

Cymbal of Death

By Jeffery Greb

When he was young, my band's drummer Matt was an exceptionally hard hitter. In rehearsals he'd play so loud that our attempts to keep volumes at reasonable levels were doomed. Amplifiers slowly crept up to eleven as we tried to match his attack. At gigs, his drums never needed a riser or PA support to be heard above the din created by the rest of us. Head down, thrashing away when his hair got shaggy, he'd remind us of a blonde version of the Muppet drummer Animal. Eventually, he got a set of electronic drums, which run through an amplifier and thus have a volume knob. Being able to control the volume of the drums while simultaneously not interfering with his furious style was an immediate relief to our ears. Unfortunately, he grew unhappy with the sound of the electronic cymbals and began supplementing them with his metal ones, renewing the guarantee everyone's ears would be ringing by the end of a rehearsal or performance.

With the exception of keyboards, just about every instrument common to rock bands has components that regularly wear out. Saxophone reeds need replacing; strings break and lose their brilliance; picks wear down; drumsticks crack and heads tear. Although rare, cymbals break too, especially when repeatedly struck by a hard-hitting drummer. One of Matt's crash cymbals slowly developed a fissure along the edge of the bell. After the crack progressed to the point of becoming obvious, it quickly became a split, a gaping yawn about a quarter to half of the circumference of the bell. The crack, of course, changed the sound of the cymbal, giving it a clanging, unpredictable quality. It looked like hell; it looked like it should be thrown out; it looked dead. We, however, liked the sound. Consequently, Matt kept the cymbal on his kit for years. It became known as "the cymbal of death" and considered as indispensable to our sound at the time as my combination of multiple distortion effects running at once.

Being erudite and enjoying wordplay, we thought “cymbal of death” was pretty funny. The cymbal was at the end of its useful life; it was “near death.” It also produced a beautiful *kerrranng!* when struck, evocative of a parody of a death knell. Obviously, the homophonous nature of *cymbal* and *symbol* provided the source for the humor. Jokes aside, however, the pun begs the question: in this context, is *cymbal* a *symbol*? The answer: maybe.

A symbol is something that stands for, or has a range of reference, beyond itself, both a denotative and connotative meaning. That symbolic meaning, or meanings, is context driven. Using this definition, “cymbal of death” meets the qualifications of a symbol. A closer study of the nature of language, however, makes this quick and easy assessment more difficult.

Phillip Wheelwright contrasts what he calls “steno-language” and “depth language.”¹ In simple terms, the former is denotative; the latter is connotative. For example, I may use the word *house* in a literal sense to mean a *dwelling* or in a figurative sense to mean a *familial line*. The *steno-language* is a necessary component for understanding the second meaning, for if I have no conception of a physical house being a family dwelling, I cannot understand the figurative use. This straightforwardness is deceptive, however, because the line between *steno-* and *depth* is not always clear.

The contextual element in the definition above must always be kept in mind to avoid the slippery trap of seeing everything as symbolic. Language, both oral and written, is inherently symbolic. Its very nature is to codify the use of vocalized utterances to stand for subjective thoughts. In English, physical symbols we call letters reference an array of arbitrary sounds, which in turn can be infinitely combined to produce words to convey complex thoughts between individuals. One could rightly claim, therefore, that everything expressed by language is

¹ Wheelwright, Phillip (1982, 1968), *The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism* (revised ed.).

symbolic and wash one's hands of further inquiry. Such solipsistic reductionism does nothing to improve our understanding of symbolism, however; it drives us to frustration and confusion instead.

And yet, we still have the problem of being awash in symbols. Mary Anita Ewer points out,

[a] word is a symbol because it stands for its meaning. The sign + is a symbol, because it stands for the operation of addition. A lily, in religious art, is a symbol, because it stands for purity. The creature which, in a terrifying dream, threatens to devour the dreamer, is a symbol, because it stands for some situation in the environment or some conflict in the inner life which threatens to engulf the personality.²

Wheelwright, commenting on the same passage, notes that “[w]hat all these many kinds of symbol have in common is the property of *being more in intention than in existence*. . . . [T]he symbol is ideally self-transcendent. Which is to say, it *means* something” (op. cit.). The word “meaning,” however, creates its own slippery slope preventing our climb to the summit of further understanding, necessitating side explorations into ontology and epistemology. Instead of sliding around in this new patch of mud, it's more directly informative for our purposes here to enter further inquiry through examining how symbols are used, rather than what they mean.

To begin our focus on usage, it is helpful to find a way to differentiate between symbols and things that “fit” the definition of a symbol but are really something else. In *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), Susanne K. Langer presents a beneficial linguistic distinction, although she doesn't use the word symbol to do so.

To a clever dog, the name of a person is a signal that the person is present; you say a name, he pricks up his ears and looks for its object. If you say “dinner,” he becomes restive, expecting food. You cannot make any communication to him that is not taken as a signal of something immediately forthcoming. His mind is a simple and direct *transmitter* of messages from the world to his motor centers. With [people], it is different. We use certain “signs” among ourselves that do not point to anything in our actual

² Ewer, Mary Anita (1933). *A Survey of Mystical Symbolism*.

surroundings. Most of our words are not signs in the sense of signals. They are used to talk *about* things, not to direct our eyes and ears and noses toward them.

Because she uses different terms, Langer's diction here could prove confusing in the present context. Her use of "signs" equates to our "symbols," and "signals" are the symbol-like non-symbols we are excluding from our discussion. Wheelwright refers to them as *logos theorêtikos* and *logos praktikos* respectively, i.e. the contemplative versus the pragmatic (op. cit.).

Langer gives us a convenient method to distinguish language used symbolically from the inherent symbolic quality of language. Her test is whether language engages higher cognitive processes beyond the literal. As her dog example demonstrates, many animals understand human words and even slightly longer utterances of multiple words, although it's difficult to know for certain whether they actually differentiate between words in such cases. For example, when you say "come here" or "good dog," does the dog perceive the words separately or are the combination of words received like a multi-syllabic single word to a human ear? While the answer is not clear for a dog, it is for a child because the latter learns the syntax and grammar of the language of their culture and develops the ability to respond in kind.

The split between symbolic and regular language grows greater as the ideas expressed grow more abstract. In common usage, directive language, like "make me a sandwich" or "leave me alone," is clearly not symbolic. Such straightforward utterances can *become* symbolic, however, within a larger context. For instance, an author may use the preparation of food throughout a novel to demonstrate a bond between two characters. The request to "make me a sandwich" might then be seen within this context as something beyond the merely directive. As literature acts as a reflection of life, the symbolism I've just described need not appear in a novel, however. If the person requesting a sandwich and the person toward whom the request is made both understand the request as a larger expression of love, the request expresses a symbolic

meaning. If, though, this larger meaning is not understood by both parties, then “make me a sandwich” devolves back into a simply directive statement, even if the request holds the larger meaning for one of the parties. *Both* the speaker and the hearer must recognize the larger context for the request to be symbolic as well as literal.

