Vietnam War, and, in 1998, refused an invitation from President Bill and Hillary Clinton to attend a celebration at the White House, on the grounds that the government only cared about the interests of those for whom poets and the poor were irrelevant. In 2003, galvanized by President George W. Bush's announcement of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he posted a poem of protest on the website of Poets Against War (http://www.poetsagainstwar.com/chapbook.asp#Carruth).

Carruth published many books, chiefly of poetry but also a novel, four books of criticism, and two anthologies. His subject matter varies widely but includes man's place in the

universe and in nature, rural people and their lives and work, human relationships, and jazz music, which many critics believe influenced his poetry. One of his most admired poetry collections is *Brothers, I Loved You All* (1978). The book in which “I, I, I” appears, *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1995* (1996), won the National Book Award for Poetry for Carruth in 1996. Later works are *Selected Essays & Reviews* (1995); *Reluctantly: Autobiographical Essays* (1998); *Doctor Jazz: Poems 1996–2000* (2001); and *Collected Shorter Poems 1946–1991* (2001). A poetry anthology edited by Carruth, *The Voice That Is Great within Us* (1970), was in the early 2000s still considered one of the finest collections of contemporary American poetry.

The many prizes, grants, and honors awarded to Carruth include the University of Chicago’s Harriet Monroe Award (1960), Guggenheim Fellowships (1965, 1979), National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships (1968, 1974), the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize for *Brothers, I Loved You All*, the Shelley Prize of the Poetry Society of America (1979), and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize (1990). In 1988, he was named a senior fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Carruth’s first three marriages ended in divorce. He has a daughter by his first wife, Sara Anderson, and a son by his third, Rose Marie Dorn. In 1989, Carruth married the poet Joe-Anne McLaughlin. As of 2006, they lived in Munnsville, New York.

Plot Summary

Lines 1–5

In “I, I, I,” the speaker tells of an incident that happened in his boyhood. If it is assumed that Carruth is describing his own experience, this would have taken place in the 1920s. The speaker begins by describing his understanding of the nature of his self from the point of view of mature adulthood. The self is divided into two aspects: the self and the observing self; “The self that acts and the self that watches.” He now knows that this realization, this self-awareness, marks the point where the mind of an individual or of a species begins.

Lines 5–9

The speaker shifts back in time to his boyhood. He struggles to understand the nature of his self. He can grasp the idea of the first self that watches, but the fact that he (“I”) can know this watching self means that there must be another “I” who is the knower, a self beyond the first watching self. If he can know this other watching self, then there must be yet another self, watching that watching self, and so on to infinity. As the speaker asks, remembering the bewilderment of his boyhood, “where does it end?”

Lines 10–13

The speaker remembers an important incident in his childhood that related to his questions regarding the self. His mother sends him to the barbershop to get his hair cut. She tells him to inform the barber that he needs it to be “cut for a part,” with the hair parted on one side. It is the first time that he has been to the barber’s for a haircut, as prior to this, his mother has always cut his hair in a “dutch boy” style—the kind of haircut that results from placing a bowl on a child’s head and cutting around it.

Lines 13–18

The boy’s mother sends him to the barbershop on his own because the shop has a pool table in the back. In the small town where they lived, this was the men’s club, and women never ventured there. He wonders whether it was his first excursion into the world on his own and concludes that it may have been.

Lines 18–28

The boy sits in the barber’s big chair. In front of him on the wall is a huge mirror, and behind him on another wall is another mirror. He looks at his image in the mirror in front of him. His image is reflected by the mirror behind him, so that he sees a reflection of

his “small strange blond head” repeated in ever diminishing images, one behind another. He strains to see the farthest one, but cannot. He sits rigidly in silence.

Lines 28–34

The barber finishes cutting the boy’s hair. He blows the pieces of hair from the boy’s neck and removes the sheet that he has put around his shoulders. The boy climbs down from the chair. He runs from “that cave of mirrors,” the barbershop, to his home a mile and a half away. He goes to his room under the eaves of his house, and it seems to him to be another cave. There is one difference, however: this cave has no mirrors. The boy realizes that he no longer needs mirrors. He has reached an understanding that makes them redundant.

