
UNIT 25: JOHN CROWE RANSOM'S *RIVERSIDE*

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25.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- recognize the life and major poetic works of John Crowe Ransom
- realize the important role of J.C. Ransom in twentieth century American Poetry
- understand the literary strategy of irony and distance in Ransom's poetry
- comprehend *Poems about God* as an expression of Ransom's search for God
- gain insights into Ransom's perception of God in nature: lawn, springs, leaf, and water.

25.1 INTRODUCTION

25.1.1 Life of John Crowe Ransom

John Crowe Ransom was an American poet, essayist, magazine editor, and professor. He published five main books of poetry, four books of essays, and edited three anthologies. He also published one textbook on writing, *A College Primer of Writing* (1943). He is associated with three important literary and critical movements – the Fugitives, Agrarianism, and New Criticism – and is regarded as the dean of Southern poetry and criticism. Scholars laud his contribution to twentieth-century letters, including his founding of the influential literary magazine the *Kenyon Review*. They

contend that his verse reflects his interest in rural, traditional Southern values, mortality, the transience of beauty, and the manifestation of God in everyday life.

Ransom was born on April 30, 1888, in Pulaski, Tennessee. The son of a Methodist minister, he grew up in several small Middle Tennessee towns where his father John James Ransom preached. Because of this peripatetic lifestyle, Ransom and his siblings were taught at home. When he was finally enrolled in school at the age of ten, school officials realized that he was academically gifted and recommended that he be sent to the Bowen School, a local private school that had a rigorous college preparatory curriculum. In 1903 he graduated from high school and was admitted to Vanderbilt University. After two years, he was forced to drop out because of financial problems. He taught secondary school for two years and then returned to Vanderbilt to finish his education. In 1909 he received his bachelor's degree, and because of his excellent grades, he received a Rhodes scholarship. He earned another bachelor's degree, in *Litterae Humaniores*, at Oxford University, which required reading Greek and Latin history, literature, and philosophy in the original languages. Returning to the United States, he took a job for one year teaching Latin and Greek at the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut. He then returned to Vanderbilt as an instructor and became involved with a group of students and faculty members that met frequently to discuss religion and philosophy; this group became known as the Fugitives. During this time he began to write and publish poetry in local periodicals. In 1917 he joined the U.S. Army, and he served overseas in France during World War I with the Fifth Field Artillery. While on duty, he revised his poems, which were published in 1919 as *Poems about God*. In 1920, he married Robb Reavill; they raised three children.

Upon his discharge from the army, he intended to move to New York City to work as a freelance journalist, but ended up returning to Vanderbilt University as an instructor. He resumed his frequent meetings and poetry sessions with the Fugitives, which included such members as Allen Tate, Donald Davidson and Robert Penn Warren. In 1922 the group began publishing a poetry magazine entitled the *Fugitive*, which published Southern poetry influenced by the modernism of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. The *Fugitive*, which was published until 1925, proved to be an important magazine. Critics note that during this time Ransom wrote his best poetry. Out of all the Fugitive poets, notes Norton poetry editors Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, "[Ransom's poems were] among the most remarkable," characterizing his poetry as "quirky" and "at times eccentric" (467). In 1924 his second collection of verse, *Chills and Fever*, was published and garnered much positive critical attention. His last book of verse, *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* was published in 1927 and was deemed an impressive poetic achievement. From that point, he wrote only one new poem, and was satisfied to revise his earlier verse and concentrate on his literary criticism.

The creative and critical spirit inspired by the Fugitives led to a new literary movement, Agrarianism, as well as a new way to analyze art called New Criticism. Agrarianism promoted the virtues of the rural South, favouring an agrarian economy over an industrial one, as well as a connection to nature and a rejection of materialism. During the Agrarian years (1927-

1938), Ransom was busy in three spheres: professor of English at Vanderbilt University, contributing to the editorship of the Agrarian publications, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, (1930), and *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* (1936), and finally publishing his first works of literary criticism; *God without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defence of Orthodoxy* (1930) and *The World's Body* (1938).

In 1937, after he left Vanderbilt University and took a position at Kenyon College in Ohio, Ransom became a vital figure in the development of New Criticism. In one of his critical essays, Ransom laid out his ideal form of literary criticism stating, "criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic." To this end, he argued that personal responses to literature, historical scholarship, linguistic scholarship, and moral studies should not influence literary criticism. He also argued that literary critics should regard a poem as an aesthetic object. As promulgated in the *Kenyon Review*, which Ransom founded in 1939, New Criticism advocated analyzing a work of art on its own, independent of outside influences. In 1941, Ransom published *The New Criticism*, and in 1955, he published *Poems and Essays*. Critics have had a mixed critical reaction to Ransom's critical theories. Despite the brevity of his poetic career and output, Ransom won the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1951. In 1964 the publication of his revised edition of *Selected Poems* led to a National Book Award. In 1966, Ransom was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Ransom died in Gambier, Ohio, on July 3, 1974.