This distinction between the directive or pragmatic and the contemplative is the first of three characteristics of symbolism described by Wheelwright (op. cit.). Although his terms clash a bit with Langer’s, he makes a similar observation.

Thus a red traffic light, although it indubitably “means something,” is not a symbol, it is a signal. But if, on the other hand, some sermonizer were to devise a remark like “The atomic bomb is God’s red traffic light,” then in that metaphorical usage that signal will have been turned into a symbol.

Langer’s “signs” and Wheelwright’s “symbol” retain the same qualities; they do not merely transmit information; they are used to express ideas beyond the literal level.

Wheelwright’s second characteristic is that a symbol is not a natural occurrence. A natural phenomenon may portend a future event, but that isn’t the same as functioning as a symbol. He employs the example of a rapidly clouding and darkening sky as a portent of rain. Rather than symbolic, it is a conclusion built upon observation and experience. If, however, the coming storm is used to represent something other than itself, like the red traffic light, then the same details become symbolic. This, again, points to usage.

The final characteristic in Wheelwright’s triad is that symbol must have “a certain stability; it endures beyond one or a few occasions.” In other words, to have communicative power, a symbol needs to remain understandable; otherwise, the ideas expressed symbolically are not understood. This necessity is clear when dealing with an ancient text. Without a deep knowledge of the cultures that produced them, symbolism in works like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca 1600-1150 BC) and the *Odyssey* (ca 700-750 BC) can be lost, which makes the average

reader dependent upon the work of scholars to explain the symbolic relationships. Of course, this is also true for less dramatic expanses of time, though less obvious. Similarly, it is true for literal language as well, given the constant fluidity of words and their meanings. When Ross tells King Duncan in *Macbeth*, “The Norways’ king, craves composition” (1.2.69), he is making a literal statement that the Norwegian king seeks to form a peace treaty. The word “composition,” however, has shifted meaning in 400+ years. Why should we expect figurative language to behave differently?

Let’s apply Wheelwright’s three characteristics to some symbols to see them in action. Before we do so, it’s useful to distinguish between two broad categories of symbols. The first I’m calling *common* symbols. These are symbols that span a particular culture and whose meanings are generally understood. They are typically born from some earlier cultural beliefs, which become irrelevant to comprehending the symbol itself as the passage of time and the concomitant changes in understanding and belief occur.

I’m labeling the second broad category *unique* symbols. These symbols are solely understandable within the individual context within which they appear. In essence, these symbols are situational and therefore are not generally understood outside their context. An individual creates them for a specific purpose and are thus the symbolism of art and literature.

A good lens through which to observe *common* symbols at work is our use of colors. Colors have a literal level: they describe specific wavelengths of light along the spectrum as detected by our eyes. They also carry meanings beyond the literal. For example, consider countries’ flags. Even when a nation’s flag does not include any symbolic shapes, the colors used are meant to convey qualities that nation wishes to declare are central to their shared values, even if those values are more aspirational than actual. For instance, if we define “the West” as Europe

and North America and assume a shared meaning for certain colors, you'll understand why nearly every flag of those countries uses similar color schemes, even when you don't know precisely what those colors symbolize. Specifically, you'll see they all have at least one of three colors: red, white, and blue, and frequently have two or all three. As you learned in school, those colors on the American flag represent valor, purity, and justice respectively, and they hold some similar meanings on other Western flags.

Let's now narrow our focus to a specific color: red. First, it is important to note that *common* symbols, like Jungian archetypes, frequently carry apparently diametrically opposed meanings.³ For example, Jung's archetype of the Mother carries both the meaning of a life-bringer and a death-dealer.⁴ The role of the Mother as a life-bringer seems clear: we are all given life through our mothers. The very nature of life, however, is that it will ultimately result in our death, meaning that, paradoxically, because our mother gave us life, she has also ensured our death. You can see this dichotomy at play symbolically in stories, particularly those for children, with evil stepmothers, queens, and witches opposed by good godmothers and princesses.

Like a Jungian archetype, the color red carries opposite and seemingly irreconcilable meanings in our culture; namely, red can symbolize both love and hate, or if not "hate" at least violence and/or its potential. How might this common symbol have developed such different associations? The answer is blood, the red substance we carry inside us. While one connection is clearly tied to the literal level, the other also uses the associated cultural beliefs blood held in the past which are now discarded and have left a *common* symbol in their place. The first is obvious; the latter requires deeper exploration.

³ For our purposes here, Jungian archetypes are essentially a set of symbols used by all peoples, although the representations are unique to individual cultures. Using my terminology, they are overarching common symbols.

⁴ Jung, C. G. (1959), *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, vol 9, part 1 of *The Collect Works of C. G. Jung* (R. F. C. Hull, trans.).

It's easy to see how blood is associated with the “hate” side of the dichotomy. Humans very early on likely understood the importance of keeping their blood inside their bodies to maintain life and its opposite: causing blood to flow from another caused damage to them. In addition, anger can cause vasocongestion in the face, i.e. the face turning red as tissues gorge with blood. Thus, we can describe anger as “seeing red” and “red with anger,” as well as the opposite, a painful inflamed sore as “angry.” We understand the *common* symbolism without necessarily understanding its source is blood.

Vasocongestion signals a range of things, not just anger. Humans probably evolved this physiological response when we were both pre-verbal and in the process of losing most of our body hair, which made changes in skin coloration an effective means of non-verbal communication. Then as now, the response signals a general heightening of emotion, rather than a single precise emotion. The specific emotion is then signaled through additional behavioral cues. Anger is accompanied by other types of threat displays. For modern humans, these include facial cues like bared teeth and a narrowing of the eyes, along with staring at the subject of our ire.

When sexual interest causes the heightened emotion, we call the vasocongestion “blushing.” Here, the other cues are much different; for example, they may include things like a lowering of the eyes to unconsciously communicate you are not a threat. During the act of sex, vasocongestion can spread to other parts of the body, further signaling sexual receptivity. Other obvious physiological responses related to blood occur with sexual excitation as well, chief among these being a quickening of the pulse. People understood the heart to be the organ most connected to blood long before William Harvey satisfactorily explained circulation in the 1600s. Of course, because of blood, the heart is also red, and so the heart, too, is associated with love

and the pangs of rejection are referred to as “heartache.” But rather than expanding our discussion to related *common* symbols, let’s stay focused on the red of blood itself.

