**COLEMAN BARKS INTRODUCES The Poetry of Rumi**



**How I Got Into This**

I knew nothing of the thirteenth-century Persian poet Rumi until I was thirty-nine. That was in 1976, when my friend, the poet Robert Bly, handed me a book of scholarly translations of Rumi and said, “These poems need to be released from their cages.” I was teaching university classes in American literature at the time. In the late afternoon after teaching, I’d go to the Bluebird Restaurant in downtown Athens, Georgia, have some hot tea, and work on freeing a Rumi poem from its cage. I would read it through in a scholarly, word-for-word English translation and try to sense what came through in the original moment, in the thirteenth century. What I felt in the Bluebird was a new freedom and spaciousness of movement. Here was poetry that could not be explicated—fully explained. It felt more like play than work.

**I Am What I Don’t Know**

There is another connection to Rumi in my life. I grew up on the campus of a private school, where my father was the headmaster. At six years old I was a geography freak. Strange child. I memorized all the capitals of all the countries in the 1943 Rand McNally atlas. As I walked across the quadrangle to the dining hall, people would call out countries, and I’d yell back the capital. I never missed. It got to be a thing. Bulgaria! Sofia! Uruguay! Montevideo! says the little smart aleck.

Then the Latin teacher found a country that didn’t seem to have a capital, at least on his map. Cappodocia! The look on my stumped face named me. I was “Cappadocia” from then on, or “Capp.” It turns out that the central city of Cappadocia was Iconium, later Konya, where Rumi lived and is buried. The universe played a little joke on me, and I finally got it. I am what I don’t know.

**How I Do What I Do**

Here’s an example of how I collaborate with Persian (Farsi) scholars to create a contemporary free verse translation: In the scholarly version of the poem “Two Kinds of Intelligence” (page 120), the phrase for the second knowledge was “a fountain in the midst of the soul gushing from the house of the heart.” I edited that to “A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness / in the center of the chest. . . / It’s fluid, that second knowing.” I try to make the idea more accessible without dumbing it down.

When I translate, I don’t always leave out God-words (soul, spirit, heart, bliss), but I often find ways to make them more alive to myself, to bring across my own sense of the sacred. Springs are sacred. The word fountain is artificial.

Rumi has supposedly become the most read poet in the United States. If that’s true, then he must be serving this innate, sweet springwater of the soul.

**Thinking About the Commentary**

**1. (a)** **Recall:**How did Coleman Barks become interested in the poet Rumi?**(b)** **Speculate:**Why do you think Barks’s translating felt more like play than work to him?

**2. (a)** **Recall:**What is Barks’s goal as he translates? **(b)** **Connect:**Why do you think this goal might produce a particularly effective translation?

**As You Read the Poetry of Rumi . . .**

**3.**Think about how Barks’s translations of Rumi reveal his passion for the poems.

**4.**Consider the ways in which reading this commentary helped you understand Rumi’s poems.

### Elephant in the Dark • Two Kinds of Intelligence • The Guest House • Which Is Worth More?

### Rumi

**(1207–1273)**

Rumi was born in the central Asian city of Balkh—now part of Afghanistan—but lived most of his life in Anatolia, which is now Turkey. The poet’s full name was Jalal ad-Din; he later acquired the nickname “Rumi” from the word for the region where his family settled. In Anatolia, the family made its home in Konya, which was the capital of the Seljuk Empire. There, Rumi’s father served as a teacher in a *madrasah* , or Islamic religious school.

## Early Adulthood

When Rumi’s father died in 1231, Rumi assumed his father’s position as a teacher of religion, quickly developing into a famous Sufi master with a large circle of disciples. Sufism was a movement within Islam that developed in the late tenth century and stressed the immediate, personal union of the human soul with God. Some Sufi orders embraced mysticism, while others stressed ascetic practices of self-denial. Through contacts with religious teachers in Iran and Syria, especially a wandering mystic named Shams ad-Din (“Sun of Religion”), Rumi grew increasingly committed to Sufi philosophy and theology.