25.1.2 Major Poetic Works of Ransom

In the period between 1915 and 1927 Ransom wrote around 160 poems that he revised several times in the following years. Noted for their metaphysical wit and occasional archaisms, Ransom's poems are most frequently short lyrics in which he explores the ironies of human existence as they are manifested in the domestic scenes of daily life. Critics describe his verse as unmistakably Southern in character and full of dichotomies: mortality and the vigour of youth; agrarianism and industrialism; idealism and reality; the tension between mind and body, as well as between reason and sensibility. It is also noted that he was able to establish a certain aesthetic distance in his poetry that affords the reader an objective, clear perspective on his work. His first collection of verse, *Poems about God*, explores religious and spiritual matters and is regarded as heavily influenced by the work of Robert Frost. Ransom later rejected these poems, contending that he had put too much emphasis on structure and not enough on "texture," or figurative language. His next few collections, including *Chills and Fever* and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, contain his best-known and admired poems. In "The Equilibrists" Ransom underscores the tension between reason and passion, as two lovers repress their desire in order to adhere to societal mores. In the epitaph to the poem, Ransom memorializes their love, which will be consummated in death. The concept of death and decay is a recurring thematic concern in Ransom's verse. His renowned poem "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" explores the death of a young, energetic girl through the eyes of her neighbour. The piece expresses the neighbour's anger at such a senseless and tragic death. In "Janet Waking," a young girl is forced to face mortality when she finds that her pet hen has died during the night.

The fleeting nature of feminine beauty is the subject of “Blue Girls,” a poem that focuses on a group of Southern school girls who revel in their attractiveness and youth. In “Old Mansions,” Ransom asserts that ideals of the South should be preserved in spite of changing circumstances and the passage of time.

Ransom is noted as a strict formalist, using both regular rhyme and meter in almost all of his poems. He also occasionally employed archaic diction. Ellman and O’Clair point out that “[Ransom] defends formalism because he sees in it a check on bluntness, on brutality. Without formalism, he insists, poets simply rape or murder their subjects” (467).

In 1963, the poet/critic and former student of Ransom, Randall Jarrell published an essay in which he highly praised Ransom’s poetry:

In John Crowe Ransom’s best poems every part is subordinated to the whole, and the whole is accomplished with astonishing exactness and thoroughness. Their economy, precision, and restraint gives the poems, sometimes, an original yet impersonal perfection ... And sometimes their phrasing is magical – light as air, soft as dew, the real old-fashioned enchantment. The poems satisfy our nostalgia for the past, yet themselves have none. They are reports ... of our world’s old war between power and love, between those who efficiently and practically know and those who are “content to feel/ What others understand.” And these reports of battles are, somehow, bewitching ... Ransom’s poems profess their limitations so candidly, almost as a principle of style, that it is hardly necessary to say they are not poems of the largest scope or the greatest intensity. But they are some of the most original poems ever written, just as Ransom is one of the best, most original, and most sympathetic poets alive; it is easy to see that his poetry will always be cared for, since he has written poems that are perfectly realized and occasionally almost perfect. (Young, *Critical Essays* 73)

Ransom was described by Allen Tate as “one of the best elegiac poets in the English language,” and by Randall Jarrell as a poet whom “generations of the future will be reading page by page with Wyatt, Champion, Marvell, and Mother Goose” (Young, *Critical Essays* 78). English Poet Laureate Ted Hughes spoke in 1977 of Ransom’s best poems as “very final objects.... There is a solid total range of sensation within the pitch of every word” (Garraty 152).

25.2 LITERARY STRATEGY IN RANSOM’S POETRY

25.2.1 Dualisms in Ransom’s Poetry

Ransom’s world is a world of fundamental opposites, a world where man is constantly made aware of “the inexhaustible ambiguities, the paradoxes and tensions, the dichotomies and ironies that make up [modern] life,” writes Thomas Daniel Young in a study of the poet. His themes, continues Young, emphasize