The spilling of blood, therefore, makes a direct symbolic connection to “hate,” and the phenomenon of vasocongestion connects to both ends of the love/hate dichotomy.⁵ “Love,” however, also relates to blood through old conscious beliefs now discarded, not just pre-verbal cues. In early history, reproduction was thought to be a function of deities, usually female, assigned the role of fertility for all things in the world. Eventually, people replaced that belief as they searched for natural explanations, rather than supernatural, for how sexual reproduction functions. This led to something called the “haematogenous theory of reproduction,” which Aristotle most clearly articulates. This theory postulates that the male’s semen is a distillate of the blood, and that during sex this blood distillation mixes with the blood of the female to create new life. (It also conveniently explains menstruation in a way that is at least a little closer to actually biology than semen being a primary essence of blood.) Haematogenous theory also fits nicely with the idea of the “four humors,” or “humorism,” proposed by Hippocrates and supported by Aristotle. According to humorism, good health is a function of a proper balance of four vital bloodily fluids, blood being chief among these. I mention it here because it is the dominant theory of medicine until it replaced with the germ theory of disease in the mid-1800s.

All this background is to explain how the color red developed into two opposite categories of *common* symbols. The explanation is important for the very reason that these connections are now unimportant to understanding the symbolism. That unimportance is why they are *common* symbols. As we shall see, the connection between the symbol and its source is important for understanding *unique* symbols. Before moving on to those symbols, though, we

⁵ Because vasocongestion is related to heightened emotion, it spans the dichotomy. It also reinforces the cultural notion that love and hate are closely related and sometimes referred to as “two sides of the same coin.”

still need to apply symbols using red from opposite sides of the dichotomy to Wheelwright's three tests. For that, I've chosen the symbolic phrases "seeing red" and "blood relative."

Clearly, when someone uses "seeing red" to describe anger, they are speaking symbolically. Wheelwright's test confirms this assessment. Is the phrase pragmatic or directive? The answer is no because it can be understood only through the cognitive act of empathy; therefore, it is contemplative. Does "seeing red" describe a natural occurrence? While inspired in part by the natural occurrence of vasocongestion, the phrase itself does not describe that phenomenon. A red filter does not corrupt the angry subject's vision. Finally, does the phrase have a certain stability making it understandable in a variety of circumstances over time? Its pervasiveness and continued understandability make it clear the answer is yes.

Similarly, the phrase "blood relative" has lost the connection to its source of haematogenous theory, becoming a purely figurative description devoid of practical application; thus, it is contemplative, not pragmatic. Since haematogenous theory has been abandoned, "blood relative" can no longer be said to describe a natural occurrence. Finally, the phrase has remained stable long after haematogenous theory, and even humorism, were discarded. Consequentially, red effectively functions as a *common* symbol for both love and hate without the necessity of us having to "decipher" meaning. We *accept* the symbolism without needing further explanation. We don't need to break the symbol into its components or fully examine its context to understand it, as we do with *unique* symbols.

I chose to focus on *common* symbols first for the simple reason they can color (pun intended) our interpretation of *unique* symbols. Because a member of a particular culture (e.g. an artist) creates them, *unique* symbols frequently reflect cultural attitudes and beliefs while building on them in ways that expand their meanings beyond our shared understanding.

Sometimes, the symbolic meaning remains close to the common source; other times, it takes the common into uncharted territory. To show this range, I am admittedly going to “cheat” a bit, to which I’ll come clean while discussing each example.

For the first example, let’s consider the opening couplet from the Robert Burns song “A Red, Red Rose”: “O, my luvie is like a red, red rose / That’s newly sprung in June.”⁶⁶ This use of “red” doesn’t stray from the common understanding, so as a *unique* symbol, the simile really doesn’t offer much that is unique. In fact, I’d argue that the only thing unique about it is how the second line adds that the rose is “newly sprung in June,” giving the rose, and the love, the extra context of new or re- birth and an association to that most pleasant of months but doing nothing to alter our common understanding of “red” being connected to love.

My “cheating” through using these lines as an example of *unique* symbolism is comprised of the fact that Burns didn’t write these lines purely as an act of his own imagination. Besides writing his own personal verse, Burns also set about collecting traditional Scottish songs, including this one, to ensure they not disappear due to disuse. (The most famous among these is “Auld Lang Zine.”) In the process, Burns reworked them, much to their improvement according to most critics, but their source material comes from Scottish tradition; therefore, the songs are closely related to the *common* symbols they contain. Not so with my choice to show the opposite end of the range.

Clearly, the use of red by Burns sticks to the cultural connotations of the color, specifically through explicit reference to the “love” side of the symbolic dichotomy. The connections of common associations to red are more tenuous in the William Carlos Williams

⁶⁶ Burns, Robert (ca 1793-4), “A Red, Red Rose” in *The Poems of Robert Burns* (DeLancey Ferguson, ed., 1965).

poem usually referred to as “The Red Wheelbarrow.”⁷ In fact, one could argue that his use of red obscures understanding for some readers. Here’s the poem in its entirety:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

Most Americans were first exposed to this poem in a high school English class and were promptly confused by it, which for some led to the erroneous conclusion that poetry is beyond them. Their confusion was probably exacerbated by the fact that their teacher was likely similarly confused, and the teacher’s explication of the poem for the class was limited to a recitation of the textbook’s supplementary materials supplied to them.

One reason for the poem causing confusion is that our brains are connection seeking machines. We’re constantly on the lookout for cause/effect, similarity/difference, and other types of relationships to help us make sense of the world. Confronted with the brevity of the poem, the importance of each individual word is heightened, and given the importance of colors to us, we especially focus on “red” and frantically scramble through the “red file” in our memory to make a connection. When no clear relationship to our *common* symbol can be easily found, we are left with a sense of the absurd rather than understanding.

A possible explanation for why we have difficulty making sense of this poem begins with critic I. A. Richards. Richards splits literary figures (specifically metaphor and its weaker cousin

⁷ Williams, William Carlos (1924) “XXII” in *Spring and All*.

simile) into two components: the vehicle and the tenor (also referred to as *V-T*).⁸ The tenor is the “thing” that is the subject of figurative description. The vehicle is the thing to which the tenor is compared in a novel way. For the Burns example, “my luve” is the tenor, and “a red, red rose / That’s newly sprung in June” is the vehicle. The interaction between the two creates a new meaning neither have independently. Richards describes it as “a transaction between contexts” (op. cit.). In other words, *meaning* derives from the *V-T* interaction. This dynamic between two things (the separate meanings of *V-T*) creates a third: the symbolic meaning. The symbol’s meaning is its own; it is not simply an elaboration of the meaning of the tenor; the separate contexts for *V-T* form a new context when they interact.