Rumi himself was the founder of the Sufi order known as the “Whirling Dervishes,” whose hypnotic dancing was the means to spiritual enlightenment. According to legend, Rumi began his ecstatic dance when he heard the rhythmic sounds of a goldsmith’s hammer in the bazaar, or marketplace, of Konya.

## The Masnavi

Rumi is regarded as not only one of the finest Persian mystical poets but also one of the finest poets the world has ever known. His most famous work is the *Masnavi* , a long poem written in Persian in rhymed couplets at the suggestion of one of his students and intended to provide guidance for his disciples and for future generations. In the *Masnavi* , Rumi uses a wide variety of literary forms—including fables, short stories, allegories, and proverbs—to illustrate all the aspects of Sufism in his own era. The Masnavi has stood through time as one of the most important Sufi works ever written. It has been translated into many languages and analyzed by countless religious and literary scholars.

## Rumi’s Influence

Rumi is believed to have completed the *Masnavi* shortly before his death. Although he seems to have had a turbulent family life, he remained highly respected in Konya throughout his lifetime, and government officials as well as Christian monks sought his advice. Various disciples succeeded him in turn as the master of his Sufi circle. One of these followers, Rumi’s son Sultan Walad, formally organized the Whirling Dervishes, whose dances may be seen in Konya to this day. Muslims from all over the world now follow the teachings that Rumi presented in his verse, and his philosophical insights have also had great appeal to millions of non-Muslim readers. The English translations of Rumi’s poetry by Coleman Barks, for example, have been bestsellers.

## Preview

## Connecting to the Literature

Many different types of literature guide readers toward ethical and humane behavior. The poems you are about to read contain gentle advice that is presented in some unexpected ways. As you read each poem, think about the way its message applies to your own life or the lives of people you know.

## Literary Analysis

## Analogy

An **analogy** is an explanation of how two things are similar. Analogies are usually extended comparisons that explain something unfamiliar by showing how it is like something familiar. They frequently use figurative language such as similes and metaphors. Unlike these figures of speech, however, analogies are essentially explanations or arguments. The assumption that often underlies an analogy is that if two things are alike in one or more ways, they are probably also alike in other ways.

## Comparing Literary Works

A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two apparently unlike things without using the words like or as. Direct metaphors connect the two terms directly, while implied metaphors suggest the comparison. Look for examples like the ones shown as you read the poems of Rumi.

* **Direct Metaphor:** This being human is a guest house.
* **Implied Metaphor:**  . . . getting always more / marks on your preserving tablets.

## Reading Strategy

## Making Generalizations

Apply the ideas and themes of your reading by making generalizations. A **generalization** is a broad statement that applies to many situations and is supported by details or evidence. As you read, use the details in Rumi’s poems to make generalizations about the author’s beliefs, philosophy, and main ideas or messages. Test the validity of each generalization by applying it to multiple elements of the poem or to real-life situations. You may find it helpful to use a diagram like the one shown.



## Vocabulary Builder

* competence *n.* ability
* conduits *n.* channels or pipes
* malice *n.* ill will; evil intent

* solitude *n.* isolation



## Background

About 1250, when he was living in the city of Konya in what is now Turkey, Rumi began to compose his greatest work, the *Masnavi* . He was inspired by a friend and disciple, Husam ad-Din Chelebi. Hasam ad-Din urged Rumi to follow Persian models of long poems written during the preceding centuries. Those works expressed mystical teachings through a varied assortment of anecdotes, fables, stories, proverbs, and allegories. In the years that followed, Rumi composed over 25,000 rhymed couplets. According to legend, the poet recited his verses in public while Husam ad-Din committed them to writing.

“Elephant in the Dark,” “Two Kinds of Intelligence,” and “The Guest House” come from the *Masnavi* . “Which is Worth More?” is drawn from Rumi’s *rubaiyat* , a large collection of quatrains, or four-line stanzas.