... man’s dual nature and the inevitable misery and disaster that always accompany the failure to recognize and accept this basic truth; mortality

and the fleetingness of youthful vigour and grace, the inevitable decay of feminine beauty; the disparity between the world as man would have it and as it actually is, between what people want and need emotionally and what is available for them, between what man desires and what he can get; man's divided sensibilities and the wars constantly raging within him, the inevitable clash between body and mind, between reason and sensibility; the necessity of man's simultaneous apprehension of nature's indifference and mystery and his appreciation of her sensory beauties; the inability of modern man, in his incomplete and fragmentary state, to experience love. (*An Annotated Bibliography* xv)

These various dualisms in Ransom's poetry could best be described in terms of a debate between the head and the heart – that is, as Young notes, between reason and aesthetic sensibility. Ransom continually sought a balance between the two, a balance which, however precarious it might have been, tried to give equal time to both logic and sentiment. He detested extremes of either kind and deliberately strived for a certain detachment in his poetry that struck some critics as being rather cold and academic. By establishing such an “aesthetic distance,” however, Ransom felt that he could provide the reader with a better view of his subject than those poets who imbued their work with sentimentalism and other distracting personal attitudes. Thus, the typical Ransom poem was never autobiographical or didactic, for, as Wesley Morris pointed out in his book *Towards a New Historicism*, “[Ransom's] dualistic theory demands that in the realm of poetic discourse the artist must never assert his own personality; he must remain as ‘nearly anonymous’ as possible” (115). As a result, Thornton H. Parsons observed in his critical study,

A proper appreciation of Ransom's poetry calls for a modest cultivation of literary asceticism. The reader must accustom himself to the idea that he will encounter no portrayal of strong personalities, no highly emotional drama, and little sense of a poet's dreadful self-discovery. He must tune himself to register elusive subtleties of perception and elegances of rhyme, wit, and rhetoric. He must be somewhat willing to forgive Ransom for the acute aesthetic self-consciousness that made him habitually subordinate passion to tonal control. He must be indulgent of Ransom's addictions to pale or paralyzing irony and to refined whimsicality. In brief, he should accept the limitations inherent in a civilized poetry and try to savour the fragile excellences. (129)

In Ransom's case, as Parsons suggested, these “fragile excellences had more to do with actual poetic technique than with the creation of a particular mood.” Many critics, in fact, felt Ransom was one of the greatest stylists of modern American poetry due to what Stewart described as the “unabashed elegance and artifice [of his work], both carried at times to the edge of affectation and preciousness. This poetry is made and proudly exhibits its technical ingenuity” (Unger 492). Randall Jarrell, among others, regarded this obsession with what he called “rhetorical machinery” as Ransom's “way of handling sentiment or emotion without ever seeming sentimental or over-emotional; as a way of keeping the poem at the proper aesthetic distance from its subject; and as a way for the poem to extract from its

subject, no matter how unpleasant or embarrassing, an unembarrassed pleasure" (*Poetry* 89).

Therefore, the key to Ransom's duality in his poetry lie in his creation and use of a "persona" who speaks in a modest yet intelligent manner. The persona, according to Ransom, functions as a personal meditative dimension to the poem. Therefore, it is through the medium of the persona's consciousness that the reader perceives the poem's narrative action. Additionally, this persona controls the level of sympathy and critical response to or within the poem. Nevertheless, a reader cannot remain confident in assuming that this is Ransom's own voice, except perhaps, occasionally when the use of a scholarly or Latinate diction operates ironically to detach a speaker further from his subject. But while it may be possible to locate Ransom's own voice in the poem's diction, he is quite absent from the poem's narrative action.

For Ransom, the issue of persona is important. In many of his narrative poems, Ransom creates and uses a persona as a mask to achieve some degree of distance. The persona, moreover, enables the reader to perceive the poem's narrative action within a critical and sympathetic mode of response by engaging the reader in the depth of the poem's situation and its psychological dimension. In terms of its function in poetry, Ransom regards the persona as necessary for the poet's anonymity that enriches the poem's as well as the poet's objectivity. For Ransom, being anonymous is an aspect of distance in many of his poems:

Anonymity, of some real if not literal sort, is a condition of poetry. A good poem, even if it is signed with a full and well-known name, intends as a work of art to lose the identity of the author; that is, it means to represent him not actualised, like an eye-witness testifying in court and held strictly by zealous counsel to the point at issue, but freed from his juridical or prose self and taking an ideal or fictitious personality; otherwise his evidence amounts the less to poetry . . . The poet must suppress the man, or the man would suppress the poet. (2-3)

Thus, the persona functions to encourage the reader to assume or accept the validity of the writer's argument in the poem or, in other words, to see the truth that the writer sees or at least the way he wants the reader to see this truth. Ransom establishes this persona-reader relationship in order to convey the material of the poem while at the same time holding the man Ransom himself absent.