When confronted by a *common* symbol like “blood relative,” we aren’t confused or troubled by the unclear *V-T* relationship *because we don’t even realize there is one*. The familial bond the phrase describes is either simply accepted through its use over centuries, or it’s automatically “translated” to mean “genetically related.” However, for *unique* symbols, our expectations are different. We recognize that the artist is attempting to communicate a *V-T* relationship, so we in turn automatically attempt to understand the new meaning created by the *V-T* interaction.

In artistic expression, the environment in which *unique* symbols most frequently appear, one aesthetic measure of a work centers on the *V-T* relationship. Because these symbols are individual creations, an artist seeks to bind together two ideas or images in a novel way that demands the audience do the work of processing the *V-T* interaction. There is a “distance” between the vehicle and tenor that the audience must resolve. It is through this resolution that imaginative and aesthetic value are achieved. As Edward Bullough points out, distancing “put[s]

⁸ Richards, I. A. (1936), *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. Richards also identifies a third component, the *ground*, but I’m choosing to ignore it for this discussion.

the phenomenon, so to speak, out of gear with our practical, actual self” and places it into the imaginative realm of art.⁹

Although differing schools of artistic thought embrace the subjectivity of the artist more enthusiastically than others, at its most basic level all art is a form of subjective expression.

While we consider subjectivity to be shoddy thinking in a field like science, it is integral to art.

The artist presents their personal interpretation of the world for others to engage with.

[Art] describes a personal relation, often emotionally colored, but of a peculiar character. Its peculiarity lies in that the personal character has, so to speak, been filtered. It has been cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal, without, however, thereby losing its original constitution. (Bullough, op. cit.)

The personal vision of the artist creates something new from the ordinary character of the components of a *V-T* relationship; their interaction changes them and, more importantly, the audience’s understanding of the world.

According to Bullough, a certain distance between the vehicle and tenor is central to artistic expression. The “right” amount, however, is difficult to pin down. Too little and the art becomes trite and inconsequential. Too much and the artist risks being misunderstood. You can see this in painting. Some have maligned the precise, almost photographic realism of John Singer Sargent as “mere” portraiture. Such critics dismiss some of his subtleties because of this *V-T* closeness. The vehicle is too close to the tenor to be recognized as such. On the other hand, some viewers of Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning are unmoored by the non-literal presentation of his subjects. Here, the vehicle is so far removed from the tenor, the tenor is unrecognizable.

When we apply these ideas to Williams’s poem, we can see that confusion might result due to the distance within the *V-T* relationship. We struggle to make meaning from the

⁹ Bullough, Edward (1957), “Psychic Distance as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle,” in *Aesthetics*.

description Williams gives us because it seems all we have is a vehicle without a tenor. This struggle is especially true when we cannot make a direct connection for a *common* symbol like red, which, in contrast, we can easily do for the Burns poem.

I chose the Williams poem as an example for two reasons. First, most people have been exposed to it and at least vaguely remember it. Many remember it because they were confused and frustrated when they read it, which was my second reason. I wanted a clear example of how a *common* symbol can lose its shared understanding when used as part of *unique* symbolism. However, I must confess now that I “cheated” mightily to make my point.

My first “cheat” was failing to disclose that William Carlos Williams is an Imagist. Imagism is an early 20th century school of artistic expression within the larger movement of Modernism, a movement spanning literature, painting, music, and architecture. Modernists reject the values of the previous generations as inadequate, especially because those values led the world into the abject horrors of WWI. Instead, Modernists seek to create new language and forms for expression. Their work is also meant to reflect the nature of the modern world, which is often confusing and chaotic. Consequently, Modernism is marked by highly individualized expression and experimentation. As Ezra Pound, one of the most influential artists of the period, advised, artists should “make it new” above all else.¹⁰

As the name implies, Imagists try to faithfully present an image and allow it to speak for itself. They remove themselves entirely from the work, taking it out of the realm of a personal statement and placing it into the universal. If the image is reproduced objectively and faithfully in art, the thinking goes, it will create the same reaction for the audience as it did for the artist.

¹⁰ Pound, Ezra (1934), *Make It New*. Pound inspired, promoted, advised, and edited an eclectic group of artists, including William Carlos Williams, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, Robert Frost, and many others.

Imagists repudiate the notion of employing symbols, in part to differentiate themselves from Symbolists, another school of Modernism they view as inferior. Pound, who uses the gussied up French terms “Imagiste” and “Imagisme,” differentiates the two.

Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists dealt in “association,” that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of a word. They made it a form of metonymy. One can be grossly “symbolic,” for example, by using the term “cross” to mean “trial.” The symbolist’s *symbols* have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2, and 7. The imagiste’s images have a variable significance, like the signs *a*, *b*, and *x* in algebra.

Moreover, one does not want to be called a symbolist, because symbolism has usually been associated with mushy technique.¹¹

In other words, according to Pound $V=T$ for the Symbolist. This rejection does not mean that Imagism can’t be symbolic; rather, it means that Imagists do not employ symbols. Instead, the image *itself* functions as a symbol.

Following the tenants of Imagism, therefore, focusing on individual elements within Williams’s poem as symbols is misguided, including the wheelbarrow and its redness. The *whole* image, i.e. the whole poem, can be viewed as symbolic, but leading you to single out the color red so I could differentiate between *common* and *unique* symbols was to mislead you for rhetorical effect.

But wait, there’s more! You may have noticed I called the poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” only once, and when I did, I purposefully used the phrase “usually referred to as” to introduce it. If you looked at the formal citation in the footnote, however, you saw no wheelbarrows of any color mentioned. People offhandedly call the poem “The Red Wheelbarrow” and title it as such when it is anthologized, but its actual title is “XXII,” marking it as the twenty-second poem in Williams’s book *Spring and All*.

¹¹ Pound, Ezra (1914), “Vorticism,” in *The Fortnightly Review* (Sept).