Themes

The Nature of the Self

"I, I, I" explores the nature of the self, a topic that the speaker has come to understand better as an adult than he did as a child. The poem presents the concept that there are two selves: one that acts and another that watches or witnesses the action. Carruth is describing the moment of individuation, when the self becomes conscious of the self and the concept of *I* is born: "The starting point, the place where the mind begins." Although it is a moment in time, it is also a state of being, in that it is possible to maintain a simultaneous awareness of the self that acts and the self that watches in everyday activity. Indeed, the boy in the poem has this experience and struggles to understand it; his adult self maintains this experience and has understood it, thanks to the episode in the barbershop.

The concept behind Carruth's poem is that of the dual nature of the self. This concept suggests that one part of the self, the small individual self, is engaged in action in the material world. The other part, the large self, which is eternal in its nature, does not act, but silently witnesses the small self's actions. It remains uninvolved and serene. This concept is common in Eastern mystical traditions. It is found in ancient Indian texts, Buddhist thought, and the writings of some Christian theologians, including St. Augustine and Meister Eckhart.

As a boy, the speaker finds the implications of this idea difficult to grasp. He finally reaches understanding through the incident in the barbershop, which graphically illustrates and makes concrete what previously was only an abstract idea. He looks in the mirror and sees an infinite number of images of himself receding into the "shadows," an image that connotes death. Afterwards, he no longer needs the mirrors that showed him his small self, because he knows the nature and destination of this small self: death.

Coming of Age

There are elements of the boy's experience at the barbershop that are reminiscent of a coming of age or moment of maturation such as might be described in a *bildungsroman*. In particular, some elements of the experience connote an initiation ceremony into manhood such as are performed in certain cultures, including some Native American and African societies. Common aspects of these traditional ceremonies are that the boy leaves his mother to symbolize his new independence and spends some time alone. The speaker in "I, I, I" also leaves his mother behind, since the place where he is going (the barbershop) is a male domain for two reasons: first, a barber is a hairdresser for men, and second, the shop has a pool table at the back, and playing pool is a traditionally male pastime. The ceremonial nature of the occasion is foreshadowed by

the momentous phrase, reminiscent of an adventure story, “no woman / Would venture there.”

The sense of initiation is reinforced by the fact that this is his first trip to the barber, and it is possibly his first lone excursion into the world. In addition, the barbershop is described as a “cave,” and his own room, on his return from the barber, has become “another cave.” Caves, or huts from which all light is blocked out, are traditional sacred locations for initiation ceremonies. The idea is that in the darkness and silence of the cave, distractions that pull the senses outward are minimized, so that the attention can be turned within. The cave in such ceremonies has a dual symbolic aspect: it is both a tomb in which the old self is laid to rest and a second womb from which the initiate is born into a new phase of life. Even the cutting of hair is an important ritual in many cultures. It symbolizes a purification of the old life and a new beginning, as, for example, in some Christian orders of monks and nuns, where the hair is cut when a novice takes vows to enter the order.

All initiation ceremonies aim to ensure that the initiate returns to his home changed in some way: he is wiser, more independent, more of an adult. The boy in Carruth’s poem is no exception. He returns home no longer needing mirrors in which to see the reflection of his small self, since he has gained some knowledge of who he is.

Style

Imagery

“I, I, I” is filled with imagery of contrasting size. The boy speaker and his mother live in a “Small” town; when he gets to the barbershop, the boy sits in a “big” chair; the walls in front of him and behind him hold “huge” mirrors; his head is “small”; the image of his head in the mirror is repeated “In ever diminishing images”; the barber is “fat” and, therefore, bigger than he is; after his haircut, he “Climbed down” from the chair. The overall effect is to emphasize the boy’s smallness in a big world. Infinity is bigness drawn out to the ultimate extent, and the image of the small boy peering into the unfathomable distance is a graphic representation of the theme of the poem: the small self being faced with the concept of infinity. The contrast gives an impression of the insignificance and unreality of the small self, and this is reinforced by the strangeness of the boy’s face to himself and the repetition of the images of his head. The small self becomes depersonalized, an object which is almost disowned. This is in line with Eastern traditions such as Hindu and Buddhist thought, which view the small self as fundamentally unreal and teach that it is part of the *maya*, or illusion, of the material world. In these traditions, this concept is not thought of as an abstract or theoretical idea, but as the subjective experience of many people, regardless of culture, religion, or belief.