The process of using personae in Ransom's poems thus evokes two considerations: first, the appropriateness of any particular persona to the presentation of Ransom's argument and narrative action, and secondly, the effect of this use of persona upon the understanding of this argument, as well as such subsidiary effects as irony and distance.

25.2.2 J. C. Ransom's Technique of Irony and Distance

Ransom believed in the poetic virtues of irony and complexity, and the importance of adhering to traditional prosodic techniques of meter, stanza, and rhyme. His poems are marked by irony and a spare classicism, and a concern with the inevitable decay of all things human. In Ransom's case, the metaphysical concept of irony in many of his poems becomes tragic

when he seeks to give imaginative expression to the carelessness of the universe with regard to the fate of man. Since the world is absurd, therefore, it is tragic.

Ransom believes that man's position in the universe itself is ironic: he argues that man's rational mind faces a non-rational and uncontrollable universe. Ransom starts his argument by first describing and defining the mind of the dualist, and then the kind of dualism he acquires. He argues:

A dualist is a practical man whose mind has no philosophical quality. It may be that we begin our lives as dualists, but under the logic of experience we soon find that the largest problem of our lives is to effect an escape from dualism. The dualist sees himself as one, and the objective world as another; this world is not sympathetic, not even sentient, but still fairly plastic to his will, and capable of being made by hard work to minister to his happiness: a wilderness which may be transformed into a garden, a habitat which has the makings of a home. His problem is purely the physical one: the application of force at the point where it will do the most good. (Young and Hindle 30)

Here Ransom's concern is with dualism, which he goes on to argue, is the essential nature of the world in which man must live. Ransom suggests that man begins his life as a dualist, realizing the difference between the spiritual world within and the objective world without. In the first stage man sees the world as "plastic" to his will and believes that through special attention and diligence he can have it minister to his happiness. He looks upon the world as a "wilderness which may be transformed into a garden, a habitat which has the makings of a home". When it becomes apparent that he cannot control the world, he turns to philosophy and metaphysics. Seeing that he cannot "impose his will upon Nature", man concludes that his "personal identity" will be annihilated by superior forces. He then, enters the second stage of his development and surrenders the idea of his own dominating personality in exchange for the more tenable idea that he is in some manner related by ties of creation to the world and entitled to some share in the general "patrimony" (Young and Hindle 30).

Ransom argues: "the romantic treatment of Nature" is a kind of escape and poets have to turn back to dualism "with a mellow wisdom which we may call irony". With this standpoint, Ransom does not take a despairing but ironic view of man's finiteness and his inability to master or overcome the world and his surroundings. He argues that: "irony may be regarded as the ultimate mode of the great minds - it presupposes the others" (Young and Hindle 30). In this ironic view of an infinite world, Ransom finds a comfortable detachment from these surroundings and the finiteness of man. In turn, this ironic detachment enables him to make a balance within a world of dichotomies: the desirable and the impossible, the abstract world of the scientist and the philosophical world of the artist.

Ironic technique in Ransom's poetry includes juxtaposition of colloquial and scholarly diction. At the same time, it manoeuvres the reader's perspective on the issue under examination. Often a distance emerges between what is said and what is actually meant. For example in his complex attitudes towards religion, Ransom stresses that irony is the mode of the modern sensibility, and that irony is the key to the strategy of the persona. The

persona does not speak as the one who wishes to proclaim absolutes, but as one who recognizes human nature as dualistic, as one who recognizes the vast realm of human choice and possibility.

Irony carries with it implicit standards of judgement and norms of conduct; it begins in a perception of contrast. Nevertheless, it may further include the justification of the irreconcilable or incompatible elements, which compose it – even when this explanation is merely the awareness that the elements are indeed irreconcilable. Such awareness implies that the ironist is himself a victim. Thus, he cannot escape from his knowledge or remain objective. He cannot humanly criticize without qualification those who for example are not aware that man and God are irreconcilably opposed.

The mood of irony in modern verse is accompanied by distance. In one way or another, the ironist distances himself from the poem and withdraws from its action, and this gives irony its modern dimension. Ransom pays some considerable attention to irony, as well as distance, in his criticism. Although, he did not identify irony with distance, they are related to each other at least in his poetic practice.

In a literary work of art, a finite persona tries to affirm his freedom against the infinite world; nevertheless, his finitude limits him. These limitations lead to the ironic vision of man's finiteness and a perception of distance between the subject [man] and the object [world]. Thus, the author, in the work of art, achieves this ironic distance by never identifying himself with the personae.