 Some Hindus have an elephant to show.

 No one here has ever seen an elephant.

 They bring it at night to a dark room.



 One by one, we go in the dark and come out

5saying how we experience the animal.

 One of us happens to touch the trunk.

 “A water-pipe kind of creature.”



10Another, the ear. “A very strong, always moving

 back and forth, fan-animal.”

 Another, the leg. “I find it still,

 like a column on a temple.”

 Another touches the curved back.

 “A leathery throne.”

 Another, the cleverest, feels the tusk.

15“A rounded sword made of porcelain.”

 He’s proud of his description.

 Each of us touches one place

 and understands the whole in that way.

 The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark are

20how the senses explore the reality of the elephant.



 If each of us held a candle there,

 and if we went in together,

 we could see it.



 There are two kinds of intelligence: one acquired,

 as a child in school memorizes facts and concepts

 from books and from what the teacher says,

 collecting information from the traditional sciences

5as well as from the new sciences.



 With such intelligence you rise in the world.

 You get ranked ahead or behind others

 in regard to your **competence** in retaining

 information. You stroll with this intelligence

10in and out of fields of knowledge, getting always more

 marks on your preserving tablets.

 There is another kind of tablet, one

 already completed and preserved inside you.

 A spring overflowing its springbox. A freshness

15in the center of the chest. This other intelligence

 does not turn yellow or stagnate. It’s fluid,

 and it doesn’t move from outside to inside

 through the **conduits** of plumbing-learning.

 This second knowing is a fountainhead

20from within you, moving out.



## Critical Reading

**1. Respond:**Do you agree with the ideas expressed in these poems? Why or why not?

**2. (a) Recall:**In “Elephant in the Dark,” what conclusion does the person draw about the elephant after touching its trunk?**(b) Analyze:**What circumstances may explain this mistaken conclusion?

**3. (a) Recall:**What does the fifth person call the elephant’s tusk in lines 15–16 of “Elephant in the Dark”?**(b) Infer:**Why do you think Rumi calls this person “the cleverest”?

**4. (a) Recall:**In “Two Kinds of Intelligence,” what does the schoolchild do in lines 2–5?**(b) Interpret:**What kind of person does the schoolchild grow up to be in lines 6–11?

**5. (a) Recall:**Which adjectives does the poet use to describe the second kind of intelligence?**(b) Interpret:**Basing your opinion on these words, explain which kind of intelligence you think Rumi valued.

**6. Respond:**Which of these two poems appeals to you more? Explain.

 



 This being human is a guest house.

 Every morning a new arrival.



 A joy, a depression, a meanness,

 some momentary awareness comes

5as an unexpected visitor.

 Welcome and entertain them all!

 Even if they’re a crowd of sorrows,

 who violently sweep your house

 empty of its furniture,

10still, treat each guest honorably.

 He may be clearing you out

 for some new delight.

 The dark thought, the shame, the **malice** ,

 meet them at the door laughing,

15and invite them in.



 Be grateful for whoever comes,

 because each has been sent

 as a guide from beyond.



 Which is worth more, a crowd of thousands,

 or your own genuine **solitude** ?

 Freedom, or power over an entire nation?

 A little while alone in your room

 will prove more valuable than anything else

 that could ever be given you.



## Critical Reading

**1. (a) Recall:**What two things does Rumi compare in the first two lines of “The Guest House”?**(b) Analyze:**What do the visitors in lines 2–5 have in common?

**2. (a) Recall:**In lines 6–12 of “The Guest House,” what advice does Rumi give his readers?**(b) Interpret:**What makes this advice unexpected?**(c)Apply:**How might you apply the message of the poem to everyday life?

**3. (a) Recall:**In “Which Is Worth More?” what choice does Rumi identify in lines 1–3?**(b) Explain:**Why is solitude so valuable, according to Rumi?

**4. Recall:**In what ways are Rumi’s insights still relevant today?