The barber contrasts with the boy in other ways than size. To the barber, with his quick, snipping movements and “brusque breath,” the boy’s visit means only another haircut. The barber is in a different world from the boy: he inhabits the everyday world in which time and space are the governing realities and in which speed and efficiency matter. The boy, on the other hand, experiences a moment outside time and space and beyond his familiar small world. Sitting rigid and wordless, he witnesses the dissolution of the ego, the small self that inhabits the world of time and space. He finds himself face to face with death.

The Run-on Line

In poetry, a run-on line is one in which the end of the line does not correspond with a completed unit of meaning. “I, I, I” contains many run-on lines, with commas or periods often occurring within the lines to mark a pause, known as a caesura. The caesura can be used to emphasize what follows or to add the power of silence to what has gone before it. There is a particularly remarkable series of caesuras in a significant part of the poem. The line “To see the farthest one, diminutive in” contains a comma to mark a pause, as the boy strains his eyes to see the most distant image of his head in the mirror. The next line intensifies the boy’s effort and failure to bring infinity within the grasp of his senses: “The shadows. I could not. I sat rigid / And said no word.” The comma of the previous line has become three periods in just one and a half lines. The pauses are longer and weightier as the power of thought, words, and ideas fails in the

presence of infinity. The boy's awed silence is not merely described, but enacted by means of the insistent caesuras.

Repetition

Carruth repeats certain words in the poem to reinforce the meaning. Lines 2 through 8 has many recurrences of variants on the word *watch*, which serve to emphasize the progression to infinity of the concept of the watcher, the knowing and conscious self that is conscious of the small, acting self. Lines 7 through 9 repeat the word *another*, which has a similar effect, drawing attention to the endless repetition of the knowing self to infinity; the word recurs in line 24, as the boy sees the repeated series of images of himself. Lines 25 and 26 echo "farther . . . farther . . . / farthest" as he strains to see the most distant image. The repeated words also express the ever-onward march of the boy's busy and bewildered mind as he seeks to force it to contain the uncontainable. Significantly, these repetitions end with a series of caesuras (the comma in line 26 and the three periods in lines 27 and 28) as the seemingly unstoppable activity of his mind freezes into silence.

Free Verse

Though Carruth frequently writes poetry in rhyme and meter, he has written "I, I, I" in free verse, meaning that there are no rhymes and the meter is irregular. This contributes to the informality of the poem, which approximates everyday speech. The ordinariness of the presentation and setting contrasts with the somewhat momentous experience of the boy. Carruth thereby draws attention to the profound possibilities within the mundane events of people's lives and emphasizes the central role of the subjective experience in interpreting the world.

Historical Context

Carruth long had an interest in the philosophy of existentialism, and its influence on his work is discernible from the time of his 1964 publication of a book-length imaginary dialogue with the French author and philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960) entitled *After "The Stranger": Imaginary Dialogues with Camus*.

Existentialism is a philosophy that attempts to understand the fundamentals of the human condition and its relation to the world. It eschews externally located absolute values such as reason and religious doctrine and rejects the notion that life has an inherent meaning, instead emphasizing that each individual must evolve his or her own subjective values. As a result, subjective experience is seen as being of paramount importance. According to music critic Annie Holub in her review of "Nowhere Man: Considered to Tears (I Like Red Recordings)" for the *Rhythm & Views* section of the *Tucson Weekly*, Hayden Carruth defined existentialism as "the reestablishment of the individual in the face of Nothingness and absurdity." This is also an apt summary of the theme of "I, I, I." The "Nothingness and absurdity" lie in the boy's bewildered imagining of an endless series of watching selves, ending with the exasperated question, "and where does it end?" The "reestablishment of the individual" lies in the boy's attempt to make some sense of his experience in the barbershop.