Thus, distance is related to irony, but is not identical with it - it might be regarded as being more general than irony, and does not have the metaphysical aspects that may be thought to exist in some of its forms. Distance occurs either when the reader is given to understand that the beliefs, attitudes, or emotions expressed are not necessarily those of the author - either because they are markedly different from what might reasonably be attributed to the author in these circumstances or because the author's own commitments remain veiled, obscure, or uncertain. In irony, on the other hand, it is frequently assumed that the author's real opinion can be discerned and that it is radically different from that expressed. Further, there is one notable difference between the two: for while a sense of duality is common to both situations, irony would suggest reversal or qualification of the expressed attitude; distance may remain neutral or express puzzlement.

For Ransom, irony enables him to see life as comedy, farce, or chaos and this justifies his attitude even towards himself. "Irony in Ransom's work becomes an attitude rather than an aspect of craft: an ironic attitude towards his art and towards life in general" (El-Komy 28). Therefore, irony, in the poetry of Ransom becomes a kind of debate or conflict between mind and body, reality and illusion, instinct and reason, flesh and spirit, meaning and fulfilment, good and evil in a world which seems to be, for Ransom, bereft of explanatory reality - a situation exacerbated by the dominance of science. Ransom's poetry always stresses the dilemma of a self that is divided between two identities. Ransom solves this dualistic dilemma by fusing irony and distance. Ransom apportions this divided self between two identities, while he ironically confesses that dualism is essential for

the individual to live properly and pretends, in some poems, to be involved in the action only to suddenly distance himself in order to heighten the sense of irony in the poem. As Stewart opines, “All poetry stands at no less than one remove from the experience it treats. However, much of Ransom’s poetry stands at two removes from the experience” (29).

In effect, Ransom’s irony is a mixture of Socratic and modern concepts of irony; it accepts the human limitations in order to achieve truth. Thus, there is a constant contrast and conflict between appearance and reality in Ransom’s poems and this gives rise to irony and distance that reveal dualism in the work - as well, perhaps, as in his personality.

25.3 J.C RANSOM AND *POEMS ABOUT GOD*

25.3.1 J. C. Ransom’s Theology

Poems about God (1919) was Ransom’s first collection of poetry and is typical of his early thinking on religion. It provides considerable insight into Ransom’s views on “God” both as a concept and as a social phenomenon. In a gist, the volume offers the reader, from Ransom’s theological point of view, three different propositional attitudes: believers as naive, God as tyrant, and God as He might be understood as being expressed in Nature. Ransom presents these propositions in an unrelentingly ironic and sarcastic manner.

The public reaction to his first book of verse was not at all encouraging, perhaps because of his immature severely sarcastic attack on American religious practices, behaviour especially regrettable from a poet from a conservative and Methodist background. Indeed, throughout the volume, Ransom criticizes, ironically or rather sarcastically, many aspects of American everyday religious behaviour.

Poems about God does not manifest one God but many gods, almost as many gods as there are human points of view. But they are, taken together, a testimony that accords with the preference in *God without Thunder* for a style of mysterious God as found in the Old Testament rather than for the “cooperative” God of the New. Indeed, “Ransom stresses the inscrutable aspects in God and nature, thus evoking a sense of the sublime but not of the beautiful” (El-Komy 44). His examination of that concept is not at all similar to a search for an unknown God, but rather suggests the expression of a reluctant and tentative gesture.

The poems present an exploration of occasions in which the presence of God is supposed to be observable; however, the investigation is ironic in the sense that the persona is unable to square this presence with his rational and realistic understanding of the realities of the situation. A scene of conflict between a family’s naive pious sense of duty and youthful rational scepticism suggests this viewpoint in some of the poems, while in many others the argument suggests adversity towards God and nature alike. In effect, as Quinlan puts it “the overwhelming impression of the collection is that it is the output of an author who has little respect for the traditional Christian pieties but who also has not yet adequately developed the elements of an alternative philosophy” (24).

In February 1923, Ransom argues in a letter to Allen Tate that he: “almost persuaded me to be Christian - but I am a tough heathen” (Young and Core 119). This has to be read in the context of his having published *Poems about God* in 1919. The volume is the work of a young man and Ransom republished only one poem from this book in his later collections. Part of the reason for this self-censorship may be that in *Poems about God*, it is difficult to discover Ransom’s intention behind his use of the word “God,” or what was supposed to be the kind of religion - if there is any - under examination. He had written in its introduction:

The first three or four poems that I ever wrote (that was two years ago) were done in three or four different moods and with no systematic design. I was therefore duly surprised to notice that each of them made considerable use of the term God. I studied the matter a little, and came to the conclusion that this was the most poetic of all terms possible; was a term always being called into requisition during the great moments of the soul, now in tones of love, and now indignantly; and was the very last word that a man might say when standing in the presence of that ultimate mystery to which all our great experiences reduce.