When poets choose not to title their poems, standard practice dictates we refer to the poem by its first line and entirely in lower case, except for the first word when written, in order to indicate the first line is being used in place of a formal title. For example, in A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), the poem "II" is referred to as "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now" and poem "LXII" as "Terence, this is stupid stuff."¹²

The title is the first contact a reader has with a written work. Because of this, a title is *part* of the work in the sense that it contains the first expression of meaning the remainder of the work will expand upon and flesh-out. Consequently, writers are generally quite deliberate about titles. Consider the Robert Frost poem "'Out, Out-'.¹³ You don't need to ponder the title to experience the horror the poem presents. However, if you notice that Frost has placed the title in quotation marks and then that the words don't appear in the poem, hopefully it gives you enough pause to consider the title more closely. Once you do so, Frost expects you to recognize he's taken the title from *Macbeth*. And not just any old lines from the play, either. They are from Macbeth's speech when he learns of the death of his wife, what is probably the single greatest statement about the meaninglessness of life ever put to page, so great, in fact, that William Faulkner uses the same speech as the source for the title of his novel *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Frost's title places the horror of the death of the boy into a context that his life (and ours, by extension) is unimportant.

Williams could have chosen to title his poem. He could have called it "The Red Wheelbarrow," "The White Chickens," "After a Rain Shower," or anything at all. The fact is, he didn't. He opted to merely label its position within the sequence of his book by a Roman

¹² Sometimes, "II" is shortened to just "Loveliest of trees," although the full line is used, along with the Roman numeral, in the table of contents for my 1932 edition.

¹³ Frost, Robert (1916), "'Out, Out-'" in *Mountain Interval*.

numeral. Similarly, if early readers referred to the poem using the standard practice, we would call the poem “so much depends,” but they didn’t. For whatever reason they called it “The Red Wheelbarrow,” and for whatever reason we decided that’s fine and dandy and continue to do so.

My “cheat” is no small thing. Allowing you to continue to think the title of the poem is “The Red Wheelbarrow” likely had the effect of causing you, at least subconsciously, to focus on the wheelbarrow more than other elements of the poem. Imagine the poem was generally referred to by one of the other titles I suggested. Try reading it again, but first insert the title “After a Rain Shower” immediately before reading Williams’s lines. Can you feel your focus shift ever so slightly? What might that shift do to affect your interpretation?

This false title is even more subtly insidious, however. Did you notice the false title uses the definite article “the,” but Williams actually uses the indefinite article “a”? “The” denotes “this specific wheelbarrow,” but “a” means “any wheelbarrow like this one.” The poem is a mere 15 words long.¹⁴ How can swapping out one word for another *not* affect an interpretation of the poem? Perhaps this specific focus caused by “the” is the reason why many critics go speeding down the biographical highway racing to find the wheelbarrow that inspired Williams to write the poem. While this information may give scholars studying Williams some insight into his artistic process by highlighting how he reshapes reality when he creates a poem, it does nothing to help readers understand the poem itself, especially given that Williams used “a” not “the”; the specific wheelbarrow isn’t important. It’s not a $V=T$ relationship.

We studied “red” in these two poems to show the range of response provoked by using a *common* symbol as a *unique* one; however, I realize we can’t move on until I do a brief

¹⁴ Williams splits “wheel” and “barrow” onto two lines, so you might consider the poem to be 16 words long. However, the meaning of “barrow” as a burial mound doesn’t fit the rest of the imagery of the poem, so Williams’s intent for the enjambment of “wheelbarrow” to be considered a single word seems the best interpretation.

explication of Williams's poem. Therefore, let's take a moment to ease any remaining trepidation about understanding it. To do so, keep in mind Pound's analogy of an Imagist poem being like the variables in algebra: *multiple* symbolic meanings may be inferred; it has a "variable significance." The poem is *not* a secret code to be deciphered; an interpretation need only account for all the poem's elements to be valid.

To approach the poem, also keep in mind the words of Archibald MacLeish, another Imagist, "A poem should not mean / But be."¹⁵ The poem is an image; it is a *vehicle* for carrying meaning, not meaning itself. When reading the small details Williams presents, allow your imagination to "see" more. Is the wheelbarrow upright or flipped over with its wheel in the air? How close are the chickens to it? Are there puddles on the ground? What is the ground like? Are the chickens pecking at grass or dirt? Are there any trees? Are there any structures? What is it *you* see when you read these 15 words?

Here's what I see. The chickens are in the foreground near the glistening wet wheelbarrow, and both are on a patch of mostly dirt with sparse grass. The grass thickens as it stretches to a shade tree in the background. I know, but can't "see," there is a one-story ranch-style house behind me and that I am at the front of the house, not at the rear. At some point, the wheelbarrow transforms into a Radio Flyer, a red toy wagon. This transformation occurs "naturally" and doesn't perturb me or feel anomalous when it happens. What I do feel is the strong impulse to run through the chickens and scatter them on my way to the wagon.

Obviously, my details are not definitive. If you see the chickens in a coop next to a barn with the wheelbarrow leaning against it, that vision is as valid as mine. Because Williams is supplying a vehicle with no tenor and because that vehicle is such a meager description, we must

¹⁵ MacLeish, Archibald (1926), "Ars Poetica," in *Streets in the Moon*.

determine the tenor for ourselves and that tenor will rely in part on the *additional* details we see. In a way, the tenor is our own creation based upon the expanded vehicle that is the fuller image from our imagination.

For me, the tenor is childhood. This reaction doesn't come from any nostalgia; I didn't grow up on a farm and have never owned a chicken. Rather, it stems from first looking at the fleshed-out image in my head, considering those details and the emotional content they carry, and going back to the poem itself to see if the image as presented by Williams supports my interpretation for the tenor. I'm looking for the details which lead me to my conclusion.

Most of the poem is descriptive. The second stanza describes the wheelbarrow, the next the rainwater, and the last the chickens. The first, however, is evaluative. When I start to "see" the image, my mind is already asking, why? Why is it that "so much depends upon" these things? "Depends" conveys a sense of urgency and importance that seems out of alignment with the description. It isn't a normal adult assessment to look at a wet wheelbarrow next to chickens and think "so much depends upon" it. The urgency and importance the line conveys seem more akin to the smaller world of a child, a world which adults have lost the capacity to fully appreciate. (Clearly, given my interpretation I think it would have been better if we used standard practice and called the poem "so much depends" since that first line is the linchpin of my analysis.)

A boy waits eagerly to be released to play after a rain shower. (I'm using *a boy* because he's *me* in my version of the complete image.) The wheelbarrow awaits him to fulfill some delayed need, some task that requires completion. It is red because it is his heart's desire. (The color also allows my magical transformation of it into the child's wagon.) The rain is gone; he has a fresh, new beginning – if only he can get to the wheelbarrow! The chickens evoke a sense

of the innocence which accompanies a bucolic lifestyle and that feeling is enhanced by their whiteness, a *common* symbol for innocence and purity.

