

**JOHN CROWE RANSOM'S "CRITICISM AS PURE SPECULATION":
QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS
(448-64)**

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

Text used: Charles Kaplan and William David Anderson, eds. Criticism: Major Statements, 4th ed. New York: Bedford, 2000.

1. On page 448, the editors state Ransom's differentiation of a poem and scientific discourse. What is this distinction?

A poem differs "from scientific discourse in its avoidance of and resistance to abstract concepts" (448).

2. According to the editors, what two traditional approaches to poetry does Ransom dismiss? (448)

The "psychologistic" (expressive) and the "moralistic" (affective).

3. How does Ransom define a poem as "an autonomous object," according to the textbook editors? (448)

Ransom favors the objective approach: "A poem is a special kind of verbal structure that must be read closely for the complex meaning that is there only because it is inherent in style, technique, and form" (448).

4. On page 450, what poet/critic does Ransom praise? He praises this poet/critic's "famous dictum about the 'sensibility'" (450). How does Ransom summarize this dictum?

He praises T. S. Eliot. For Eliot, "sensibility" means the ability of poets to "feel their thought,' and to have a kind of 'experience' in which the feeling cannot be differentiated from the thinking" (450).

5. Section three deals with the moralistic approach, the "use' for poetry" (452). He denies that Plato ever seriously considered poetry as having a moralistic end. "Plato understood very well . . . that close and effective moralizing is scarcely to be had from [a poet]" (453).

Ransom attacks Marxist literary critics for believing that poetry must present a moralistic ideology (453). He writes, "The moralistic critics wish to isolate and

discuss the '**ideology**' or theme or paraphrase of the poem and not the poem itself" (453).

"Art is more **cool** than hot, and a **moral** fervor is as disastrous to it as a burst of **passion** itself. We have seen **Marxists** [literary critics] recently so revolted by **Shakespeare's** addiction to royal or noble personae that they cannot obtain **esthetic** experience from the plays; all they get is **moral** agitation" (454-550).

6. On page 457, the second paragraph from the bottom, Ransom writes that a poem has "a **central** frame of **logic**" and "also a huge wealth of local **detail**."

It is this conclusion that leads him, at the bottom of page 457, to define a poem. Copy this definition.

"A poem is a logical structure having a local texture" (457).

In the architectural metaphor used on page 458, Ransom explains the relationship between the two main terms of his definition of poetry. Summarize this relationship.

"The walls of my room are obviously structural; the beams and boards have a function; so does the plaster, which is the visible aspect of the final wall. The plaster might have remained naked, aspiring to no character, and purely functional. But actually it has been painted, receiving color; or it has been papered, receiving color and design, though they have no structural value; and perhaps it has been hung with tapestry, or with paintings, for 'decoration.' The paint, the paper, the tapestry are texture. It is logically unrelated to structure. But I indicate only a few of the textural possibilities in architecture. There are not fewer of them in poetry" (458).

How does he relate this metaphor to the "intent of the good critic"? (458)

"The intent of the good critic becomes therefore to examine and define the poem with respect to its structure and its texture" (458).