Wishing to make my poems as poetic as possible, I simply likened myself to a diligent apprentice and went to work to treat rather systematically a number of the occasions on which this term was in use with common American men. And since these occasions fairly crowded into mind even at the most casual inventory, I also likened myself to a sovereign and a chooser; and I very quickly ruled that I should consider only those situations as suitable in which I could imagine myself pronouncing the name God sincerely and spontaneously, never by that way of routine which is death to the aesthetic and religious emotions. I anticipate the objection that the name of God is frequently taken here in ways that are not the ways of the fathers. I reply in advance, there are many mountains; and probably every one of them is worthy of being charted on the true Chart of God’s world! (vi-vii)

In 1919, Ransom was assuming something of the role of his Methodist minister father. He was still writing in the same vein in 1922, “being sympathetic more than other men, they [poets] may contain within themselves the conflicting emotions of different classes of society; in poetry they resolve this conflict, and then men hear a voice which is larger than the voice of any class, and which is the voice of God” (Knoll 111).

In *Poems About God*, Ransom searches for God in nature, cathedrals, and sick rooms. He also questions the presence of God in bar rooms and in wrestling matches. Honest and ardent in tone, the poems are primarily iambic with a regular rhyme. Though a markedly immature effort because of the poems’ conventional diction, sentimental tone, and excessive emphasis on structure and narrative, *Poems About God* forecasts Ransom’s trademarks: a blending of classical and modern forms, an ironic voice, and a preoccupation with the domestic life, the evanescence of youth, and the duality of the human body and soul. Rubin Jr. remarks:

What is most impressive about the poems, however, when viewed in the light of Ransom’s origins and his later development, is their God-searching. They indicate how unwilling Ransom was, despite his philosophical bent

and his voyaging far from the orthodox Protestantism of his Methodist background, to give up the traditional small-town religious attitude. The poems are almost all explorations of the human condition in a world that has moved away from theological certainty. And that world is generally found to be unavoidable but unsatisfactory. (568)

Poems about God is essentially retrospective though complicated by the feelings of disillusionment experienced in wartime. It mirrors Ransom's own youthful confusion about religion. At his early age, Ransom regarded piety and Deity as merely human creations through which man expresses his sense of mystery. Consequently, Ransom stresses the importance of rational humanism and this clarifies the use of irony, extended ambiguity and dualism in his poems.

25.3.2 By the Riverside: Poem

A GREAT green spread of meadow land, (Must rest his weight on an ample base),

A secret water moving on,
A clean blue air for his breathing-space,
A pair of willows bending down
In double witness to his grace,
And on the rock his sinner sprawls
And looks the Strong One face to face
The sinner's mocking tongue is dry,
Wonder is on that mighty jeerer,
He loves, and he never loved before,
He wants the glowing sky no nearer,
He likes the willows to be two,
He would not have the water clearer,
He thinks that God is perfect once:
Heaven, rejoice! a new God-fearer.

And now each quiet thing awakes
And dances madly, wavers, dips;
These are God's motions on the air,
His Pulse for the sinner's finger-tips,
His arrows shot across the blue,
His love-words dropping from his lips,
And who ever heard such whisperings,
Who ever saw such fellowships?

25.3.3 Content of the poem

"By the Riverside", which appears in the collection *Poems About God* pictures God's glorious presence by the riverside. Here, the speaker finds God conventionally in Nature. In this poem, the speaker ironically describes a man-God relationship. Ransom's poem provides us with a clear statement of the conflict between immanence and transcendence, between the body of

the world and the insubstantiality of the other world. This notion preoccupied Ransom throughout his life. In this poem religion is conceived of as an abstraction that takes away the fullness of the natural world. However, some soothing lines engage with conventional piety and from this point springs Ransom's irony.

The first stanza of the poem begins with a description of the grassy meadow land that spreads greenery by the side of the river. Beside the river, the speaker perceives God with all his grace and elegance on an ample base. The water moves on secretly and the air is clean and pure. Water represents infinity to the persona, and this suggests a pantheistic concept of Nature. The pair of willows near the river, on witnessing God's grace bends down as if to show their respect. The riverside thus reflects the grandeur of God.