The boy's sense of alienation is emphasized by his response to the sight of his own reflection, which seems both unfamiliar and foreign: "my own small strange blond head / With its oriental eyes." The "oriental eyes" both reflect a fact of Carruth's physical appearance and recall his interest in Eastern thought. For example, the Chinese poet Tu Fu (712–770) forms the subject of Carruth's poems "A Summer with Tu Fu" and "Peace on the Water," and "Rubaiyat" refers to the Persian poem, the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, attributed to the Persian mathematician Omar Khayyam (1048–1123). All these poems appear in *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1995*.

Insofar as it is possible to generalize about the many traditional philosophies of the East, it is safe to say that they excel in such self-reflection as is enacted in "I, I, I." They lay greater emphasis than is found in the Western philosophical traditions on the subjective experience of the self, and they offer frameworks that define the relationship of the individual self to the material universe and to the infinite, or divine.

Carruth's speaker's "oriental eyes" alert the reader to a philosophical framework that is not native to the small American town where he and his mother live but that has its home in the Eastern countries. This philosophical framework may seem incongruous in the mundane small-town setting of the barbershop, but that is part of the point of the poem. The alienated boy who finds his own image "strange" finds answers to his questions of identity in the kind of self-examination that is central to philosophies of distant Eastern countries. He does not have to move outside his own small world to find those answers, but this is because the philosophies of the East are based on subjective spiritual experience, which is universally available to everyone, even a boy sitting in a barbershop in a small town in the United States.

The boy receives an answer to his question, “where does it end?” in the barbershop. He finds that it (the watching self) does not end but stretches to infinity. Infinity cannot be grasped or seen by the senses, but lies “in / The shadows,” an image that suggests death. Whether this lends meaning to the boy’s life is not made explicit, but it is clear that he gains an understanding that makes him independent of the mirrors, and the small self that they symbolize.

Critical Overview

When *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1995* appeared in 1996, the critical reception of the collection was generally positive. Though no critic picked out “I, I, I” for particular comment, the poem was posted on various websites and is anthologized in *The Autumn House Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, edited by Sue Ellen Thompson (2005).

Eric Murphy Selinger concludes his essay on Carruth, “The Importance of a Small Floy Floy,” with a consideration of *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1995*, calling it a “first-rate new collection.” Selinger credits the collection with two qualities widely praised in Carruth’s poetry, spontaneity and emotional honesty, in his commendation of the poet’s “apparently off-the-cuff, heart-on-sleeve verses.” This comment could easily apply to “I, I, I.”

Ray Olson, reviewing the collection for *Booklist*, notes the influences on Carruth of the poets Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, concluding, “Contemporary American poetry doesn’t get any richer than this.” In her review of the collection for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Elizabeth Lund writes, “Hayden Carruth has never been afraid to wrestle with life’s hardest questions.” Lund notes that the poems in the collection are “straightforward and simple,” and, agreeing with Selinger, she remarks on their honesty. However, she adds, “the magic is missing,” and writes, “One would hope for more of the stunning music and imagery that occasionally allows the work to change the reader as well as challenge.”

The anonymous reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* calls the collection “bittersweet, sometimes celebratory, occasionally rueful,” adding that it is “generally moving” but “uneven.” The reviewer writes that Carruth’s poetry is “at its best when it mixes colloquial diction with an elegiac lyricism,” a comment which could apply to “I, I, I.” The reviewer adds that when the colloquial takes over, Carruth’s verse becomes “almost flat.” The reviewer concurs with other critics that the collection illustrates “the openness and honesty with which Carruth addresses the world” and notes “the mixed compassion and outrage with which he responds to it.”

The power of “I, I, I” is identified by Matthew Miller’s general comment in *Midwest Quarterly* on Carruth’s body of work that it is especially distinguished by its “truth value.” The brand of truth for which Carruth strives and often achieves, Miller writes, is not the truth of the ego in narcissistic reverie, nor is it “the presumption of objective truth handed down from the twin mountains of religious and intellectual tradition.” It is “the truth of impassioned subjectivity . . . as Carruth puts it . . . ‘the whole individual subjectivity, the spirit-body-soul.’”