The vehicle is the image, which in my interpretation functions as a symbol for the tenor of childhood. The interaction of this *V-T* relationship produces meaning, which can be roughly expressed as childhood is a time of purity and innocence that is lost in adulthood, as well as hinting at how it might be regained. Again, we're dealing with algebra, not arithmetic. Although interpretations connecting the poem to childhood are common, so are those that see the poem as a contrast between the artificial or man-made and the natural. Neither is objectively more right or wrong than the other because all interpretations are based upon subjective expansion of the limited image Williams gives us.

Let's leave the convolutions of interpreting Imagist poetry aside to look at a couple of more straightforward *unique* symbols. The first of these is a graphic representation, the second poetic. I promise: no cheating this time, and no need to get too bogged down deciphering *V-T* relationships – that was mostly to understand why Williams's poem is so opaque.

Not surprisingly, many Imagist poets feel an affinity to painting because painters capture by brush what Imagists attempt to capture by pen. Williams is no exception and most notably strikes up a friendship with painter Charles Demuth, whose painting *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (1928) is directly inspired by Williams's poem "The Great Figure" (1921). Coincidentally, Williams's close friendship with painter Charles Sheeler begins when he is composing "The Red Wheelbarrow."

Sheeler is a Modernist painter of the Precisionist school, which is inspired by the European movements of Cubism, Purism, and Futurism and seeks to unite them under a new American form. Sheeler is also a photographer, and unlike some other Precisionists, he often

presents his subjects with the exacting realism of a photographer's eye. This realistic approach is reflected in one of his works that hangs in NYC's MoMA, *American Landscape* (1930). The painting is of a Detroit Ford Motor Company plant, and Sheeler relied upon the extensive photographs he took of it under commission from Ford as his preparation. The black and white rendition below shows this attention to detail.



The title *American Landscape* evokes the work of 18th century American landscape painters. For example, Thomas Cole's *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm – the Oxbow* (1836), Asher Brown Durand's *Kindred Spirits* (1849), and George Caleb Bingham's *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap* (1851-52) all present an idealized view of their subjects. They are Romantic landscapes devoid of threat, tamed through American exceptionalism supported by the divine

right of Manifest Destiny. To see this in context, here is the Bingham painting (again in black and white), which resides in the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University in St. Louis.



Notice Bingham's use of light. Boone leads the settlers through the dark wilderness bringing the light of civilization with them to illuminate the untamed natural world.

In contrast, Sheeler replaces the natural landscape with the industrial. According to critic Robert Hughes,

Sheeler's work reflects the replacement of the Natural Sublime with the Industrial Sublime, but his real subject is the Managerial Sublime, a thoroughly American notion. The subject is the style—exact, hard, flat, industrial and full of exchanges with photography. No expressive strokes of paint; virtually everything live and organic is edited out. There is no nature at all except for the sky and the water of a dead canal. Whatever can be seen is man-made, and the view has a strange embalmed serenity,

produced by the regular cylinders of silo and smokestack and the dark authoritarian arms of loading machinery.¹⁶

The mechanization of America meant the exploitation of its natural resources, as well as the rapid growth of cities and decline of rural life.

Sheeler's Modernist painting, then, is devoid of anything resembling Bingham's Romantic hero Daniel Boone, the rugged individualist supremely confident in his abilities to face any threat posed by the wilds of Kentucky and Tennessee. He and the settlers are at the center of the painting, and the light combined with the landscape make them the focal point. As Hughes points out, little natural remains in the world created by Sheeler; however, a lone human form *does* inhabit the painting. Even when the painting is in color and seen in the original size, the figure is difficult to discern, so I'll point it out.



¹⁶ Hughes, Robert (Spring 1997), *Time Special Issue: American Visions*.

The lone figure moves along the rail track, subsumed and subservient to the mechanized industrial world.

Sheeler's landscape, therefore, graphically presents, and thus symbolizes, the replacement of the natural world with the industrial, as well as the unimportance of the individual in the modern world. Any beauty found in the geometric shapes and sublimity in their scale crushes the individual like an insect, like an ant approaching a picnic table. Unlike Bingham's work in which the focus is on the intrepid people and their faces, for Sheeler our very humanness is lost.

To those who may feel I've cheated again because I've given further background on Modernism to help understand the painting, I protest. First, awareness of the specific philosophical era in which a work of art is created deepens our appreciation for it and places it in context. Sheeler's original audience was immersed in Modernist themes, including in popular artistic forms. For example, the plot of *Modern Times* (1936), the final film of Charles Chaplin in which his iconic Little Tramp figure appears, follows the intrepid character's struggles to survive in the modern world. His repetitive factory job drives him to a nervous breakdown, a consequence foreign to his usual upbeat nature. Although the film ends with the Tramp and his love Ellen walking down the road into a new dawn, their future is ambiguous and may just as easily end in further tragedy as not. Sheeler's contemporary audience, therefore, would intuit his symbolism with ease since such representations were dominant and common.

My second reason for this not being a "cheat" is that a viewer of the painting today need not know anything about Modernism to grasp the symbolism. In my experience, when the uninitiated first see the tiny figure on the tracks, they say something like, "Wow, that's pretty small." A typical conversation ensues: "Why do you think Sheeler made the person so small?"

“Well, he had to because the factory is so big.” “So why include a person at all?” “He had to in order to show the scale, the immensity of the factory.” “But he accomplishes that already. For example, the train cars – we know how big those are. Why, then, did he *choose* to include a person?” “To show how small we are compared to the factory?” Once we reach this tentative question, my strawman is beginning to grasp the symbolism in the painting.

“Hold on,” you might be saying, “that’s it? Just ask yourself why the figure in the painting is so small and the answer deciphers the symbolic point of it? That sounds way too easy.” Well, I did say “*beginning* to grasp the symbolism,” but if you’ve approached symbolism with trepidation in the past, thinking it is beyond your comprehension, of course the revelation that your fears are ill-founded comes as a surprise. As Stephen King notes,

If in school you ever studied the symbolism of the color white in *Moby-Dick* or Hawthorne’s symbolic use of the forest in such stories as “Young Goodman Brown” and came away from those classes feeling like a stupidnik, you may even now be backing off with your hands raised protectively in front of you, shaking your head and saying gee, no thanks, I gave at the office.

But wait. Symbolism doesn’t have to be difficult and relentlessly brainy.¹⁷

King goes on to say symbolism is important because it adds grace notes to enhance the story (he is writing about fiction), not take it over. I would modify that assessment slightly to say it is also a major factor in establishing the artistry of a work, no matter the genre.