Stanza two expresses the divided self of Ransom but eventually he is drawn towards Christian faith as he has known no alternative philosophy. In this stanza, the speaker goes on to introduce a "sinner"- one who has sinned against God. The sinner, perhaps Ransom himself, sprawls toward God and looks at the "Strong One face to face." The radiant face of God creates a radical transformation in the sinner. The sinner is unable to mock or even speak because his tongue goes dry. The sinner, who is once a "mighty jeerer", is wonderstruck. He senses a gush of love within him which he has never felt before: "He loves, and he never loved before." He understands the imperfections and limitations in himself and others. This realization helps him to approve of the world around him and appreciate the beauty of God's creation. He, thus, becomes a new "God-fearer" and the speaker opines that Heaven rejoices as the sinner has transformed his self.

In Stanza three, Ransom portrays God as seen in various aspects of nature. The sinner's transformation awakes the quiet things of nature and they dance gleefully representing "God's motions on the air". The sinner's finger-tips feel the pulse of God, that is, he realizes the existence of God. God's arrows of love shot across the blue sky pierce the heart of the sinner and fill it with love while his words of love dropped from his lips make him humane. According to Ransom, it is only through religious myth that man is able to bridge the gap between the physical and metaphysical realms and thus give a satisfactory account of his experience in a way that can "represent the fullness of the natural" (Young and Core 180).

Ransom concludes the poem with the rhetoric: "And who ever heard such whisperings, / Who ever saw such fellowships?" hinting that whoever has witnessed the power, benevolence and fellowship of God, will acknowledge the limits of his/her power and will accept the existence of God. On the contrary, these concluding lines also reveal the speaker's disordered feelings at the time of the original experience. The last two lines indicate and stress, tension and puzzlement in the nature of the speaker of the poem. The poem ends without any indication that the speaker took any of the possible roads. We leave him puzzled and confused in his choice.

As a whole, the speaker mocks the ridiculously self-oriented nature of Christian piety, though he does not express explicit doubts concerning the existence of the deity. The ironic speaker hints that he has a far more elevated concept of such a divine being than most believers do. The persona in this

poem cannot reach a logical explanation until he formulates a philosophical explanation of what others may do. One moves from scepticism to theism through clearing one's mind of all beliefs and reordering them again in one's mind after doubting everything around one. Moreover, this is what Ransom is trying to do in his poems. Ransom is trying to find a logical explanation for the idea of God and religion.

25.3.4 Structure of the poem

Language and technique

"By the Riverside" is a short poem of twenty-four lines, divided into three stanzas. The language and diction used in the poem is simple, straightforward and clear. But behind this linguistic simplicity, there is a deep subtlety and depth of thought. The power of the poem lies in its ironic conveyance of the metaphysical thought about God and religion.

Irony

The type of irony in *Poems about God* is largely a circumstantial one. Koch states, "In reality, *Poems about God* is not so studiously schematised as the introduction would suggest. When 'God' does not appear in a poem, the word 'Christian' does – to keep the frame of reference straight. However, the poems are hardly devotional. It is just possible that there was a deliberate irony in the very *absence* of a religious tone in contexts where 'God' occurred" (115-16). Ransom observes and records certain discrepancies in the nature and conduct of human affairs in his poems. This approach can be called a psychological one. This is an anecdotal and external irony; the poet offers the situation, with its obvious contrast.

Meter and Rhyme

The dominant meter in the poem is iambic. The poem has a regular rhyme. In each stanza, the second line rhymes with the fourth, the sixth and, the eighth.

Point of View

As a device within the logical structure of the poem, point-of-view helps in the control of the textural elements. Ransom presents the poem "By the Riverside" in an objective point of view maintaining a particular aesthetic distance. The point-of-view belongs to the speaker of the poem; only the final gestalt assertion belongs to the poet.

Figures of Speech

Following are examples of figures of speech in the poem.

Alliteration

- A **g**reat **g**reen spread of meadow land (lines 1)
- A clean **b**lue air for his **b**reathing-space (line 4)
- And on the rock his **s**inner **s**prawls (line 7)
- And looks the Strong One **f**ace to **f**ace (line 8)
- He **l**oves, and he never **l**oved before (line 11)
- He wants the glowing sky **n**o **n**earer (line 12)
- He **w**ould not have the **w**ater clearer (line 14)
- And **d**ances madly, wavers, **d**ips (line 18)

His arrows shot across the blue (line 21)
His love-words dropping from his lips (line 22)

John Crowe Ransom's
Riverside

Metaphor

The nature of the Ransom's first book of verse *Poems about God*, calls for no extensive use of metaphoric language. The book mainly deals with the experience of a fifteen year-old boy with a religious [Methodist] way of life. Additionally, the poems are more descriptive than narrative; and are closely involved with what the boy feels or experiences about his situations. This direct self absorption pushes the language of the book away from metaphor - most frequently towards blunt, sarcastic or portentous statement.