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Robinson has an M.A. in English. She is a writer and editor and a former teacher of English literature and creative writing. In the following essay, she examines how "I, I, I" illustrates an idea of the self that runs through the ancient Indian and other spiritual traditions.

When the author Roger Housden included a poem by Hayden Carruth in his book *Ten Poems to Last a Lifetime*, he wrote by way of introduction, "Carruth, a social realist and a political radical, is wary of mysticism, yet his work carries some of the most penetrating insight—spiritual insight—to be found anywhere." Indeed, Carruth's poem "I, I, I" addresses the fundamental paradox of the Upanishads, one of the ancient Indian texts known as the Veda: "By what . . . should one know the knower?" Lest this should seem an impossibly obscure question, Carruth asks the same question in his characteristically clear language at the beginning of "I, I, I." There is "The self that acts and the self that watches." But if the speaker of the poem knows the self that watches, then there must, logically, be another watching self beyond the first watching self, and this other watching self must be the knower. Every watching self, in order to be known, demands another knower beyond itself. The speaker cannot comprehend how this never-ending process can conclude: "and where does it end?"

A person in this state has ceased to identify the self with the material world of the senses, but has yet to attain the blissful expansion of the self into union with God; he is alone, between two worlds, with nothing.

Carruth is describing a common spiritual experience of people of every culture and of all shades of religious belief and non-belief: that there is an aspect of the self that is involved in activity in the world, and an aspect of the self that does not act, but stands apart and silently witnesses the busy-ness of the acting self. The first self is frequently called the small self or ego, the self that identifies with the material world, with change, with time and space constraints, and with the fears and anxieties that come from a feeling of individuality and separateness from the rest of creation. The second self (sometimes capitalized as Self) is sometimes described as the large self and is the self that feels serenely uninvolved with the bustle of activity. It stands beyond time and space and beyond the separations and divisions of the material world.

The Upanishads describe the two aspects of the self as follows:

Two birds, companions (who are) always united, cling to the self-same tree. Of these two, the one eats the sweet fruit and the other looks on without eating. On the self-same tree, a person immersed (in the sorrows of the world) is deluded and grieves on account of his helplessness. When he sees the other, the Lord who is worshipped and his greatness, he becomes freed from sorrow.

In the Christian tradition, St. Augustine (cited in *The Principal Upanisads*) wrote of the "two virtues . . . set before the soul of man, the one active, the other contemplative." The first is engaged in "toil" that cleanses the heart to prepare it for the vision of God, and the other enables the person "to repose and see God"; the first is bound by time and space, the second eternal.

If the self can be brought to identify with its expanded aspect, then, depending on the person's belief system, the experience may be felt as being at one with the creator, God, infinity, eternity, or the transcendent. Those people who consciously experience this state describe it as a unified state of being, a feeling of being at one with God or with the universe as a whole, and as profound bliss or peace.

Mystical traditions, including those of Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian origins, teach that the process of witnessing activity from the point of view of the transcendent can be consciously cultivated through meditation. It also appears to happen involuntarily to many people who have had near-death experiences. Equally, it can occur through extreme circumstances such as a serious illness or a life-threatening experience. People who become very absorbed in an activity, such as sportspeople or musicians, often describe so-called peak experiences in which they seem to stand apart from the self that performs the activity. Finally, it can happen in periods of transition, for example, in puberty, or in the moments of transition between different states of awareness, such as passing from sleep into the waking state. Carruth's boy speaker appears to be in just such a period of transition, when he takes his first trip into the world unaccompanied by his mother.

Mystics often describe the ultimate conclusion of the experience, the expansion of the self into the infinite, as one of pure bliss. However, many people initially find the process of getting to that point disturbing or frightening. This is because it can seem to involve the diminishment of the small self to a point smaller than the smallest before it expands to become bigger than the biggest, into infinity. Carruth's poem features a graphic enactment of the diminishment of the small self, in the form of the receding images of the self in the mirrors to an infinite degree of smallness. There is no blissful sense of expansion into infinity. Insofar as a conclusion to the experience can be located, it is "in / The shadows," an image that connotes darkness and death. To the boy, the experience does not seem pleasant; in fact, it is so disturbing that he sits "rigid" and speechless while it takes place and runs home as fast as he can immediately afterwards. The boy has the first half of the experience, the diminishment of the ego, but seems unwilling or unable to pass through the Biblical "eye of a needle" (Matthew 19:24) into infinity. His experience is incomplete.