“Hold on,” you might well say again, “then why all that theory stuff from Wheelwright and his buddies near beginning this essay if it is unnecessary for understanding symbols?” My answer is twofold. First, jazz musicians commonly remark that you need to learn all the “rules” of music in order to then forget them and simply play without thinking. In other words, learning the theory to a deep level allows one to apply it as a matter of *fact*, rather than *effort*. Knowing

¹⁷ King, Stephen (2000), *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*.

things like *V-T* relationships exist can help you gain traction as a reader when stumped by a piece of writing.

Second, as I stated in my definition, a symbol is “something that stands for, or has a *range of reference*, beyond itself ...” [emphasis added]. With the possible exception of allegory,¹⁸ the depth of the symbolic range can be one measure of its artistic quality. This range is also one of the reasons symbolism can be so off-putting for non-literary types, but it should have the opposite effect. Think back to how your experience with “The Red Wheelbarrow” likely changed with my encouragement for you to see that not only the meaning of the image was subject to individual interpretation, but also how the very image itself is filled out subjectively by the reader. The range of possible meanings validates individual interpretations of meaning, as opposed to creating the need to identify a single meaning.

Let’s approach our final example of *unique* symbolism, then, from this perspective of range of reference. I’ve chosen a well-known and accessible (at least compared to “The Red Wheelbarrow”) poem by Robert Frost, “Fire and Ice.”¹⁹

Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

¹⁸ An allegory is a type of symbolic narrative in which elements typically have a single symbolic meaning, like a character named “Faith” symbolizing faith.

¹⁹ Frost, Robert (Dec 1920), “Fire and Ice,” *Harper’s Magazine*.

Academics have noted symbolic parallels between Frost's poem and the *Inferno* (ca 1300) by Dante. For instance, the poem has nine lines, and Dante describes nine levels in hell; they use a similar rhyme scheme; they share diction, specifically, words like "taste," "desire," and "perish;" and Dante describes both fire and ice as elements of suffering in hell. Seeing none of these correlations, however, doesn't mean you've missed the symbolism of the poem. The poem still has much to offer those who've never even heard of Dante.

Our first task is to understand the poem on its basic "narrative" level. What is Frost – through the speaker of the poem – telling us? First, that "some" say the world will end in fire, while others say in ice. The speaker, however, believes it will be fire after equating it with desire. He then acknowledges the destructive power of hate associated with ice. Understanding the poem's symbolism, therefore, first hinges on three key elements: defining the "world" being destroyed, identifying how fire connects to desire, and how ice links to hate. These elements are open to subjective interpretation, not locked into a single meaning and certainly not dependent upon Dante.

The world ending in the first line can be taken to mean the literal end of the world. The possibility of destruction by fire or ice is exactly the plot of *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (1963). In the novel, we learn the late Felix Hoenikker created both the atomic bomb and a substance called ice-nine, a version of water that freezes at room temperature. While the characters have avoided nuclear immolation (the book is published the year following the Cuban Missile Crisis), they cannot prevent ice-nine's release into the world, instantly freezing the globe. The poem could be read similarly, that Frost is writing about those qualities he sees leading to the world's destruction, although I think we can dig a little deeper to mine a better nugget.

Stephen Crane notes that “[p]erhaps an individual must consider his own death to be the final phenomenon of nature.”²⁰ In other words, Crane suggests that, given the subjectivity of existence, the universe an individual inhabits is destroyed at their death. Likewise, T. S. Eliot laments that his *Hollow Men*, those devoid of a spiritual life in the dehumanized modern world (yes, Eliot is a Modernist), die a mournful, meaningless death.²¹ The poem famously concludes,

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

Here, “the world” is the life of a *Hollow Man*, not those who still have a spiritual connection to the infinite. In both cases, our egocentrism identifies the end of the world with the end of our Self, which is clearly a *depth* language reading of the world ending, not the *steno-* meaning. The world, therefore, can be describing us, either individually or collectively, and its end can stand for our literal or figurative death.

Frost equates fire with desire. The connection between fire and sexual desire should be clear from our earlier discussion of the symbolic associations of the color red. The vasocongestion of a sexual blush can carry heat with it, and the combination of the color and temperature makes an obvious link to fire. When David Bowie sings, “He swallowed his pride and puckered his lips / And showed me the leather belt round his hips / My knees were shaking, my cheeks aflame,” we understand the meaning of “aflame.”²²

Furthermore, desire, sexual or not, is frequently described as *burning*, like it is when Elvis sings, “Feel my temperature rising / Higher and higher / It’s burning through to my soul / Girl, girl, girl, girl / You gonna set me on fire / My brain is flaming” and that he is “Just a hunk,

²⁰ Crane, Stephen (1898), “The Open Boat,” *The Open Boat and Other Tales of Adventure*.

²¹ Eliot, T. S. (1925), “The Hollow Men,” *Poems 1909-1925*.

²² Bowie, David (1972), “The Width of the Circle,” *The Man Who Sold the World*.

a hunk of burning love.”²³ Desire is described as burning in other contexts. A person can have a burning desire to become something, like a chef, a movie star, or president. When such desires are thwarted, something inside us is destroyed. As Langston Hughes puts it in his poem “Harlem”:²⁴

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over —
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load

Or does it explode?

Thus, the lines “From what I’ve tasted of desire / I hold with those who favor fire” don’t require much explication for readers to understand the alignment of desire and fire and destruction.

The destructive power of ice provides similarly clear associations. The primary qualities of ice are its hardness and cold temperature. To call someone “cold as ice” implies an emotional aloofness that may even range to ruthlessness. To say someone has “ice water in their veins” says they are so emotionally remote that they lack the normal response to highly charged situations, although veins of ice water can be considered a positive trait if it involves a high-pressure circumstance wherein emotions must be control, such as remaining calm piloting a ship or an airplane.

²³ Linde, Dennis (1972), “Burning Love,” *Burning Love and Hits from his Movies, Vol 2*.

²⁴ Hughes, Langston (1951), “Harlem,” *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

This destructive nature of ice becomes even more pronounced if we extend the language beyond the actual word to related qualities, as we did for fire. Obviously, ice forms when water drops below its freezing point, so freezing is a clearly concomitant idea. To be “frozen out” means to be emotionally cut-off from another on purpose. It holds both the ideas of cold and hardness definitive of ice. In Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, Richard tries to suborn Buckingham to murder the princes who are the true heirs to the throne. When Richard directly declares he will have the boys dead, Buckingham responds that as king, Richard can do as he likes. This response is not the enthusiastic answer Richard hoped for from a co-conspirator. He replies, “Tut, tut, thou art all ice; thy kindness freezes” (4.2.24), and he quickly resolves to have Buckingham killed, too. Ice clearly connects to hate.