25.4 LETS SUM UP

Commentators debate whether Ransom's legacy rests more on his poetry or his critical work. Critics that favour his poetry argue that despite his limited poetic output, he was able to reflect modern sensibility and combine qualities such as delicacy and strength, as well as elegance and earthiness in his verse. They also consider him a master stylist, and praise his poems as well-crafted, finely textured pieces that explore the ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies that make up modern life. Although some reviewers find Ransom's poetry to be cold and distant and view him as a minor American poet, many consider him a distinctive and profoundly influential writer whose verse will not only endure but deserves greater critical attention.

Ransom's poems reveal a great deal about the poet without representing him directly. *Poems about God* launches an all-out war against the abstract in terms of a critique of religion. The volume suggests that a proper study of the duality of man's experience provides a desirable knowledge; because it is not possible to obtain this knowledge through reason or scientific discourse. Though *Poems about God* provides the reader with a considerable insight into Ransom's early thinking on religious themes, yet the reader constantly feels that there is some sort of conflict or struggle in the poems - a conflict more extensive than the overt irony would encompass. The overwhelming impression of the volume is that it is the output of an author who has abandoned orthodox Christianity but who has not yet developed an alternative philosophy.

25.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Write briefly on the early life of John Crowe Ransom.
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2. Major poetic works of Ransom
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3. Role of Ransom in twentieth century American poetry

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4. Dualism in the poetry of Ransom

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5. Ransom’s theology

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6. Irony and distance in the poetry of Ransom

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7. Ransom’s perception of God in nature

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8. Analyse the role of Nature in the poem “By the Riverside”.

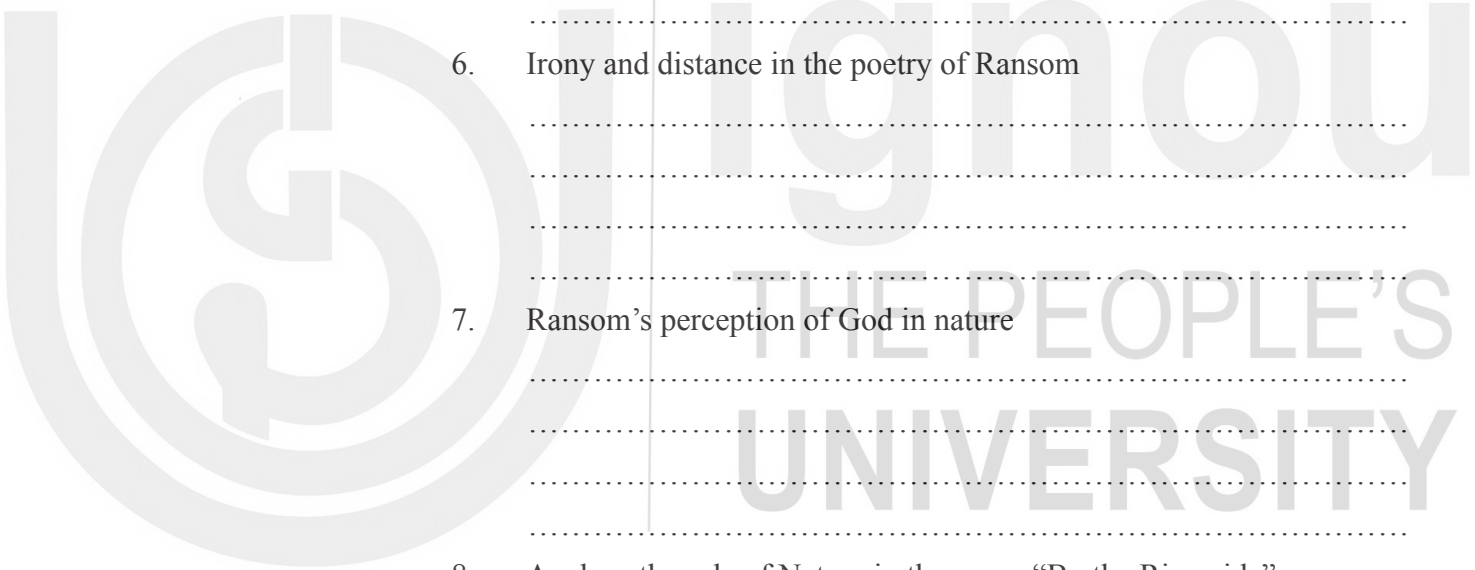
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9. Language and technique of Ransom in the poem “By the Riverside”.

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10. What are the figure of speech used in the poem?

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