The boy's experience is reminiscent of the song by the American songwriter and guitarist Jimi Hendrix, "Room Full of Mirrors":

I used to live in a room full of mirrors
All I could see was me
Then I take my spirit and I smash my mirrors
And now the whole world is here for me to see.

Many writers have used the symbol of passage through and beyond a mirror to mark the transition into another, wider world of expanded potential from which the protagonist returns transformed. These writers range from the French poet, playwright, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau in his film *The Blood of a Poet* to the English author Lewis Carroll in his book *Alice Through the Looking Glass*.

The boy's experience in the barbershop may be understood as an example of the *dark night of the soul*, a phrase coined by the sixteenth-century Spanish poet and mystic St. John of the Cross to describe a period of desolation in spiritual development. A person in this state has ceased to identify the self with the material world of the senses, but has yet to attain the blissful expansion of the self into union with God; he is alone, between two worlds, with nothing. The silence into which the speaker of "I, I, I" falls is a recognition that the self has passed into a state beyond words; his rigidity suggests the rigid fear of death. The *dark night of the soul* generally precedes a surge in spiritual development and the discovery of a greater meaning to life. Carruth does not explicitly say whether this occurs to the boy speaker. However, the episode clearly marks a milestone in his development, as afterwards, he no longer needs the mirrors that showed him the nature of the self. He knows that the small self is an illusion that he can leave behind, but he does not yet know the reality that lies beyond.

Source: Claire Robinson, Critical Essay on "I, I, I," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Write an essay in which you compare and contrast “I, I, I” with William Wordsworth’s poem “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.” What differences and similarities do you see between the spiritual experiences described in each poem? How does each speaker respond to his experience, and what are the implications or consequences of the experience for him?

• Write a poem about an experience (spiritual or otherwise) that changed your life. You may use free verse or rhyme and meter as you wish. Write a short paragraph on what was gained or lost from writing in verse as opposed to writing your account in prose.

• Research the topic of coming of age and initiation ceremonies in at least two different cultures and create a class presentation on your findings.

• Write an essay in which you relate the experience of the boy speaker in Carruth’s “I, I, I” to your own and/or your friends’ childhood or teenage experiences. In your view, how usual is his experience and his response to it?

• Research the topic of spiritual experiences from history and the present day. Write a report about the different types of experience and give your view of what is happening in each case.

Compare and Contrast

- **1920s:** Society in small towns in the United States is to some extent gender-segregated, in that there are places where women do not generally venture. These include public bars, pool rooms, and barbershops.

- **Today:** Gender segregation has largely disappeared. Both women and men frequent bars and pool rooms, and men's barbershops have in many cases been replaced by dual-gender hair salons.

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- **1920s:** Ideas prevalent in existentialist and Eastern philosophies are known in some circles of the intelligentsia and academe, but they are not known or discussed in society in general, particularly, perhaps, in small towns in the United States.

- **Today:** Elements of existentialist and Eastern thought are widely disseminated throughout society, for example, through films, popular books, television, and magazines. Eastern religions are taught in religious education classes in schools and colleges. The mystical aspects of religions and New Age ideas are popular with increasingly widespread discussion of spiritual experiences. Consequently, some of the fear and isolation that has often surrounded such experiences in the West has dissolved.

What Do I Read Next?

- Carruth's *Brothers, I Loved You All: Poems, 1969–1977* (1978) is widely considered to be his best collection of poems. It covers a variety of themes, including the insanity of society, the people and natural environment of Vermont, and the jazz music that he loves.

- Carruth's *Reluctantly: Autobiographical Essays* (1998) is a collection of essays in which the poet discusses with characteristic honesty his suicide attempt, hospitalizations, nervous breakdowns, divorces, and other disappointments, alongside his successes, joys, and creative life.

- Ralph Metzner's *The Unfolding Self: Varieties of Transformative Experience* (1998) is a popular yet scholarly book that uses stories and metaphors to look at the different stages of spiritual growth, bringing sense and order to what for many is a challenging or even frightening experience.