Cold is rarely positive, except in the context of things such as foodstuffs, e.g. ice cold beer. Describing someone as “cold” means they lack typical emotional warmth; to give (or get) the “cold shoulder” means to turn one’s back to entreaty; to quit something “cold turkey” is to do it suddenly, painfully, without support; and to be “cold blooded” and “cold hearted” carries the idea of total rejection of another’s love. The refrain of Hank Williams’s “Cold, Cold Heart” repeats the line “Why can’t I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart?”²⁵ Notice the heart’s need to melt further carries the imagery of ice. The hardness of ice is emphasized in the chorus of a song of a similar name by Dua Lipa and Elton John: “Cold, cold heart / Hardened by you / Some things lookin’ better, baby / Just passin’ through.”²⁶

The destructive power of both fire and ice, therefore, poses no interpretative problem for readers of Frost’s poem. As we’ve seen, figurative language expressing them as such is so pervasive that they have become more *common* symbols than *unique*. Frost adds nothing to

²⁵ Williams, Hank (1951), “Cold, Cold Heart” (single).

²⁶ Lipa, Dua & Elton John (2021), “Cold Heart” on *The Lockdown Sessions*.

either fire or ice individually to make his use of them exciting or original or thereby difficult to interpret. His artistic achievement lies in his symbolic juxtaposing of the two.

Now that we've quite easily established interpretations for the possible meanings for destruction, fire, and ice in the context of the poem, the next step is to understand why Frost might connect them together. Neither the end of the world, nor fire coupled with desire, nor ice linked to hate are particularly perceptive observations, as we've seen; however, their combination may offer unique symbolic insights from which we may profit.

Frost equates the polar opposites of fire and ice suggesting the power of either to destroy "would suffice." Like the two paths in "The Road Not Taken" being worn about the same and preferring one over the other really isn't the point, the two extremes represented by fire and ice only gain rhetorical importance through their juxtaposition. Calling fire and ice the same produces an oxymoron, a figure of speech providing a contradiction which produces a new, third idea. If you recall, Richards says the dynamic between the two elements of a *V-T* relationship produces a third, which is the symbolic meaning. An oxymoron functions in a similar way. Juxtaposing two terms that should negate their meanings instead creates a new meaning neither have separately.

Romeo has a speech filled with oxymorons in the first act of *Romeo and Juliet*: "Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health, / Still-waking sleep that is not what it is!" (1.1.185-186). Sadly, most explications available online claim these oxymorons are used because he is trying to express the ineffable pangs of love, when in actuality Romeo is acting the fool. These oxymorons are stilted and clichéd by 1595. They stem from Petrarchan conventions established in the 1300s. They show Romeo is playing at love, rather than experiencing true love. Shakespeare makes this clear by having Benvolio snicker at Romeo's over the top pining in this

scene quickly followed by Romeo forgetting his pain and asking where they should go eat. His friends know Romeo is not a serious lover. This notion is further reinforced when Mercutio parodies his language by calling out, “Romeo! Humors! Passion! Lover! Madman! / Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh. / Speak but one rhyme and I am satisfied– / Cry but ‘Aye me!’, pronounce but ‘love’ and ‘dove’” (2.1.8-11). He then conjures Romeo by what they know he’s really after “I conjure thee by Rosaline’s bright eye, ... / ... quivering thigh, / And the demesnes that there adjacent lie” (18-21).

Romeo’s stilted language in act one, scene one, gives way to an inventive sonnet, improvised by him intertwining his lines and Juliet’s, when the pair first meet. He follows this with the memorable “But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?” speech, with nary an oxymoron in either. The change in language mirrors his change from a false love to a true love.

I’m sure you noticed one of Romeo’s oxymorons is “cold fire,” a close approximation of fire and ice. In Romeo’s case, he is trying to express how the fire of his love for Rosaline is a fire that gives him no warmth. Frost is saying something else entirely since he has equated fire and ice with destruction. It does, however, illustrate again how some of the associations regarding fire and ice have been around for a while, especially given that they were old fashioned by 1595.

An oxymoron, then, is a type of comparison akin to simile and metaphor and also dependent upon a modified *V-T* relationship to *create* a new third thing: the symbolic meaning. It is a modified relationship because no true vehicle or tenor exists; it is more properly a combination of tenors. To understand Frost’s symbolism, therefore, we must explore what the third new idea is that connects two polar opposites, and the key to this exploration is that they are tied together by the concept of destruction.

Let's conduct a little thought experiment. Suppose we can graph fire and ice by ascribing them numerical values and plotting them along a line. Let's make fire positive numbers, so along an x axis the first point representing fire is (1). Ice's first point is (-1). If the fire is hotter, the number is larger (2), (3), etc. to (∞). As ice gets colder, the pattern repeats in the opposite direction. The hotter the fire/desire, the greater the integer. The colder the ice/hate, the opposite. It's easy to see how a desire point of (100) or a hate point of (-100) might be equally destructive and would thus "suffice," but what about point (0)? What does that look like? Is that a point where no destruction takes place?

In a way, Frost presents us with a false dichotomy limiting our choices to fire and ice and the destruction they carry. No destruction occurs, however, at point (0); zero has neither fire nor ice. It represents an ideal midpoint, a Goldilocks zone that is neither too hot nor too cold but just right. Frost is saying to avoid the world ending we should stick close to this theoretical ideal midpoint, theoretical because a life entirely devoid of passion is impossible. However, we *can* avoid allowing our desires to become so all-consuming that we are devoured by the flames until nothing but ash remains; we can avoid hating to the level that we form a frozen carapace allowing no other emotion to penetrate.

Frost is not advocating destruction; he simply states as a fact that the world will end, which it will at some point whether we are talking about a physical reality or an emotional one. Nor is he claiming fire and ice are the *only* methods open for our destruction. However, he *is* saying if we allow our passions to control us, they will destroy us. At least that's my reading of the symbolism of the poem.

Now that I've taken this circuitous route to examine the nature of symbolism, I return to the original question: was our use of the term "cymbal of death" symbolic? After all this, I have

to say the answer is no. The cymbal just had a humorous name based on its physical condition and a pun on the word “symbol.” The cymbal did not stand for or represent death; there is no $V-T$ relationship. In the end, it was just a joke, albeit one I find still makes me smile. All that glitters is not gold, and not every abstraction is symbolic. Or as Freud is said to have remarked, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”