- The poet William Carlos Williams exercised a considerable influence on Carruth's work, and readers who enjoy Carruth's poetry may appreciate that of Williams. Williams's poetry is characterized by its honesty, its clarity of thought and expression, and its concreteness of imagery. Many of his best poems are collected in *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems* (2004).

Further Study

Fu, Tu, *Selected Poems of Tu Fu*, translated by David Hinton, New Directions, 1989.

Tu Fu (712–770) is widely considered to be China's greatest poet, and he is one of Carruth's favorites. His highly personal poems tell of his own and his family's experiences in a period of history fraught with such disasters as famines, floods, and civil war, as well as the simple pleasures of life. David Hinton's translation has garnered much critical acclaim.

Kaufmann, Walter, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, The World Publishing, 1956, reprint, Plume, 1975.

Kaufmann provides a readable anthology of existentialist writings for the lay reader. In his illuminating commentaries on the various writers, which includes Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Søren Kierkegaard, he emphasizes that existentialist thinkers revolted against traditional philosophies and resisted categorization.

Pound, Ezra, *ABC of Reading*, New Directions, 1960.

In this enjoyable, clear, and accessible work, the modernist poet Ezra Pound, whom Carruth cites as an important influence, gives advice on how to develop the sensitivity to appreciate and get the most out of reading literature. The book contains a selection of passages from great literature.

Upanisads, translated by Patrick Olivelle, Oxford University Press, 1998.

The Upanishads form the core spiritual thought of the Vedas, the scriptures of ancient India. They have had a profound influence on philosophers, artists, and writers, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. They also influenced Buddhism and existentialism. They explore the nature of consciousness, spiritual experience, and man's relationship to the universe and to God. Parts of the text are difficult, but other parts are immediately accessible.

Weiss, David, ed., *In the Act: Essays on the Poetry of Hayden Carruth*, Hobart & William Smith Press, 1990.

This collection of critical work on Carruth's poetry includes essays by Philip Booth, Wendell Berry, Maxine Kumin, David Weiss, Anthony Robbins, Sam Hamill, William Matthews, Geoffrey Gardner, and Carolyn Kizer. It examines Carruth's contribution to twentieth-century American poetry and provides a useful introduction for students.

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Carruth, Hayden, “I, I, I,” in *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1995*, Copper Canyon Press, 1996, p. 44.

Hartman, Steven, “Who Is Hayden Carruth?” in *Writers Online*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring 1999, http://www.albany.edu/writers-inst/olv3n2.html (accessed December 7, 2006).

Hendrix, Jimi, “Room Full of Mirrors,” http://www.singulartists.com/artist_j/jimi_hendrix_lyrics/room_full_of_mirrors_lyrics.html (accessed December 7, 2006).

Holub, Annie, Review of “Nowhere Man: Considered to Tears (I Like Red Recordings),” in *Rhythm & Views*, *Tucson Weekly*, June 26, 2003, http://www.tucsonweekly.com/gbase/music/Content?oid=47238 (accessed December 7, 2006).

Housden, Roger, *Ten Poems to Last a Lifetime*, Random House, 2004, http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781400051137&view=excerpt (accessed December 8, 2006).

Lund, Elizabeth, Review of *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1995*, in “Themes of Family, Struggle in National Book Awards,” in *Christian Science Monitor*, November 12, 1996, p. 14.

Miller, Matthew, “A Love Supreme: Jazz and the Poetry of Hayden Carruth,” in *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3, Spring 1998, p. 307.

Olson, Ray, Review of *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1995*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 92, No. 16, April 15, 1996, p. 1409.

The Principal Upanisads, edited and translated by S. Radhakrishnan, George Allen & Unwin, 1953, reprint, 1974, pp. 201, 575, 686.

Review of *Scrambled Eggs & Whiskey: Poems 1991–1995*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 243, No. 9, February 26, 1996, p. 101.

Selinger, Eric Murphy, “The Importance of a Small Floy Floy,” in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1–2, 1997, pp. 257, 274, 275, 277, 278.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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